

JANUARY 24 WORSHIP SERVICE

OPENING WORDS – PASTOR CALEB

Good morning and welcome to our morning worship service at Alexanderwohl.

We are gathered here to worship the God we know through Jesus, and seek encouragement and commissioning through the Spirit.

As we enter this time of worship, I encourage you to turn on your camera's if you are able to do so, so that we may see one another's faces and greet each other.

Starting today, our theme for worship over the next number of weeks will be the Upside Down King. We will follow the story of Jesus through the Gospel of Luke all the way through Lent and to Easter.

As you may have read, the Upside Down King was originally written as a musical by Carol Duerksen, and Doug and Jude Krehbiel and later turned into a Bible Study by Carol.

We have to do some adapting, but I'm excited about what this resource offers to rediscover the Jesus story.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR CELEBRATION AND SERVICE – PASTOR LOIS

This past week John Fast and Rod Peters made a 1900 mile round trip, driving this MCC van with 2,000 pounds of canned meat to the Northern Cheyenne Reservation in Busby, Montana. They were met there by Erica Littlewolf and her dad. Erica works for MCC, Central States and has lived here in Kansas in the past but she moved back to MT some time ago, feeling compelled to be there to help and participate more directly in the lives of her people. Now, like many others she is working from home.

From Montana, John and Rod drove to Freeman, SD where they picked up quilts and comforters made by folks from that area and brought them back to N. Newton. These two fellows drove all those wintery miles in three days on behalf of MCC and our AMC Mission Board!

Erica Littlewolf sent a message of appreciation to John and Rod for making the long journey to bring this canned meat and she also sent a few words of explanation that I'd like to share with you.

She and her dad took some of the meat to an organization there called Yellowbird Lifeways. The folks there "have been helping get food to people that are quarantined or elders who are not able to leave their homes because they're afraid of getting covid, but they have no one to get groceries for them." Erica writes, "Many times 20 people can live in a house and it will be multigenerational. So there is no way to isolate when one person gets sick. During the summer months it was easier because people could camp outside. But with the cold weather now we are not able to do that. We also have one grocery store on the reservation and the nearest city is Billings which is 200 miles away.

From Yellowbird Lifeways, Erica and her dad delivered some of the meat to the Boys and Girls Club of the Northern Cheyenne Nation. She writes, "Our schools haven't been in session. I'm not sure if they are doing zoom school but most homes would not have internet access. As most kids rely on their meals from school, the schools have been delivering some meals to children as well as to the Boys and Girls Club."

After deliveries at these two locations, she said they had about 9 of the 40 boxes left and they will distribute those to different homes in the coming months as people reach out.

Erica's message contains several links to interesting and helpful websites about the Cheyenne – if you're interested in receiving those, send me an email and I'm glad to pass that information along.

ROSEBUD BLESSING –

In times when we're not dealing with a pandemic, it's our practice to celebrate and welcome new babies into our congregation soon after they're born – within the first time or two that they come to church. Typically we do this with a prayer of blessing from the infant's grandparents and the presentation of a rosebud, symbolic of a new-born baby. As with lots of other things, this rhythm has been thrown off a little since we've been worshiping virtually, at a distance. So this morning, we'd like to catch up a bit and celebrate and welcome Nolan Paul Miller. He was born on November 3 to Chrystiana and Bryant and joined his big brother, Emmett. His maternal grandparents, Delton and Janice will offer a prayer of blessing.

INVOCATION PRAYER (BASED ON HWB 677)

Christ, our rock,

Come to us in the glory of your risen power;

Come to us in the humility of your wondrous love.

Come and reign among us!

Let new life course through our veins, new love bind us together, and new vision spur us on to follow you forever.

In the name of Jesus, Amen

MORNING PRAYER – PASTOR LOIS

Creator God, you are our rock and our redeemer, our hope and our help in times of trouble and uncertainty. Amidst our confusion and disorientation as this pandemic continues on, we confess our need for you and for one another. God we pray fervently for the residents and staff at Bethesda as well as other long-term care facilities, hospitals and medical centers. We pray for Julia and Willard as they struggle to regain their health and strength. We don't know how much longer this crisis will continue but we know that caretakers are tired. We ask for perseverance, energy and hope. We pray for all who are undergoing medical treatments in these days; things can seem even more complicated and difficult than usual, so we ask for your guidance and wisdom as doctors tend to the needs of their patients. We continue to hold Joyce and Dan Bergen in our prayers as well as Mary Lou and Glen Unrau. We pray especially for

those who are grieving the loss of loved ones – we pray for Susan Voth and her family as they remember and celebrate Irvin’s life and grieve his loss. We pray also for Patsy and the other family members and friends of Norman Schmidt as they grieve his loss. We continue to pray for June Hiebert and her family.

Even as we grieve and bring our petitions to you, God, we also celebrate and offer you our praises! We thank you for the gift of birth, for new life and the hope and inspiration we see in the lives of babies and children. We’re especially grateful this morning for Nolan Paul, his brother Emmett, parents Bryant and Chrystiana, grandparents Delton and Janice and Jaynette. We thank you for this family unit and the support and strength they offer to one another as they journey together and strive to follow you faithfully.

