

WORDS FOR THE GATHERING SONG

You may have noticed the last few Sundays there have been a few prayers, litanies and a song here and there that have been used from the new Voices Together book. And that's true again this morning. The Call to Worship was taken from this new resource and this first, gathering hymn is from there as well as our closing hymn, "You are Salt for the Earth". That song you'll recognize – that's one from the blue Hymnal: A Worship Book that has also been included in this new book. Clearly we've not had a chance yet to bid a formal farewell to the Hymnal: A Worship Book, nor have we properly ushered in and introduced this new book. We're in this weird, pandemic, can't-sing-together time!

Even though there might be a few worship resources and possibly a song included here and there from Voices Together we want you to know that it is our intention – and it is being planned, as we're able to come together and sing – to have a formal farewell to the blue book and introduction to the purple one.

This song, "Mountain of God", fit so nicely with the text that Caleb is preaching from this morning, we made the decision to use it. It's been around for a few years already and some of you may know it, the way I know it, from singing it at Rocky Mt. Menn Camp, where there actually ARE mountains – or at convention, or somewhere? It's a contemporary song that is a single melody line. It doesn't have four-part harmony written into it, but it's a simple melody and you can feel free to add your own harmonies – especially since you're at home singing whatever you like!

MORNING PRAYER – LOIS HARDER

Loving God, thank you for this time of worship, a time that we have set aside to come together, to hear your word, to be encouraged, challenged, inspired, nurtured. Thank you for each person who is gathered in this service and for those who are a part of this body but who are not with us this morning for whatever reasons. Each one is a vital part of this congregation.

We thank you God for opportunities to learn – for the students who will begin the Faith Exploration classes today, along with their mentors as well as Caleb and me. Be present with us as we read and talk and learn together, from one another – may your Spirit guide our conversation and our education and our openness to you.

We thank you for the healing experienced this past week and we dare to ask for more healing. For Janice Voth, for Joyce Bergen, for June Hiebert, for Javin Schmidt, for Mary Lou Unrau as her leg continues to heal, for those at Bethesda who are recuperating and for no new covid positive test results there this week! We thank you for the development and distribution of the covid vaccines that many have now received and for the hope that those vaccines give us for moving forward. Help us to be disciplined about continuing to be safe and careful – to continue to look out for one another.

We pray your blessing and comfort on those who are grieving, for those who have recently lost loved ones. We pray for Julia, for LaNae and Steve. We pray for others in our community and our circles of friends and acquaintances who are grieving losses – some grieve

loss of life, some are grieving losses of opportunities in this covid time, for some there is grief at the losses of traditions or ways of understanding that have shifted or changed for one reason or another. Thank you, God, that you are our rock and our redeemer. You hear our cries of loss and grief and you understand and send your comfort. You are the God of grace and mercy.

God of every place, some of us see you today from mountains of joy and confidence, mountains of gratitude and praise.

Some of us seek you today from valleys of grief or doubt, valleys of loss or exhaustion.
And in all places, there you are with us, nudging us onward.
When we descend from the heights, show us your presence on the ground.
When we rise from the depths, show us the light of your way.
Meet us all on the path made by Jesus. Amen.

PRAYER OF DEDICATION

God of life, we give these offerings in gratitude, rejoicing in the abundance of your gifts to us.
We give these offerings in faith, trusting that you will provide for our needs.
We give these offerings in hope, knowing you can use them to spread your love in this world.
And with these offerings, we give ourselves; may we live with generous hearts and open hands.

Amen.

JESUS' MISSION – PASTOR CALEB

Luke 4:14-30

I often wonder what our boys will remember of their early years. Our youngest Josiah would be too young to be archiving much into long-term memory, but Austin, soon-to-be four, may already be archiving who-knows-what.

Will he remember any of his tantrums? Will he remember his imaginative role-playing as a rock star, firefighter, builder, or a crab (at the dinner table)?

Will he remember using his “excavator” in his “work site” in our yard? Will he remember sludging through rain water or scuba diving in the bathtub?

I wonder what formative memories Jesus held from his childhood. How did Jesus' earliest years in Nazareth impact his growing discovery of his unprecedented connection to God the father, or to his vocation as God's Messiah?

After Jesus was baptized, he spent forty days in the desert fasting, and being tempted by the devil – even crazier than John. But he returns to his home country of Galilee empowered by the Spirit. He begins teaching in the synagogues, and comes to the synagogue of his home town of Nazareth.

What memories flooded Jesus' mind, as he walked the old streets of Nazareth and entered the synagogue he had sat in countless times before?

Synagogues are the gathering places of Jews like Jesus. I don't know how Jesus acquired permission, but he stands up to read from the scroll of Isaiah that they have in the synagogue.

Jesus chooses to read words from Isaiah:

*“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
19 to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”*

He has anointed me... this is messianic language. The Messiah is the “anointed one.”

Also striking are the groups of people mentioned:

The poor, who receive good news.

Captives, who receive release.

The blind, who receive recovery of sight.

