

FEBRUARY 21 WORSHIP SERVICE

WELCOME – PASTOR LOIS

Good morning! Is there such a thing as being cautiously joyful!? As I thought about how it would feel to stand up here and be able to speak directly to people sitting here, in the building as well as to people at home, in the camera, I thought of the phrase “cautiously joyful”, and that seemed to maybe fit. It is good to have more people joining us here in the sanctuary and it’s also good to have folks still joining from home as well – welcome to one and all! I invite those who are zooming in to turn on your camera and greet one another, and those who are here to turn around in your seats and greet those around you with a wave. Let’s join together in our worship and our prayers this first Sunday in the Lenten Season and as we continue to learn about “Jesus the Upside-Down King”. Both themes will be incorporated in the service this morning.

PRAYER OF INVOCATION (CALL TO WORSHIP IN BULLETIN)

Let’s pray. Jesus, you have said you are the Bread of Life. Whoever comes to you will never be hungry. When we learn of you, we’re fed and nourished. We’re hungry for good news, sweet wisdom, God’s grace! Meet us here, Jesus, come alongside us and walk with us. Amen.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Lent is a season of confession, whether that is confessing sin, or our feelings of grief, loss, or fear. In this season we travel with Jesus to Jerusalem and to the cross. But we know that hope is on the other side, and only by facing the pain of the cross do we open ourselves to new life and transformation.

I'll read a prayer of confession taken from a song entitled Forgive, forgive us, holy God, by Shirley Erena Murray (*Voices Together* 149)

This will be followed with moment of silence;

Space to personally offer confession, name what you feel, what you fear. Name your need or our need for restoration. Notice what first comes to your awareness. Leave space to listen for the Spirit.

Forgive, forgive us, holy God! Your children call on you to hear!

Our blood is on each other's hands, we die from hunger, lies, and fear.

Forgive the minds no longer shocked by homeless poor, by lives abused;

Forgive us that the earth is stacked with weapons waiting to be used.

Forgive us that our household gods are self and safety, private need;

Forgive us all our fitful prayers, the token gift, the token deed.

Give us this day the bread of peace, the hands to share a common good,

The hearts to ache for justice's sake, the will to stand where Jesus stood.

[silence]

As a prayer of assurance of God's presence, Lois will lead us in the hymn "O thou in whose presence." This may have been more well-known in the past, than at present. I know it is part of a list of beloved hymns that Meribeth Schmidt once made. The prayer is fitting for a time like Lent, the melody is beautiful but very somber.

MORNING PRAYER – PASTOR LOIS

Loving God, we acknowledge that an important part of worshiping you is prayer – talking to you, listening for you, making space for a relationship with you. Thank you for always listening, for hearing and knowing the needs of our hearts – you know the needs of every heart that is worshiping here this morning.

Thank you, God for this season in the Church that we call Lent, for this time to reflect and pray with special intention and attention. Give us openness to the work of your Holy Spirit in our lives and spirits during these next days and weeks.

God, we thank you for life – for the seasons and the cycles of nature, we thank you for the cold, the wind, the barrenness of the prairie now in this season of winter. It reminds us that this is how you've created the natural rhythm of the seasons and that in due time spring will come and all that is dead and barren will be used to create new things, life-giving things. Thank you, God for this plan. And thank you for the gifts of life. We're especially grateful this morning for the gift of Cameron Michelle to Evan, Maryanne and Kennedy and their extended family. Thank you for her safe passage and the first week of her life here in this world.

Creator God, we've been strongly reminded this week of the cycles of life and death and the fact that through that entire cycle, you are our God. We thank you for the lives of Milferd Schmidt, of Leon Nikkel and of Julia Regier. Thank you for the love that they shared throughout their lifetimes and we ask for comfort and peace for their loved ones, grieving their loss. We pray for Marilyn Schmidt and her family, for Karen Nikkel and her family, for LaNae and Steve and their families.

