

10/2/22 WORSHIP SERVICE

WELCOME

Welcome to Alexanderwohl on this beautiful fall morning! A few of you are also watching on Zoom, especially with some Covid going around. Pastor Lois is not here with us in person for that reason.

Nevertheless, we are here to worship the God of our ultimate hope. Today is a unique Sunday, as this is World Communion Sunday. We will celebrate the Lord's supper in our service today along with Christians around the world, mindful that Christ's body transcends differences of geography, culture, language, and nation.

This Sunday is also our final week with our series on the Confession of Faith and it seems fitting that this coincides with World Communion. This coming week looks to be eventful with our midweek kick-off coming on Wednesday night.

I'll again lead adult Bible Study beginning this Wednesday with our Midweek kickoff. We will gather in the conference room at 7:50, just after the dismissal of choir. Each week we will delve deeply into one of Jesus' parables about God's grace and our discipleship. The study and insights we come to together will bear fruit in the following Sunday's service as we also begin a worship series on the parables.

What other opportunities and announcements do we have this morning?

CALL TO WORSHIP

As we finish our series on our *Confession of Faith*, I invite us to read a statement of faith together. This is slightly shortened from a unison reading found in the back of the Confession of Faith book. It is still a little lengthy, but I invite us to read together or listen to the words that will be up on the screen.

We believe in God the Creator of all, who called forth a people in faith.

*We believe in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, crucified and resurrected for us.
Christ is our peace, our Savior and our Lord.*

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the source of redemption and life.

We who respond to Christ in faith are his church.

*We are called to proclaim and to be a sign of God's kingdom,
sustained by the Spirit and Scripture.*

*So we continue the mission of Christ, making disciples, forgiving, restoring, baptizing, sharing
the Lord's Supper, using our gifts in unity and love.*

We commit ourselves to follow the way of Jesus, through suffering to life.

*By grace we are being changed into the image of God,
in which God created women and men.*

As disciples, we hear Christ's call to life in the Spirit, to chastity, stewardship, love for enemies, and the practice of justice and peace.

We joyfully worship the three-in-one God, giving full allegiance to Christ, living now as if in the age to come.

We place our hope in God's reign, in God's victory over evil, in the resurrection, and in Christ's coming again in glory.

To God be all glory! Amen!

INVOCATION

Loving God, you have heard our words and you know the intentions of our hearts. We acknowledge and welcome your Holy Spirit here. We're open to receiving the gifts you have for us through your Spirit's leading. Amen.

PRAYER OF DEDICATION

Giver of all good gifts, we gratefully return to you the first fruits of what we have been entrusted with. Bless these gifts and those who give them, to the increase of your reign here on earth, as it is in heaven. Amen.

LIVING BY ULTIMATE HOPE – PASTOR CALEB

1 Corinthians 15:20-28, 35-58

Those of you who are my age or older might remember the show *Home Improvement*, which my family watched fairly often growing up. Tim Taylor often got himself into trouble and sometimes sought advice from the next-door neighbor Wilson, who always had words of wisdom. I distinctly remember Wilson observing in one conversation – with just his eyes poking above the fence – that human beings are the only creature who know they are going to die. (I have no memory of anything else in the episode, just that one line).

We know that our earthly lives will not last forever, and many cultures have pondered what, if anything, comes next. Most people when we are younger rarely think about it. The limitation of time hits perhaps around the same time that we begin experiencing the losses of aging.

My very best 5000-meter race was my final track meet in my senior year of college. I remember realizing that I was highly unlikely to ever be in the position in the future to beat that time.

Before that point, in pretty much any area of life, I was always getting better and could continue to get better. This was the first awareness of there being a limit. Finitude.

Many Christians recognize, quite rightly, that a life of faith must have deep meaning as well as the journey of personal transformation in our present lives. The life abundant that Jesus talked about begins in our lives of faith.

Many Christians also recognize, quite rightly, that it is not enough to wish people well who are disheartened, grieving, poor, or disenfranchised – to assure them of the hope of heaven, if we are not in some way working together for well-being, liberation, and a taste of God's kingdom in the present.

With all that said, Paul the apostle wrote passionately about the topic of resurrection. The Christian life involves sacrifice and risk working for what we may not see materialize in our lifetimes; Christians live by faith rather than sight.

So Paul has this very unforgettable sentence in verse 19: *“If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.”*

In chapter 15, Paul begins by summarizing the proclamation of Jesus’ resurrection. Then he pivots to weigh into a debate in the churches of Corinth about whether there will be a resurrection for those who die.

