

5/9/21 WORSHIP SERVICE

OFFERTORY PRAYER

Giver of all good gifts, we ask your blessing on our gifts of money, of time, of energy and creativity. May we live in generous gratitude, and be reflections of your love.

SCRIPTURE

Mark 10:13-16; Isaiah 46:3-9

“GOD AS NURTERER AND PROVIDER” – PASTOR LOIS HARDER

We’ve been talking, for the last several Sundays about how we think and talk about God, the various names and images that we find in scripture for God. Pastor Caleb led us through the Trinitarian images of God, Jesus and Holy Spirit.

He reminded us that the ancient Hebrews used the sounds of the letters Y-H-W-H that, in the Hebrew had the significance of breath or wind... yah-weh. Yahweh. They understood Yahweh as Creator, Source, I AM, the name of God that Moses was instructed to tell the Pharaoh.

Caleb reminded us that the name Jesus also has its origins in this Hebrew word. Many Hebrew words are rooted in these sounds and their meanings. Yahweh...Hallelu-YAH, Isa-YAH, Eli-JAH, Yehoshua, which is the source of Joshua and Jesus is the Greek form of Yeshua/Joshua. We reviewed how Jesus was called many names, but among them was Rabbi or teacher, the Good Shepherd, the Light of the World, the True Vine, the very Image of God, Immanuel, God-WITH-us, the Christ or Messiah, the anointed one – the Savior.

Then last week we heard about the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit sent to the disciples – to us, as an advocate, a comforter who comes alongside us, a friend and helper. The Spirit of Jesus with us in his physical absence.

This morning I want to continue that theme of names and images of God in the scripture, specifically as nurturer and provider. As these parents dedicate themselves and their children to God, through the church, they come as human nurturers and providers; I offer these thoughts as challenge and encouragement to reflect these attributes of God to your children. There are lots of Biblical references to God as nurturer and provider, but we’ll just look at a couple.

First from this passage in Isaiah; God was addressing the whole people of Israel and asking them to remember, as God often does. Remember, God says, that I have upheld you and carried you since your birth – since you became a people, an entity through which I will make myself known to the world. The words used throughout this section describe God as the one who has borne and carried and delivered the people. God loved them into being and then provided all that they needed. And God promised to sustain them even into their collective old age with grey hair. From womb to tomb God has been present with them, has heard their cries and has carried them home. God continued to love and uphold and sustain the people even when they disobeyed and turned away from God. Even when they thought

maybe they'd have it better if they worshiped idols – gods that they could create in their own image and carry them around, put them wherever they wanted rather than having this omnipresent God who sees all and knows all and is always with them wherever they are.

But maybe we shouldn't be too hard on the people of Israel. Their impulses were only human. No matter how loving our providers are, there are times we just feel the need to assert our independence. I'm quite sure I'm not the only one here to have packed my small travel suitcase in a fit of angry defiance somewhere around the age of 12 or 13 and shoved it under my bed, just waiting for the right moment to steal away, ready to make my own way in the world. One instance, in particular, stands out in my memory; my suitcase had been stowed under the bed for a couple days as I waited for the right "running away" moment. My mom casually said to me something like, "Hey, I noticed your favorite flowered bell-bottoms are missing from your suitcase – don't you think you'll need those?" Ooph. Nurtured and provided for – even in the midst of puberty and bad decisions.

Like God, human parents have visions and plans, hopes and expectations for their children. And children almost always have their own ideas and make their own choices. When we read a bit further, the prophet tells us in the following chapters that the people are stubborn, they go their own way and often reject God's plans for them. And, like human parents God can get angry and frustrated! But Yahweh allows the people's decisions to have their own consequences. And still...God continues to nurture and provide – sometimes from afar. Isaiah writes that "God will overcome the distance between stubborn hearts and God's righteousness and deliverance."

Now lest we leave our scripture study this morning thinking that people, in general and children, in particular are *only* stubborn and disobedient (which all of us *occasionally* are), let's go back, briefly to the familiar passage from Mark that Gretchen read earlier about people bringing their children to Jesus to receive his blessing.

