

3/13/22 WORSHIP SERVICE

WELCOME – PASTOR CALEB YODER

Welcome to Alexanderwohl on this beautiful spring morning. Hopefully you don't have too many yawns after loosing an hour with the time change.

It is good to be gathered here and remotely to encounter the Spirit of Christ in the presence of one another.

This morning I'd like to try something a little different.

For those of you here in person, let's take a moment to simply turn to those you are seated next to and simply say "the peace of Christ be with you."

The peace of Christ be with you all indeed.

CALL TO WORSHIP

We are into our second week of Lent, following the journey of Jesus toward Jerusalem.

Throughout this season, we are recalling the words of Isaiah 55: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts,

neither are your ways my ways,"

declares the Lord.

⁹ "As the heavens are higher than the earth,

so are my ways higher than your ways

and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Let's center ourselves with the words in your bulletin under "Call to worship."

Leader: God's thoughts are higher than our thoughts.

People: God's ways are higher than our ways.

Leader: Together we seek to learn God's way. Because God is for us,

All: Whom shall we fear?

Leader: We come to be reminded of God's power

People: and to be led more deeply into God's love.

Leader: We come to gather under the wings of Christ,

All: and to learn the way of compassion.

PRAYER:

God, you are our light and our salvation. You are our fortress and stronghold. As the songwriters of the Bible would say, we rest in the shelter of your wings. Of whom should we be afraid?

We make our home in you. We seek eyes that see beauty, and hearts with compassion. As we are rooted and grounded in your love, let our fear give way to compassion. Gather us in and send us out.

Amen.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION – PASTOR LOIS HARDER

Since Lent is particularly set aside as a season of repentance and confession, we often include in our worship services, corporate prayers of confession, followed by some silence to reflect and pray, and then words of assurance of God's love and mercy for us. So, I invite you to read the words of confession as they're in your bulletin. Then, during the silence Caleb will blow out two candles since this is the second Sunday of Lent. Blowing out the candles represents the impending suffering and darkness for Jesus as we move closer to the time of the crucifixion. We'll move right into the morning prayer then.

Leader: Holy One, we seek you while you may be found.

People: We call upon you while you are near.

Leader: Have mercy on us, O God, for your thoughts are not our thoughts and our ways are not your ways.

People: Forgive us for living with fear. Help us live out compassion.

Leader: As we walk with Christ on this Lenten journey, let us see your way more clearly

All: And follow you way more faithfully.

(silence)

PRAYER OF ASSURANCE –

God, you are our light and our salvation. You are the stronghold of our life and we seek a home in you. Grounded in you, sheltered by your wings of love, we will persevere through this Lenten wilderness as we strive to follow your son Jesus in our thoughts, our words and our actions.

We ask, loving God, that you would surround the people of Ukraine, that your Spirit would uphold them, strengthen them and carry them through this unspeakable horror. Give us and the rest of the world compassionate and generous hearts – move us to actions that support and help the people. We pray for the Russians who also do not want this war and who have bravely spoken out and tried to make their opposition known. Continue to give them courage and strength also. We pray for those in neighboring countries who are receiving Ukrainian refugees in record numbers. Bless them and their compassionate efforts. We acknowledge, Lord, that it's hard to know how to pray about Putin and the other power players who are inflicting this hate and destruction, but we do pray – we pray for peace, we pray for a change of heart, we pray for this violence to stop.

We pray for places in other parts of the world where there is war and violence, where some groups of people are treating others unjustly or with cruelty, wielding power over those perceived as less worthy. God, we know that sort of mistreatment and violence happens all around the world and also right here in our own communities. Help us to be reflections of your light, God, to shine your love and your truth in situations of darkness.

We pray for those in our own neighboring Reno County who are reeling from the destruction of the fires last week. We ask for your presence of healing and resilience in that community.

We pray for those in our church family and others we know who have illnesses, who are healing from surgical procedures, who may be anticipating medical procedures, for all of us

who need your healing in our bodies, our minds and our relationships. Give us open spirits to receive the needed healing from you, God.

We are grateful, God, for times to relax, to go on adventures, to rest or learn or rejuvenate. We pray for those who've just had or are just entering a time of spring break. Give them whatever is needed during this time – be with those who are traveling with safe travel mercies. We thank you for those who've been traveling and have returned safely. O God, we know that in your master plan, you designed time for work and time for rest – help all of us to honor that rhythm in our lives, whether we have a spring break or not.

Thank you God for the incredible gift of new life. We're especially grateful for the gift of Reagan Laine to Brittany and Garrett and big sister, Elliot. Thank you for their family and their extended family, Ann and Myron, Merlin and Velma as well as Brittany's sister Sierra and Jerrell and their new baby Orly, and for her parents, Pasty and Ron. O God, we know that each member of each family is an important piece in the network of support that you have established for us and we thank you for that.