Paul argues that it makes no sense to claim faith in the resurrection of Jesus if you don’t think a resurrection of others is possible. Furthermore, Paul claims that we can’t assume that the new bodies that we will be resurrected into will be the same as our present bodies.

A seed looks nothing like the plant that it will sprout into. We also see a variety of sorts of bodies in the natural world among land animals, birds, and fish. Likewise, we can look at the celestial bodies – the sun, moon, and the stars, all of which differ from each other in splendor.

As I read him, Paul suggests that when people saw Jesus after his resurrection, he had a different sort of body. We all begin with a body like the first human, Adam. Adam is called a *“living being”* or *“living soul,”* and we currently have these *“living being”* sort of bodies. In contrast, the risen Jesus is a *“life-giving Spirit”* and the resurrection we look forward to will be into such a *“spiritual body.”*

As we read Paul’s words nearly 2,000 years later, we may have questions.

- What is a “spiritual body”? Doesn’t “Spirit” mean “not body”? Yet apparently for Paul, a body could be made of “spirit,” and the resurrected Jesus was an example.
- Bodies are kind of gross, much to the delight of little boys. At the resurrection are we free from bodily functions?
- What kind of “body” did the risen Jesus actually have?
- If we are waiting for a resurrection at the end of the age, what happens to people who die in the meantime?
- Are we to believe the entire universe will end in a few years when Jesus returns? Is resurrection somehow outside of this universe?
- If Paul thought Jesus would return very soon, was he fundamentally mistaken in his hope?
- How important is it for Christians to know the details of resurrection versus a simple practice of hope beyond our lifetimes?

There’s no time to do justice to these questions right here, but we are allowed to ask questions.

Most scholars see clear evidence in Paul's letters that Paul was personally convinced that Jesus would return within his lifetime or at least the lifetime of those he wrote to. Understanding this actually makes Paul a bit more comprehensible.

For example, in verse 51, he tells the Corinthians, *"we will not all die, but we will all be changed..."* In other words, Paul expected some of them to still be alive when Christ returns and the dead are raised.

For centuries, Christians, including the early Anabaptists, have been convinced theirs was the last generation before Christ would return and the end of the age would come. And everyone so far has been wrong.

This disappointment may even be addressed within the New Testament. The first generation of Jesus-followers did in fact die, and the second generation had to deal with the disappointment of Christ's delayed coming.

The letter of 2 Peter seems to address this disappointment: *"With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. ⁹ The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness"* (2 Peter 3:8-9). The same passage even references *"our dear brother Paul,"* whose *"letters contain some things that are hard to understand"* (2 Peter 3:16).

FAITHFUL ANTICIPATION OF ULTIMATE HOPE

Biblical writers envisioned God setting things right in different ways. The hope of God setting things right always came from a sense of God's goodness and justice.

Ezekiel envisioned the building of a giant temple much bigger than the second temple that was actually built. Yet aspects of his vision were incorporated into the vision found at the end of Revelation.

Isaiah has a poetic depiction of a new heaven and a new earth in chapter 65. *"The sound of weeping and of crying will be heard ... no more. ...They will build houses and dwell in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit..."* (Isaiah 65:19b, 21)

In this rather earthy vision, people still die, but everyone has a long, full life. *"Never again will there be... an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not live out his years"* (65:20)

The final verses of the vision return to images found earlier in Isaiah: *"the wolf and the lamb will feed together... They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain," says the Lord.*" (65:25)

There is a long biblical tradition of faithful anticipation of ultimate hope, trusting God to make things right, to restore all things, to redeem all things, to renew all things. The biblical phrase for this is the "kingdom" or "reign of God."

Faith is not about having secret esoteric knowledge or answers. Faith is a matter of having tenacious hope that is the animating force of our lives.

When we have a deeper hope than realistic expectations for shorter-term outcomes, we are paradoxically freed to take more risks and be radically different. And when we reach the years where we must face the reality of our own limited time, we don't have to approach death with despair. We may feel fear and grief at certain points, but we don't have to ultimately be afraid to die.

"Where, O death, is your sting? ... Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

REIGN OF GOD AND MISSION

Our Confession of Faith connects the Reign of God with the mission of the church.

The last article states: *"We believe that the church is called to live now according to the model of the future reign of God. Thus, we are given a foretaste of the kingdom that God will one day establish in full. The church is to be a spiritual, social, and economic reality, demonstrating now the justice, righteousness, love, and peace of the age to come."*

We are to be a kind of "beta trial." An experiment of what by faith is possible.