We thank you for the celebration that Zach and Hailey had yesterday on the occasion of their wedding. Bless them and their families in this new chapter of their lives together.

We thank you, God, for the hard work that Bino and Allison have done for his preparation and now full-time work as a firefighter in Austin. Protect Bino and his colleagues and be with him and Allison and their children as they can enjoy more family time together.

We praise you, God, for safe travels for John and Rod this past week as they took this long journey in a short time to tend to the work of MCC. We thank you for their willingness and commitment to take this on and share your love in this way. Be with Erica and the Northern Cheyenne people in their struggle for wellness and wholeness, for righteousness and justice. Be with each person who will receive a quilt or comforter through MCC; may they feel wrapped in your love and care for them.

Be with us now, Lord, as we continue in this worship service. Send your Spirit to each one in ways that we need you. Bless Caleb as he brings the message and each of the others who are participating in and hearing this service. May we be challenged and encouraged in our walk with you each day. Amen.

PRAYER OF DEDICATION (BASED ON HWB 738)

Christ be in our heads and in our understanding;

Christ be in our eyes and in our looking;

Christ be in our mouths and in our speaking;

Christ be in our hearts and in our thinking;

Christ be in our hands and in our doing;

Christ be in all that we offer today.

ROAD TO EMMAUS ~DOUG AND JUDE KREHBIEL
(Used by permission)

V 1

Two men on the road...one's head is bowed in sorrow
The other one is shoutin' at the sky
"If you were the Lord, our hope and salvation,
then why did you have to die?"

CHORUS 1

It's a long road home to Emmaus And I have never felt so alone
It's a long road home to Emmaus Now that all our dreams are gone

V 2

The men on the road are joined by a stranger
Who talks as he walks with the two
He speaks in a way that fills them with wonder
And they wonder if what he says is true.

CHORUS 2

It's a long road home to Emmaus And I have never felt so alone
It's a long road home to Emmaus Now that all our dreams are gone
Now that all our dreams are gone

CONFUSED FOLLOWERS OF AN UPSIDE-DOWN KING – PASTOR CALEB
Luke 24:13-27

My dad is the half-owner of Mowers Plus. It primarily is about selling and serving lawn mowers and related equipment, but a hold-over from dad's diesel mechanic days is a station for making up hydraulic hose.

It's difficult to keep all of the hose fittings well-organized and keep an accurate count of the inventory, but there are a number of local farmers who know how to let themselves in with the garage door code, and make up their own length of custom hose.

They just write down what they used in a notebook by the office and they eventually get billed.

I was telling someone about this arrangement, who commented that it requires a lot of trust. For some, it probably feels refreshing that this kind of arrangement can work.

Trust is something that particularly seems broken right now in our world. We don't trust each other. Or we put our trust in the wrong things to save us. Loss of trust can run even deeper when people feel their trust in what they had believed in shaken. What do you trust or believe in when hope feels shattered?

While most people face this kind of question on a personal level at some point in life, we're in a unique time of collective confusion and uncertainty, as the national death toll of Covid tops 400,000.

I think that's what the two disciples traveling to Emmaus were feeling. You've heard the skit, heard the song, and heard the reading from the Gospel of Luke. It's one of the most beautiful and ironic stories of the Bible.

This story will serve as bookends for our Upside Down King series through the Gospel of Luke. We're jumping in near the end of the Gospel, before going to the beginning of the Gospel to fill in the story of this crucified prophet, powerful in word and deed.

It's always difficult to read the Bible as if for the first time. We know already who the mysterious traveler is, and how the story ends. We want to put ourselves in the shoes of Cleopas and his companion, who only know the story up through the death of Jesus, who are dejected and confused.

When we meet Cleopas and the other disciple, they are vigorously discussing recent events in Jerusalem, trying to seek out answers. They are going back and forth about this, pitching words back and forth to each other.

They are struggling to understand. You can see the sadness on their faces. They are confused.

The irony is that their new traveling companion seems to know nothing about Jesus of Nazareth. When the mysterious traveler asks them what they are discussing so passionately, it must feel to the disciples like someone who hasn't heard of Covid.

"Are you the only person making pilgrimage in Jerusalem who hasn't heard?"

As they tell their new traveling companion about the marvelous things Jesus had done, they sigh: *"We had hoped that he was the one that was going to redeem Israel."*

In the minds of the disciples, Jesus' death was the indication of failure. It was the ultimate disappointment. But the mysterious traveler explains that it wasn't at all that way. *"Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and enter his glory?"*

I'm sure the two disciples had trouble understanding what glory their mysterious companion was talking about. But as their traveling companion opens up the scripture to them, they later report that their *"hearts were burning within them."*

Like the two disciples, we collectively are going through uncertainty in this pandemic. It is no longer just a news story or an inconvenience. It is becoming personal. We know people working at nursing homes or hospitals. We all personally know people who have gotten seriously ill or lost a loved one. As a pastor, I'm bracing for graveside services that are Covid-related.