Continue to bless us now God as we worship, sing, hear the Biblical message and consider how to weave this thread of worship into the tapestry of our everyday lives. Bless us as we offer our gifts of money to you, through this church, God. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

OFFERING PRAYER –

Grant us, God, the grace of living with a spirit large and free, that ourselves and all our living we may offer unto thee. Amen.

FROM FEAR TO COMPASSION – PASTOR CALEB

Luke 13:31-35

INTRO

When I was young, there was a chicken coop behind the yard of my aunt and uncle's house, where my dad grew up, and the smaller "Grandpa" house next to it.

It was a thrill to go in the chicken coop when it was full of chicks and see all the small delicate animals peeping amidst protective hens. If you picked up one of the chicks to feel the soft down, you knew what a vulnerable creature it was.

Jesus said that he longed to gather the people of Jerusalem in the same way that a hen protects her chicks under her wings. This is a tender, maternal image that we relate to. In our hearts, we desire this kind of experience of God's tenderness and protection, but this is not how our external reality often feels.

In the short passage we all heard, Jesus is on his way toward Jerusalem at the climax of his ministry. Verse 22 says: "Jesus went through one town and village after another, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem."

Jesus is probably still in the region of Galilee, north of Jerusalem, because Galilee was the region controlled by Herod. There are some Pharisees that tip Jesus off that Herod would like to kill Jesus. It's hard to know whether these Pharisees genuinely care about Jesus, or if this is just their way to get him to move along faster.

Jesus' response pretty clearly says that he's not afraid of Herod: "Go tell that fox this: "I'm casting out demons and doing healings today and tomorrow and by the third day, I'll be done."

So we have both foxes and chickens in this passage. Anyone want to guess what happens if a fox got into the chicken coop?

We don't have to know the specifics of how the culture of Jesus' day viewed foxes to have an idea of what Jesus is saying. Calling Herod a fox wasn't praise or a nice compliment. It means that Herod is voracious and cunning.

Both back in Jesus' day and in the present, foxes are associated with being crafty or sly. We have a Richard Scarry children's book with a version of the fable of the fox and the crow. The fable dates back to at least Jesus' day.

In the fable, the crow has a piece of cheese that the fox wants. The fox praises the crow for being a beautiful animal with a beautiful singing voice, and asks the crow to sing. Down falls the cheese into the fox's mouth.

Jesus will not be stopped by a fox. Jesus will press on. Jesus' work is liberating people from all spirits of bondage and healing people from whatever ailments they have. This is Jesus' work of compassion, and he is determined to finish it, death threats or no.

"Today, tomorrow, and the next day," Jesus' says. He is dead set on getting to Jerusalem. Jesus did not let fear get in the way of completing his goal. Jesus did not let fear get in the way of his compassion.

Somehow this whole exchange with the Pharisees reminds Jesus of what's coming. Though Jesus isn't afraid of Herod, he also knows his life is in danger. He expects to meet his fate in Jerusalem. "It's inconceivable for a prophet to die outside Jerusalem."

In the rest of the passage, Jesus addresses the city of Jerusalem, in a similar voice to how the prophets communicated messages from God for the city: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets!"

Within these words we have one of the most tender word-pictures of God – a mother hen protecting her chicks under her wing. The idea of being sheltered under God's "wings" is common in the psalms, like this one:

"You, Lord, preserve both people and animals. How priceless is your unfailing love, O God! People take refuge in the shadow of your wings." (Psalm 36:6b-7)

We can't miss the bigger point of this, though. While Jesus *longs* to embrace Jerusalem in this loving, tender way, the city will tragically face destruction. By the time that Luke's gospel hit the press, the Romans had devastated the city.

I imagine Jesus feels conflicted emotions: the longing to provide protection like a hen provides her chicks, while seeing the danger Jerusalem was on if they continue the same course. Jesus describes Jerusalem as a city that has never been able to hear the message of the prophets.

Prophets are truth-tellers, and Jesus was a truth-teller. That's what prophets do, and cities, rulers, and institutions do pretty well at getting rid of any prophet who has a truth they don't want to hear. For Jesus, this would happen dramatically with his death on the cross.

Jesus finishes his mournful message to Jerusalem, saying, "*You will not see me until the time when you'll say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.'*"

I really don't know what he's trying to say with that, but I do know that this was the cheer in the streets when Jesus entered the city on a donkey – what we celebrate with Palm Sunday. In that triumphant moment, Jesus also wept for the city. Jesus said, "*If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes....*"

Jesus warned that enemies will encircle Jerusalem just like Russian artillery encircling cities in Ukraine. "*They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you.*" (Luke 19:41-44)

I also don't know exactly what Jesus meant to say with this warning, but here's my take. This warning did come to pass when the Jewish people tried to rebel against Rome and the Romans squashed the rebellion.

My take is that Jesus' people failed to understand where they would see God at work. They failed to understand the things that make for peace. They expected to see God at work in a military movement that would throw off the Roman yoke and usher in new glory days for a Jerusalem-based theocracy.

They failed to see God at work in Jesus' non-violent, healing-based, on-the-ground movement of compassion.

