

5/16/21 WORSHIP SERVICE

WELCOME – PASTOR LOIS HARDER

Welcome and introduce Matt and Ruth, Sara and Brad and children. Last week we had five families up here, with the parents dedicating themselves and their young children to God and to the faith community. This morning we'll be reminded of God's faithful love and care throughout our lives even into our old age. Bethesda Home is a prime example of one of those places where the people – both residents and employees – show and are shown God's love. We're grateful, Matt and Sara that, along with your families, you could join our worship service this morning, representing Bethesda Home. And in between our birth and our old age come all sorts of landmarks and accomplishments – we'll also recognize our graduates this morning as part of our service. It's a good thing to have these rites of passage in our lives, to help us mark and celebrate the significant mile-markers and to remember, always, God's love with us.

What opportunities do you bring to share with one another for celebration or service?

INVOCATION

We do thank and praise you, God. We acknowledge, with grateful hearts, your presence here with us as we worship you. We invite you to move in our midst, open our hearts to your words and wishes for us. Amen. Our hymns are Sing praise to God and God of our strength.

GRADUATE RECOGNITION

I invite Colby and the High school graduates to come forward, along with Brian and Rachael.

Colby – I have thoroughly enjoyed and appreciated learning to know you and being at mid-week sessions with you. I pray God's blessings on you as you continue to learn about following Jesus in the community of the church and that this study Bible will be a helpful companion to you on your journey.

CHILDREN'S TIME – SARA HIEBERT, BETHESDA HOME

Many of us already know and appreciate Sara Hiebert and the amazing work she does at Bethesda, but few of us get to worship with her or to receive the words she shares with children!

MORNING PRAYER – PASTOR LOIS

Loving God, we thank you for every good gift. For the rain and the sunshine, for the growth of plants, the beauty of the birds, the bursting forth of springtime. We thank you for the passage of time, the cycles of the seasons, for school years and graduations that mark learning and accomplishments. And we thank you God, for your faithfulness to us through all of it. Thank you for our graduates and for the "village" of people who supported them along the way. We pray for your presence and guidance for leaders – of schools and communities, of governments,

local, national and global, as they seek wisdom. Help them to make decisions that will benefit all people, in equitable ways.

We thank you, God, for the liberation we're beginning to feel as more people are vaccinated and we're less inhibited by the covid virus. Help us to remain steadfast in our commitment to protect and defend the most vulnerable – children and those who may be immune-compromised – those who are still vulnerable to the virus. And we know, God, that in other parts of the world people continue to be desperately ill and dying in huge numbers. Grant humanity the wisdom and the will to share – to share vaccines and knowledge, medical personnel and equipment, so that the entire planet can thrive.

We pray for people who are living in situations of fear, hunger or violence. There are those in this country living under that kind of oppression, and other places near and far. God you hear the cries of your people wherever they are. We pray especially for the people of Israel and Palestine, that your love and justice would be welcomed. We long for your peace in this world as we pray together the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples. Our Father, who art in heaven...

I invite you to stand as we dedicate our offerings to God.

O God, we give our offerings in gratitude, rejoicing in the abundance of your gifts to us.

We give our offerings in faith, trusting that you will provide for our needs.

We give our offerings in hope, knowing you can use them to spread your love in this world.

And with our offerings, we give ourselves; may we live with generous hearts and open hands. Amen.

SCRIPTURE

Exodus 3:4-10, Exodus 4:11-16

MESSAGE – MATTHEW LEHMAN WIENS, BETHESDA HOME

“The Place Where God Meets Us”

Where and how do we encounter God? I believe that we can find little visions of God in all things; the laughter of my niece when she tastes something sour; the way that the wheat turns from green to gold; the sound of voices singing together in worship, or just for the pure joy of bird song on a spring morning. Each of these sounds are subtle ways of announcing God's presence, whispers that point us towards the joy inherent in our faith.

There are other times, though, when the presence of God manifests itself in a way that is undeniable and clear, a voice that speaks to us with strength and clarity. While we can hear whispers of the voice of God every day, God's call to action can come as a clarion call, guiding us to a new and hopeful future. How this call finds us, and how we respond, are two of the most important questions of our faith.

They are also questions that defined the life of Moses. The burning bush is just one example; Moses was blessed to spend tremendous amounts of time with God, and witnessed many miraculous things. The world changing events of the last year have given new relevance

to the story of the Ten Plagues. During this time Moses was God's mouthpiece, delivering the news of each plague to the Egyptians.

Moses also spent time with God on Mount Sinai after leading the Israelites out of Egypt, and heard the voice of God throughout his life, directing him and leading him. The moment that started it all, though, comes in front of the burning bush.

When God first speaks to Moses, God begins by identifying himself.

"I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob"

(repeat) "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob"

That's a lot of emphasis! Why couldn't God have been more succinct, and simply said, "I am the God of Abraham?" Even to this day, the religions descended from Abraham are known as the Abrahamic religions; Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Even though Moses was raised with Egyptians, he surely would have known that the God of Abraham is the God of the Jewish people. Surely, that would have communicated the message.

Further, if it was so important to include Isaac and Jacob in this message, why not just say "The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob?" Of course, we can't know exactly the mind of God, but one commentary I read theorized that this was because God was known differently to each of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Each of these patriarchs of the Jewish faith encountered God in a different way, and were met by God at different times in their life.