The oppressed, who go free.

Who are these people Jesus mentions? The words are straightforward enough, but there are a dozen directions to take them.

Some interpreters tend toward a spiritualized reading.

The poor are the spiritually poor – who need to hear the good news of salvation in order to find forgiveness of their personal sins. This “preaching the good news” is, after all, where we get the word “evangelize.”

The captives are those captive to the power of sin. The blind are those who don’t yet know the truth of the Christian faith.

Other interpreters believe Jesus is talking about sociopolitical liberation. Literal poor people, who are victims of economic oppression. Literal blind people. Prisoners of war and of the industrial prison complex.

Both Isaiah and Luke’s version allow for multiple interpretations.

The gospel narratives bear this out too. Doesn’t Jesus heal literal blind people, while criticizing the Pharisees for being literally blind? Doesn’t Jesus hang out with literal poor people, while proclaiming spiritual wealth in heaven?

Doesn’t Jesus offer forgiveness of sins and call for forgiveness of economic debt?

The word release appears twice: “release to the captives, and sending the oppressed in release.”

This same word is used in the gospels for forgiveness of sin, forgiveness of debt, and for release from oppression.

Truly the gospel has a holistic vision.

At the beginning of his new book, *Who will be a witness?* Drew Hart wrestles with what word to use to describe all the dimensions of God's salvation through Jesus.

He concludes that using several different words interchangeably is useful. Salvation is one of them. Yet in the English language, salvation tends to only signify forgiveness of one's personal sin and a ticket to heaven in the afterlife.

Liberation is another important word, but English speakers tend to limit it to sociopolitical freedom. Yet the problem is that our sin problem has many dimensions. Personal sin is a thing. So are the many forms of social injustice, racism, and poverty. There are "death-dealing spiritual forces that keep us captive" to patterns of life that harm each other and this earth. This captivity is much beyond our individual captivity.

Drew Hart settles on the word "deliverance" as one that has a thicker usage, and captures more of what God is doing.

He writes, "God is active, present, and intervening in the midst of the crushing poverty that people are experiencing, even right now" and "God's delivering presence is a force that we can join. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, our revolutionary Messiah came and lived, and has overcome the cross and the powers that deteriorate our human condition... We are delivered from ourselves, from the exploitation of others, and from the unjust structures and institutions that deny the dignity of all human people."¹

The story of Jesus resoundingly reveals that God cares about human pain. God cares about the pain of rural communities that have faced decades-long declines from the days of prosperous family farms and bustling main streets. God cares about the pain of folks who feel excluded because of disability, of folks whose lives are ruined and families shamed while they remain incarcerated years longer than in other developed countries. God cares about the pain of victims of abuse. God cares about the pain of young black men who see no examples around them of a way out of a ghettoized life.

God cares about our pain, but also about the pain of people we'd rather pretend don't exist.

Folks in Jesus' day had their own share of problems:

Most were dirt poor and landless. The Romans controlled large portions of Israelite land, which allowed a peasant to sustain themselves. People were trapped in cycles of debt, which is why debt comes up so often in the gospels.

People didn't know what exactly to expect, but they expected some sort of intervention from God soon to restore the nation of Israel to its former glory.

By choosing to read this passage from Isaiah, Jesus has captured everyone's attention. Their eyes are fixed on him, wondering what he will say next.

¹ Hart, Drew. *Who will be a witness? Igniting activism for God's justice, love, and deliverance*. Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2020, p. 32-33

“Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”

Now that’s *just* what they want to hear! Folks in Nazareth feel like the poor, the prisoners, and the oppressed, due to the ruthless Romans.

They are eager to hear what a Nazareth native will be able to accomplish to make the folks of his hometown proud. They are impressed at Jesus’ charisma. They’ve heard about Jesus’ first miracles.

We see the dynamic in any hometown. You can think about people that grew up in Goessel and went on to get a good sports scholarship, assume political office, or get a fairly impressive job in an urban area.

It’s a good reflection on Goessel. The community can feel proud. You take a bit of credit, especially if you were their teacher or coach or peer growing up.

So far, the folks of Nazareth are eager to see what Jesus will do for them, how Jesus might put them on the map.

“Isn’t this Joseph’s son?” – there might be a bit of skepticism as to just how far Jesus will really get. In Jesus’ day more than now, you were a rare person if you came to a higher station in life than what you were born into.

Jesus keeps talking. He tells his community, “you remember this proverb – ‘Physician, heal yourself!’”

The way Jesus uses the saying, it seems to mean that if Jesus is great and powerful, he will surely resolve whatever ails his hometown and make them great.

So, Jesus tells a few Bible stories. Maybe you’ll remember these and maybe not. The folks of Nazareth knew these stories. They were found in scrolls likely kept in their synagogue.

One is about the prophet Elijah. You can read about it in 1 Kings 17.

During a three-year famine, God sends Elijah to a foreign land. Elijah finds a destitute widow completely out of food. He convinces her to give him the almost last of her bread, as she and her son expect to starve to death.