In the very next chapter, Jesus gives the parable of the Great Banquet. The expected invitees refuse the invitation, and instead the host of the banquet invites "poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame" (Lk 14:21).

What Jesus models is not being stuck with fear or despair, but a determination to press on. "In any case," he says, "I must press on today and tomorrow and the next day!" Jesus presses on, and it is safe to say that compassion is a primary motivator of Jesus' work.

UKRAINE

These days, there is no shortage of things that may give us fear, disappointment, or perhaps anger.

News coverage these days is dominated by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Some of us feel the horror of the reminder that we live in a world where one individual with too much power and ill intent can bring devastating suffering to millions. We live in a world where there are no easy answers for how to prevent something like this tragedy from happening.

Ukraine is not allowing any male between 18 and 60 to leave so that they can potentially be called to fight. Many people are fleeing, while others staying behind to help other people to flee or find basic resources.

We may also feel unsure how to reconcile our peace convictions with what is happening. How can one respond to such violence with anything but violence? What does it even mean to have peace convictions as comfortable middle-class Americans far removed from the situation? We wonder what we would be doing if we were in one of the besieged cities.

COVID

Even while Ukraine dominates headlines, it's also true that our country is approaching an official tally of 1,000,000 COVID. On average, those who died with COVID as a factor would have had about 10 more years of life.

Perhaps part of the reason we are hardly noticing this milestone is the fact that the toll is not evenly distributed. COVID less of an impact on people who are white, college-graduates. It has greater impact on people who are lower-income, lack good access to health care, and people of color.

Worst toll has been among people who had already been out of view and forgotten. After two years, we may no longer feel acute fear, but we do feel exhaustion. The stress we all feel has only widened polarization between people with different beliefs about masks or vaccination.

SWIMMING IN FEAR

What do we do with our fear, disappointment, or anger?

Fear can be motivating. In JH PE, we had a unit on swimming, using the high schools swimming pool. Swimming in PE was anxiety-provoking in of itself. I didn't look forward to the humiliation of being the only boy to jump in the pool feet first because I couldn't dive, and then sputter as I half dog paddled and half-breast stroked across the length of the pool. Minutes stretched into eternities.

On top of that, everyone knew that if you happened to forget your swimming trunks, there was no problem. The high school had some speedos from the HS swim program so that you would not be sitting this out. Motivation of fear meant that I always brought swimming trunks!

ALCHEMY OF EMOTIONS

While fear may be motivating, I believe Jesus shows us a better way. It is to put our strong emotions into the service of compassion.

To start, we acknowledge our fear, our disappointment, our anger about the world, or things closer to home, or brokenness in our relationships.

Acknowledge means neither denying our strong emotions or acting impulsively out of them. It is an awareness. Being able to sit with us and make a conscious, principled choice about what I want to do with this.

Sometimes emotions are a problem and we just want to make them go away. Sweep them under the rug. Distract yourself from them. Will them to go away. Or my default -- turn to your logical, analytical side and try to reason them away. The only problem is it doesn't work.

Emotions are a form of energy. I remember my running coach talking about anger as one kind of energy for performance. It wasn't the best energy. The best energy for running was a kind of positive energy anticipating meeting a goal or pushing your body past previous limits. At the time, I thought the point of his comments was that it's better to tap into positive energy rather than anger to run well.

But the flip side is that if you already have the anger and need to do something with it, you may as well put it to good use. There's a kind of alchemy of emotions -- not that I'm any kind of expert on this. It is to sit with the difficult emotions, and let the energy present within them serve a better response rather than a worse one.

We cannot always make our emotions go away, but we can make choices about what to do with them.

Acknowledge what you carry in your soul. Offer that to God. Rather than asking God to simply take it away, you might ask instead for God to use your fear, your disappointment, or your anger and turn it into compassion.

In our passage, we have a small window into Jesus' emotions. We see Jesus' defiance of Herod. The passage never names fear, but Jesus surely felt fear, especially as he inched toward Jerusalem knowing what was coming. Jesus also felt longing. He saw the danger Jerusalem was on if they would continue their course. He felt conflicted -- wanting to be able to provide protection like a hen protects her chicks, but ultimately unable.

CONCLUSION

In this season of Lent, we are journeying with Jesus toward the cross and resurrection, journeying with the difficult challenges of our own lives, journeying as a congregation in a process of discerning who God is calling us to be.

May we trust the Spirit of Christ as our guide in this wilderness journey. May we remember that God's thoughts are always higher than our thoughts.

May we accept the powerful emotions we carry in these days, and invite the Spirit to transform them into energy to press on and approach life with an attitude of compassion.

QUESTIONS

1. What gives you the most fear these days?
2. What does the image of a hen with her chicks under her wings communicate to you?
3. How can we use the energy of feeling fear into the energy of compassion?

BENEDICTION

From this time and place into your next week, may God grant you encouragement, strength, and compassion. May the embrace of Jesus ease your fears. As you go, know that Christ is our guide through every wilderness and remains with us on the way.