Not only that, but I know many of you have uncertainty in your personal lives.

A common one is medical uncertainty: will the surgery be successful? Will this grueling treatment work? What comes next?

This past summer, my cousin Jacob was in a motorcycle that caught his bike on fire. He almost lost his life, and was left with burns on half his body, requiring extensive time in the burn unit. His fingers on his left hand had to be amputated.

For awhile, this was a life and death struggle, but he shared with us over Christmas what it looks like now as he does rehab. As his life gets closer to normal life, he confronts the uncertainty of what his limits will be. What will he again be able to do and what not? How to keep positive when the permanent losses become evident and the pace of progress slows?

For others, you face financial uncertainty: how will we pay these bills? What's going to happen with my business or farm?

Or relationship uncertainty: will my spouse/friend/family and I be able to repair the trust that has been broken.

The two disciples heard the reports from the women that the tomb was empty and there were angels saying that he's alive. But the disciples clearly don't know what to believe. No one has actually seen Jesus, after all. It seems like an idle tale.

At different times in my life, I've had nagging thoughts of doubt. One of the more intense experiences actually occurred during my time in seminary. What I was learning in classes caused me to re-examine some of my beliefs, and I was struggling to put it all together. The intent of the seminary was only to deepen and strengthen faith, while also expecting students to be spiritually mature adults.

While I sincerely wanted to remain a strong believer, for a while I couldn't shake the nagging thought that maybe my faith tradition was just something of human origin, like a language or a culture.

My spiritual practices weren't solid enough to make me feel I was on solid ground. I started to worry about losing my faith. It was a process to move through this wilderness, and I benefited from the support and wisdom of trusted people I could talk to.

Like a home remodel that for a while looks like chaos, persisting through this wilderness didn't put everything back the way it was before. You don't tear up a room only to restore it to the way it was before, but to make it into something new.

In the end, I think that my faith has deepened, has integrated my heart and my head more, and the gospel message has become more real to me.

The two disciples on the road to Emmaus felt confused and uncertain of what to believe.

They know what the women have said, but it seems outrageous to them. They are still caught up in their disappointment that Jesus was crucified, instead of the revolution they expected.

At least until they recognized the risen Jesus walking with them.

Dale Schrag has written an essay, “How Could Uncertainty Possibly be a Gift?” that some of you have already seen.

Dale writes that admitting our uncertainty allows us to encounter Jesus in each other’s presence. It can transform our relationships when we are caught in our polarized disagreement. It can also help us find a “clarity of focus and understanding of that which is absolutely essential.” It can help us fully trust Jesus, rather than looking for other ground to stand on.

Greg Boyd writes, “I’m ... inviting you into a way of embracing faith that accepts that our world is filled with complexity, ambiguity, and unanswerable questions. It’s a kind of faith that accepts that there is no absolutely certain place to stand, but that also sees that there is no need for such a place, so long as we have *reason enough* to place all our trust in Christ.”¹

When we feel shaken, and everywhere feels like sinking sand, trust that there’s still solid ground on which to stand.

I hope that this winter and spring, we can meet Jesus again – a Jesus who isn’t the conventional King or the conventional answer, the conventional fix, or the conventional savior that our worship of certainty wants to create.

This Jesus went through the ordeal of the cross, and that opens the way of meeting Jesus as a trustworthy companion pointing the way to resurrection, no matter what we are going through. It opens the way to changing the game of life we play, no longer based on winning, achieving, acquiring, knowing, and controlling, but on love.

Today, I make two invitations:

The first invitation, especially at a time when we feel collectively shaken is to check in with yourself on how you are doing. Find a quiet time to be aware of what you are feeling. Cleopas and his friend not only felt sadness, but it showed on their faces.

This doesn’t mean that you want to be swept away in all your thoughts and feelings, but we do need to be present to them. We need to have compassion on ourselves for feeling what we feel.

If you need to, after acknowledging your thoughts and feelings, give them to God. Sometimes we need to dig deep for resilience to go about each day, like continuing to work in spite of manageable back pain.

But go easy on yourself. Have grace for yourself, and fill your own cup in order to have something to offer others.

The second invitation is to do the work of finding this solid ground to stand on in this upside-down Jesus.

¹ Gregory Boyd, *Benefit of the Doubt: Breaking the Idol of Certainty*. Grad Rapids: Baker Books, 2013, page 32

Discovering this solid ground allows us to embrace the uncertainty and lack of guarantees that we face in our lives. Discovering this solid ground is essential to truly giving our lives to serving the upside-down kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed.

As always, we invite your own reflections and responses. You are welcome to click the “chat” button and type these in.

The reflection questions for this week are:

1. If you put yourself in the shoes of the two travelers, what would your discussion of the events of holy week be like? How does it relate to present events?
2. What uncertainties are the most difficult for you now in your life? In what way can uncertainty be positive?

In addition to these, ask yourself: “What would happen, if I fully trusted Jesus with x?” You fill in the blank for what x is.

Grace and peace to you as you seek this solid ground.