Article 10 says it like this: *"The church is called to proclaim and to be a sign of the kingdom of God...The church is called to witness to the reign of Christ by embodying Jesus' way in its own life and patterning itself after the reign of God."*

We may need to use words at times, but words are hollow and mean little unless they are lived. Hope expresses itself by impacting what we do in the present. It is not a choice between caring about the present or having guiding convictions about the future.

When we have ultimate hope, we can take risks in the present to live into the pattern of God's reign as we can most faithfully anticipate it. We don't withdraw from this life or the world, but rather invest in it. We entrust that investment to God, rather than letting our finitude limit our willingness to invest.

The writer of Hebrews characterizes living by ultimate hope in this way: *"All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth."*

Hope is really a spiritual practice that impacts how we go about life. It isn't about excessive speculation about what lays beyond this life or doctrinal certainty.

When we believe in the resurrection, it becomes a pattern that we see everywhere. Every winter and spring. Every time human solidarity or rebirth emerges from tragedy. We have to learn to see it and trust it.

CONCLUSION

I can't solve any mysteries about life after death, or resurrection, or the mysteries of God's ultimate reign.

I challenge us to become comfortable with having only partial understanding. In the next weeks we will engage Jesus' parables, in which Jesus describes the essence of God's reign.

I challenge us to let God's reign captivate our imagination. I challenge us to identify the pattern of resurrection every time it happens even in this life.

A common thread through the 2000 years of Christian tradition is the practice of reenacting Jesus' last meal with his disciples. The practice of partaking the bread and cup of Christ is not only a remembrance of Jesus' death and resurrection, but also a practice to orient ourselves to the pattern and ultimate hope of resurrection.

We will now sing together in preparation of our communion service.

INVITATION (ADAPTED FROM VT 936)

At the table of Christ,

we eat this bread and drink this cup

to remember the life and death and resurrection of Jesus,

to be united with Christ and with one another as the church, and to look toward a time when all will be one.

As we eat and drink with thanksgiving,

Jesus is present with us.

WORDS OF PREPARATION (ADAPTED FROM VT 937)

[adapt. from Balthasar Hubmaier (present-day Germany), *A Form for Christ's Supper*, 1527]

Sisters and brothers, as we gather to eat the bread and drink the cup, let us first make a pledge of love. In silent reflection, consider these questions:

- Will you love God before all things, and join yourself to Christ's way? (*silence*)
- Will you love your neighbor and offer your life in service, through the power of Jesus Christ, who laid down his life for us? (*silence*)
- Will you support and challenge one another, speak and hear the truth, and do good even to enemies? (*silence*)

May the Spirit of God give us the grace, strength, and patience to live this pledge of love, so that we can follow Jesus' way of love as the body of Christ, both broken and blessed for the life of the world.

WORDS OF THANKSGIVING — (ADAPTED FROM VT 943)

Just as Jesus gave thanks when he broke bread, we too give thanks for this table of fellowship with one another and with Christ. We will give thanks in several languages, and I have some people that will help us do that.

The words "Thanks be to God" are in the screen in different languages. We invite you to make your best attempt to repeat the phrase.

Pastor: At this table, we receive the bread of life and the cup of Christ, a worldwide communion with Christ and one another.

¡Gracias a Dios!

All: ¡Gracias a Dios!

French leader: Rendons grâce à Dieu!

All: Rendons grâce à Dieu!

German leader: Gott sei Dank!

All: Gott sei Dank!

Plautdietsch leader: Danksheen, Gott!

All: Dankscheen, Gott!

Portuguese leader: Graças a Deus!

All: Graças a Deus!

Haitian Creole leader: Gras a Dye!

All: Gras a Dye!

Pastor: Thanks be to God!

All: Thanks be to God!

WORDS OF INSTITUTION

The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, 24 and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me."

25 In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me."

Let's Pray: Blessed are you, bountiful God,

For you made bread to strengthen us and the fruit of the vine to nourish us.

you gave us this bread as a sign of your body and this cup as a sign of your blood.

Let our sharing be a taste of the bread of heaven, and the wine we shall drink in your joyful feast. Amen.

Come to the table of Christ!

PRAYER AFTER COMMUNION -VT 946

(Wild Goose Worship Group (Scotland), 1999)

Let's pray:

In deep gratitude
for this moment,
this meal,
these people,
we give ourselves to you.

Send us...

to live as changed people
because we have shared the Living Bread
and cannot remain the same....

So, God, may we glorify you
as inhabitants of earth
and citizens of heaven. Amen.

BENEDICTION

In the Sotho language the song we just sang says something like:

"It is the Lord Jesus who enabled us to carry the Gospel."

Go, carry the gospel in everything you do in the coming week, living in light of the hope of God's reign.