Miraculously, the widow’s jar of flour and jug of oil never run dry.

The second story is about Elisha, Elijah’s successor.

In this story, Naaman is the commander of the Syrian army, and he has leprosy – the dreaded illness in the Bible. Through an Israelite slave-girl, he hears of Elisha and sends for him. Elisha has Naaman dip seven times in the Jordan river and he is healed of his leprosy.

These seem like arbitrary stories for Jesus to recall. What’s significant about them? Two of the greatest prophets of all time, doing miracles for foreigners. A foreign widow and the commander of a rival nation.

Jesus emphasizes the point – “there were many widows in Israel in Elijah’s time... but Elijah wasn’t sent to any of them.”

“there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha... yet not one of them was cleansed.”

How do you think the good folks of Nazareth heard that?

Jesus’ point is pretty unmistakable: don’t think that I’ll do anything special for you Nazarenes just because you saw me take my first steps.

Jesus doesn’t wish bad things on them. He isn’t calling the judgment of God upon them. But he wants them to understand that his fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah is so radical, it is not limited to fellow Israelites.

It includes a foreign widow and a pagan army commander.

No one sets up a fence around who God can or cannot bless. That’s the upside-down kingdom.

The townsfolk are furious. Filled with rage. They drive Jesus out of town and take him to the top of the hill outside the town to throw Jesus off the cliff.

I have some pictures of what is possibly the actual spot. Jesus could have had his end right then and there, but manages to slip through the crowd and goes on his way.

MICHAEL J. SHARP

Jesus’ inauguration of his ministry almost got him killed, right at the outset. Embracing this kind of mission and living it can be dangerous.

Some of you may have heard the story of Michael J. Sharp. He was a year or so ahead of me at EMU where I attended college. From that time, I remember him simply as the editor of the student paper *The Weathervane*, but I unfortunately didn’t get to know him well. His parents continue to live in Hesston.

MJ graduated and began a life of service that led him to literally practice the peacemaking he believed in.

After time serving with MCC, he began work with the United Nations engaging in talks with rebel groups in the Congo to encourage them to lay down arms.

It seems like incredibly risky work, but MJ found a way to have meaningful conversation with these rebels. MJ understood that they had deep narratives of a fantasized glorious past that they wished to return to and that justified their violence.

MJ could listen powerfully to them, and speak into their own narrative to persuade them to lay down arms. He would tap into their homesickness: “your children are growing up uneducated in the bush.”² In other words, do this for the sake of your children’s future.

Coming out of talks with dangerous people unscathed did not happen by scolding them or flattering them. It happened by listening to them deeply enough to understand their pain and their goals, then to pointedly reveal how their violence wasn’t furthering their goals; there had to be another way.

Both MJ and Jesus had a remarkable ability to engage in fruitful listening and transforming work with all sorts of people. In the case of Jesus, it was tax collectors and Pharisees, prostitutes and centurions, lepers and zealots.

Ultimately, MJ’s work got him and a colleague tragically killed, not because they were reckless, but because their work may have uncovered evidence of government atrocities. A journalistic investigation suggests they may have been killed in an attack arranged by the government.

Knowing the end of the Jesus story, we know that Jesus’ unfazed work of bringing God’s deliverance to all in all dimensions of life – spiritual, social, and physical – this work got Jesus killed.

CONCLUSION

Now we who find new life through the power of Christ’s resurrection inherit this work. The mission of Jesus now becomes our mission.

What does that look like?

I’m asking us to expand our imaginations of what God’s salvation through Jesus transforms. Don’t limit that.

In whatever kind of captivity you might feel in your personal life – broken relationships, addictive behaviors, or addiction to wealth or to constructing and hiding behind a perfect self-image – God’s deliverance transforms that.

But it’s not limited to personal sin, either. God’s deliverance also transforms the church so that we can be a visible sign in the world of an upside-down kingdom.

It starts with something as simple as us forming a “close-knit communities and meeting each other’s needs”³ – and we already do this.

We’ll continue to follow the ministry of this Jesus, and that will have more to say about our response. But first, it’s important to hear how Jesus understood his own mission.

The pandemic has felt like a limiting factor, but maybe God is using it to both call us to gratitude for the life-giving work we’ve been a part of in the past and a call to something new!

² <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2017/03/29/521962848/remembering-michael-sharp-he-risked-his-life-to-make-peace>

³ Claiborne, Shane. *Jesus for President: politics for ordinary radicals*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008, p. 90

Maybe this will generate a new vision for the ministries of Alexanderwohl. Maybe catching the vision of Jesus will transform our own sense of mission.

Questions:

1. Who are the poor, the captive, the blind, and the oppressed that Jesus refers to?
2. How does Jesus' mission impact us? How does it define our mission?

BENEDICTION – PASTOR CALEB

May we find our way toward embracing the mission of Jesus:

"to find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among people,
To make music in the heart"⁴
Go in peace, Christ is with you.

⁴ Howard Thurman, 1985