We pray, God for your healing touch wherever it's needed. We continue to pray for Mary Lou Unrau and for Glen and their family. Be a constant source of comfort and peace for them so that on the roller coaster ride of healing and illness they may deeply know your Spirit of love. We pray for on-going healing for Javin Schmidt as he heals from his basketball injury. We thank you for healing that has already happened for him. We pray for Gene Hastings as he is currently hospitalized with complications from the chemo he's been receiving. Be with him and Cindy as they continue on this slow process of treatment and healing. We pray for Les and Ann Flaming, that the two stints Les had this week will help him to feel better and for his continued healing. We thank you also for successful surgery and the beginning of healing for Janice and pray that continues to go well. God, we pray for Donely as he heads into shoulder surgery this week. Be with his surgeon and all who will care for him. We pray for all those who are in on-going treatments of all sorts and various stages of healing. Continue to be present with each one, God, offering your comfort, your mercy, your healing and love. We are grateful,

God, for the negative covid test results that have come consistently these last couple of weeks at Bethesda – we pray for hope and encouragement for the residents and staff.

Be with us now as we continue in our worship, our discipleship, our faithful attempts to follow Jesus, as individuals and within this Alexanderwohl community. Be our guide. Be our God. Amen.

PRAYER OF DEDICATION

(see VT 487 and 1025)

At this time, we would be receiving offerings in normal times, and for a prayer of dedication, I thought of a very simple table grace from Latin America that goes like this:

Lord, thank you for this bread.

Give bread to those who have hunger

And give hunger for justice to those who have bread.

Lord, thank you for this bread. Amen.

God, bless the gifts that we offer for the building of your upside-down kingdom. May our gifts be like the five loaves and 2 fish that Jesus multiplied.

5 LOAVES AND 2 FISH – PASTOR CALEB

(Luke 9:10-17)

I know it looks like there isn't enough,

But let's say a grateful prayer,

To thank God for this bread,

There's more than plenty to share

That's the refrain of the song that Eric and Kevin sang, and our proclamation of faith for today.

This past pandemic year, as the total numbers of Covid-related deaths reaches a half million any day in the US, and after funeral after funeral in our own community, we've had enough.

One of you commented that this whole past year has been a season of Lent.

We feel like we've lost our breath. We wonder if we have enough (money, energy, strength, or hope) to keep going.

We wonder if we can do enough when it comes to serving others. We wonder if we *are* enough in the face of the challenges we feel.

Of course, there are signs of hope for the pandemic, and spiritually we know that Lent is always followed by Easter, death by resurrection.

Even our soon-to-be four-year-old knows the story. Though he did wonder why Jesus didn't stay home rather than let people be mean to him on the cross. But after that, "*he's alive!*"

DIG INTO THE STORY

So let's dig into the story of the feeding of the 5000.

It's a well-known story and each of the four gospels tells a version of it. Luke almost certainly had access to the gospel of Mark, but rewrites the account in a more concise and format.

It starts with the apostles coming back from their first mission that Jesus sent them on two by two. They take off expecting to be by themselves, but predictably the crowds follow.

Jesus welcomes the crowds (in Mark, Jesus has compassion on them). He speaks to them about the kingdom of God and heals those who need healing.

As the day draws to a close, the 12 come to Jesus and urge him to dismiss the people so that they can buy food in the surrounding towns, since they are in a remote place.

Jesus turns that back to them: *You give them something to eat!*

In Luke the disciples are a little more polite in responding back to Jesus, but they are still direct – “we don't have more than five loaves of bread and two fish, unless we were to go and buy food for everyone.”

There are 5000 men, and an unstated number of women and children. The prophet Elisha once made 20 loaves of barley stretch for 100 men. This is clearly over-the-top.

You know the story, Jesus ignores his disciples' attempt to be reasonable and control the situation. He tells them to start dividing the crowds into groups of 50.

Jesus looks up to the sky (which is how people used to pray in those days), and he blesses the five loaves and two fish, and then he breaks the bread.

What does that remind you of?

Of course, you break bread in order to divide it among a group of people and pass it around.

The disciples have the role of distributing the bread and setting it before the people.

Everyone eats, and when all is said and done, there are 12 basketfuls of left-overs. Whether it's a miracle that defies the laws of physics or the miracle of convincing everyone of opening their hands and sharing the provisions they already happen to have, there is *enough*.

Everyone eats their fill.

12 basketfuls reminds a Bible-reader of the Israelites gathering basketfuls of manna while wandering in the wilderness.

The number 12 is also highly symbolic. There are 12 tribes of Israel and 12 apostles. This event is about the presence of Christ among the people of God.

THE UPSIDE-DOWN KINGDOM

The feeding of the 5000 shows how the economy of abundance works in the upside-down kingdom. You don't start with the massive production of a resource that is viewed as scarce and hoarded by each individual.