Of course, as always, the placement and the context of this story is important. Just *before* this is the story of the Pharisees testing Jesus with the question about divorce. And right *after* this story is the one about the rich man asking Jesus about how he can be sure he'll have eternal life. The children are placed strategically between the powerful and the rich – two of the most petulant and strong-headed groups of all of God's children.

The disciples, thinking that Jesus was well on his way to becoming the next strong man military leader who would lead the poor and oppressed Jewish people in a coup to overthrow the heavy-handed Romans were dismissive of the parents who were bringing their little ones for a blessing. Jesus, of course, immediately chided them with the reminder that God's upside down kingdom belongs to the children and those who are child-like in their discipleship. Decidedly *not* those who value power or wealth more than trust and faith. Even more than now, in Jesus' time children were the most vulnerable population. They were valued, but mostly because of how they could benefit their families and communities – not necessarily as gifted people in their own right. Children were more like commodities with virtually no individual worth or value. So Jesus' words are perhaps some of the most radical in

terms of challenge and encouragement for all of us as we join our young parents in modeling God's attributes of nurturer and provider for our children.

When parents who follow Jesus bring their children to God before the congregation, they come in the spirit of gratitude, thanking God for the lives of these children entrusted to them. They come to offer their children back to God and to ask for God's blessing on their lives together. And we, as their congregation are here to share in their joy, to pray with them for their children's well-being and to welcome them into our church family. It's an honor and a privilege to participate together in this worship service. Let's pray.

Gracious God, like a father who nurtures his children you have cared for us.
Like a mother you have called each of us by name and claimed us as your own.
You have loved us into being, placed us in human families, and blessed us on our journey.
By the presence of your Spirit, be with these parents and their children for every step of their journeys together through life. We pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Now I invite all of you to join me here. And as they're coming forward I want to reiterate the welcome that Karl gave at the beginning of the service and extend that especially to the families of these families – we're so glad you could be here this morning to give witness and join in the blessing of these parents and children!

Maryanne, Evan, Kennedy and Cameron Michelle (Feb 11, 2021)
Brittany, Garrett and Elliot Holland (December 5, 2019)
Courtney, Weston and Wyatt Ross (January 22, 2020)
Chrystiana, Bryant, Emmett and Nolan Paul (Nov 3, 2020)
Justine, Kyle, Lillian and Myles Wayne (April 29, 2020)

On behalf of this congregation, there are two questions for you all to respond to:

As you bring your child for blessing by God in this congregation, do you consecrate yourselves as parents to bring up your child in the nurture and instruction of the Lord? (we do)

Is it your intention to try to shape your family's life by caring for one another, sharing in God's word, in prayer and Christian fellowship so that your child can learn to know and love Christ as their Lord and Savior?

(Yes! As Christian parents we are thankful for the privilege of parenthood. We recognize that we have a very special role in the life of our child, helping him/her to know and to love God. We pledge ourselves to the task of parenthood with love, patience, with firmness and with faith, trusting God to guide and strengthen us. We welcome and appreciate the support of this congregation, in active partnership in our task of parenting. We need your encouragement. We entrust our children to your loving care in this community of faith.)

_____ (parents), may the God who has entrusted you with _____ (child) grant you fullness of love in raising him/her. May God grant you to live a life of integrity and faithfulness before _____ (child) so that he/she might come to know the way of Jesus.

_____ (child), the God who created you, who sent Jesus to redeem you and The Holy Spirit to live in you, may this God watch over you, bless you and empower you to seek, to find, and to know God.

I invite you all to stand now and offer the congregational covenant in response to these families:

You have offered your children to the strong and tender care of God.

We rejoice with you and give thanks for the gift of your children.

With God as our guide, we will share in your children's nurture and well being.

We will support, by our example and words, your efforts to provide a loving and caring home where trust in God grows and Christ may be known.

Our prayers are with you and for you.

May our shared life and witness help you grow as a family in faithfulness and joy.

Amen.

You may be seated. And you may all return to your seats. (Point out gifts.)