Abraham was the first, hearing God's call late in his life. We read in Genesis that God called Abraham to leave his father's house when he was seventy-five years old, move to the land of Canaan. Going from Harran, where Abraham was living, to Jerusalem is roughly 500 miles, the equivalent of walking from Goessel to Boulder, Colorado with all of your possessions! Even then, Abraham faithfully followed God's call!

God would go on to grant Abraham two sons, Ishamel and Isaac, both of whom would become the patriarchs of great religions. Isaac encountered God in yet another way; from his birth, he was circumcised and raised in a faith that worshipped Yahweh. However, while we have 12 chapters of Genesis about Abraham, we only see Isaac for about half of that amount of scripture. The Bible shares with us stories of great faithfulness and great sin, but the lives that are lived in faithful obedience to God tend not to fill chapters and chapters of scripture. Some are called to struggle greatly and overcome, while others are called to preserve and support the people around them. What is important is that we follow faithfully.

Finally, Jacob was raised in the faith like his father, Isaac, but we know that Jacob was a trickster and often created more strife in his family than he did comfort. Whether it was exchanging soup for his hungry brother's birthright or stealing their father's blessing with outright trickery, Jacob was not one to behave in open and honest ways. Later in his life, he literally wrestles with God, a battle he continues until God dislocates his hip and gives him a blessing. Jacob's life was defined by constant scheming and manipulation, but he still followed God's call as patriarch of a great nation.

For each of these men, God was known in a different way. Similarly, each of us encounters God in a way unique to us; for some, it's a powerful, life-changing call that comes late in life. For others, it's a call we've always known, and it fits comfortably like a pair of well-worn jeans. And finally, some of us hear the call, wrestle with it, fight it, but come to it in the end all the same. God's presence in our life, and the way that God meets us, remains true in each of these settings.

I think of this often as I walk the halls at Bethesda; each of the residents has a life story, one that extends well before I was born. Their stories contain sorrows and joys, lives full of memories. While I have a relationship with God, I know that each of the people that I meet have known God in a different way than I have, but in a way that is no less full, and no less true, than what I have experienced. For those of us who serve Bethesda Home, this is a true gift; to recognize that each person in our care, and each person surrounding them, represents the face of God.

Presented with the nature of God, one that is always unique and always true, Moses is given his calling. God has heard his people's cry! The enslavement of Israel, a scourge on the people for years, has not been ignored by their Lord. Moses will bring them relief, and lead them to the promised land.

The pandemic of the last year has presented challenges that none of us thought we would be encountering in January of 2020. We've all seen plans dashed and lives uprooted; many of us have fallen ill, or even lost loved ones. In all of it, though, God's presence is with us and God hears our cry.

This has been especially true at Bethesda Home. There's no denying that the winter was one of the hardest ones we've seen. With cold weather, visitation through windows had to be ended. As case counts began to rise among residents and staff, we found ourselves in an awful predicament. People wanted to see their loved ones, some of whom were in their last weeks of life, but we had to maintain protocols to protect our residents and staff. For a time, Bethesda resembled a hospital more than it did any kind of home.

For each of us, it was a time of grief and sadness. The phrase "dark night of the soul" is often used to describe a time of trial and doubts that ultimately leads to closer unity with God. In our dark night of the soul, a time when hope seemed distant, this was the core belief that kept us going. We were filled with the knowledge that God hears our cry and draws us closer, comforting and soothing us. Our call was an outpouring of that comfort, a calling to deliver relief in the midst of darkness.

Sometimes, though, in the most difficult times, faith wavers. Even standing before a bush that was on fire but not burning, even after seeing his staff turned to a snake, Moses still trembled at the thought of what he was called to do. Each of us is no different; if asked to follow God's call, we'd all say yes! But as the details of that call become painfully clear, it can bring us to the limits of our human endurance. We reach our dark night of the soul, and cannot escape. Even though God has been present in our lives as a unique, personal God, even though God has heard our cry, we still tremble at the work ahead.

One of my favorite sayings is that if you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together. God calls Aaron to support Moses, helpers to speak for him and talk to Pharaoh and the elders on his behalf. Even after we've heard God's call, we still need the support of our community and the people around us. While we were comforted by knowledge that God heard our cry, and while faith emboldened our calling, this community helped carry us across the finish line.

In the 130 years that Bethesda has been in existence, this community has been the lifeblood of Bethesda Home, supporting it in incredible ways. The care we've received since March of 2020 is the definition of that unwavering support.

You all lifted us up in your prayers, and supported us with letters, emails, and gifts of food, doing all that you could from afar. Now, as vaccines have allowed us to take steps towards normal life, we've been gifted with your joy and presence. Seeing the faces of our residents light up as they receive visitors like you again has truly been a bright point in a dark time.

In the past months, we've also been able to completely replace our call system, and not a moment too soon; the old call system crashed completely the day before the new system went live. Our work inside has also been accented by the rhythm of nail guns outside as a new roof and soffits were installed on our building. To be able to accomplish these major projects in the midst of a life-changing pandemic is a true testament to the support we receive from all of you. Believe me when I say that we could not have made it through the last year without you.

The road ahead is full of questions, questions that only time will reveal. However, in the midst of that uncertainty, we can draw comfort from this scripture, and from what we've already been through together.

So, as we look to the future, let us use the burning bush as our guiding light. The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, and the God of you and I will meet us as we are, and call us to where we need to be. If we cry out, when we cry out, God will be there to hear us, and help us along. And finally, as we go along the way, let us go together, and go far. Amen.

BENEDICTION – PASTOR LOIS

Go now with the God who is always faithful to you. Live in joyful faithfulness to God in return.