You start with a meager offering of five loaves and two fishes, and this meager offering when shared is enough, just like the widow's penny that was more valuable in this upside-down economy than the donations of the wealthy. The power of God makes it enough.

You've probably heard before that it's important to read scripture passages in context. I'll give you a great example of this.

Right before the feeding of the 5000, Herod is confused.

Some people are saying that John the Baptist was raised from the dead. Some people say that Elijah has appeared. Some people say that one of the ancient prophets has risen.

Fast forward to after the feeding of the 5000, and Jesus asks the disciples, "who do the crowds say that I am?"

The disciples rattle off the exact same list that had troubled Herod – John the Baptist, Elijah, one of the ancient prophets...

This repetition isn't a coincidence. While Mark has an extended aside about Herod before his account of the feeding of the 5000, Luke deliberately puts this conversation about Jesus' identity directly afterwards.

That's the context of this feeding story in Luke, and it tells us something about what Luke wants us to get out of the story.

This event reveals who Jesus is. Maybe it's what turns the lightbulb on for Peter, who grasps that Jesus is the anointed one of God.

Anointed one, or Messiah was King-language. But Jesus is an Upside-down King, trying to show us what life in the Upside-down kingdom is like.

RESPONSE TO THE GOSPEL

Now it's time for us to respond to this picture of the gospel. What does it look like for us to proclaim this faith that God makes our meager offerings to be enough?

Yesterday, a number of people from our church participated in an online event offered by Hesston College called "What if they don't come back."

The event featured a guest theologian and Christian leader named David Fitch and addressed the uncertainty that we face as a congregation and broader church after the Covid-19 pandemic.

Will we ever get back to normal? What will our new normal be like?

We need to do the work of grieving the losses we've felt and lean into the fears we feel from change and uncertainty. But beyond that, how do we reclaim faith that God is still at work?

How do we embrace the opportunities for more intensely living in the Upside-down kingdom that this painful period might create for us?

When we let go of what we thought church was about, or what we thought a normal good life was about, and when we are willing to offer our meager 5 loaves and 2 fishes before the grace of God, by faith we believe that God will multiply the offering.

David Fitch asked us to think about the church in terms of its practices. Practices like worship, fellowship, service, and of course breaking bread together (harder to do at the moment!).

What if we let go of our ideas of “success” and simply understand our task as being present to one another and to the presence of Christ that is already among us and among our neighbors, whether we are aware of it or not?

In the back of the sanctuary and also on the faith formation email, I’ve created a half-sheet with a few ideas of practices that we can engage in together during the season of Lent.

I would like to call all of us during this season of Lent to some kind of simple practice or prayer in which you open yourselves to God’s presence.

Even if it’s a five to ten minute pause at a set time every day, that is significant.

We need this both on the personal level after the many losses of this year, and also as members of the body of Christ that form this congregation.

That doesn’t mean that we will necessarily experience God in that very moment. Prayer is also not something to do or accomplish the way that we are doing something during most of our day.

It is a kind of non-doing. You don’t have to worry about failing. But it does ask us to give up control. Josh Banner writes that “Prayer is not a way to earn God’s favor.... Prayer is simply responding to Jesus’ invitation to enjoy his love.”

How do we know what are our five loaves and two fishes that we have to offer?

Well, that’s where we need space to listen... after our restless efforts just to function this past year, we need to spend time in a practice that will take us from our focus on doing and give us faith that what we have to offer will be enough.

There isn’t a formula, but with time, we may come to clarity what our five loaves and two fish are.

Our role is to offer what we have and let it be blessed by Christ. Then we have the role of distributing the gifts, energy, and attention that is offered. We seek to be present and real with those that God places us in contact with.

It always is the work of the Spirit of Christ to multiply what is offered. When you offer it from the heart, it will always be enough.

Questions for reflection:

1. How does the story of the feeding of the 5000 from five loaves and two fish speak to your journey through a difficult year?
2. What are do you offer, like the five loaves and two fish, to be multiplied in the upside-down kingdom?

BENEDICTION

Receive these words of blessing spoken by Dorothy Day of The Catholic Worker in 1957:

Lay one brick at a time, take one step at a time;

We can be responsible only for the one action taken of the present moment.

But we know that God will take them and multiply them, as Jesus multiplied the loaves and fishes.

Go in this hope.