

6/18/23 WORSHIP SERVICE

MORNING PRAYER

Ted Nikkel's older sister Joanne Klassen died this past week. She was married to Harold Klassen and they lived at Kidron Bethel Village.

Let's pray. Dear God, you have created us and you know us inside and out. You know our thoughts and our fears. You know what motivates us to act or to speak, and what brings us joy. You know each of our strong suits and you know our weaknesses. Help us to trust you, God, knowing that there's no place we can go where you are not.

As we gather to worship you, we are reminded of the depth of your love for each of us, for all humanity, for all of creation and we thank you.

We thank you today especially for our fathers and those who have nurtured and guided us along the way. Thank you for the ways you showed your love through them.

We pray for those who are grieving and missing their fathers and others who've died. Be especially with Ted Nikkel and his family as they grieve the loss of his sister.

We pray for those who are sick or ailing; we ask for your healing and for your comfort.

We pray for those who will be baptized later in the service. Give them your peace and the confidence of your Holy Spirit – a sense of joy as they boldly take the next step in their faith journey.

O God, be with those who will participate at Camp Mennoscah this week – with Peter Voth, Nathaniel Schmucker, and others on the staff and with the campers. May they all learn more of you and your love.

Be present with us through your Spirit now in this worship service and in the days to come as we try to live out your will and walk in your ways. In Jesus' name. Amen.

PRAYER OF DEDICATION

Holy God, we do not understand your thoughts.

Your knowledge is too wonderful for us.

Still, we want to participate in your creative work—
in all that you are forming and knitting and weaving
and birthing.

So we give these humble offerings,
knowing that you see the sacrifice they represent
and the spirit in which they are given. Amen.

BAPTISM SERVICE

INTRODUCTION-REFLECTION ON BAPTISM – LOIS

Pastor Caleb and I have really appreciated spending time with the high school class this last year and it's been especially meaningful to have the conversations that we had in Faith Ex, to learn to know these students better and to confirm what we already knew – that they are thoughtful, sincere, and committed young people; they give us lots of hope for the world and the church!

As we discussed in class, baptism is an external sign of an internal decision and transformation. Each of you has already committed to following Jesus in your life – this ritual with water is the way we make that inward, private decision an outward, public statement.

Scripture tells us that baptism isn't just an individual matter. It makes you a part of the body of Christ. Because we have a spiritual connection with Christ, we also have a spiritual connection to each other, with the mandate to act as Christ's hands and feet in the world.

BAPTISMAL VOWS – CALEB

Perhaps the most meaningful part of my work as a pastor is learning to know young people through the Faith Exploration class, and having the opportunity to be a part of the decision of a number of these young people to be baptized.

Mallory, Emma, Noah, Javin, and Cambry: you have each requested the sign of baptism as a public expression of your faith.

This isn't something we do lightly, and you may even feel nervous. But you don't go by yourself. The Holy Spirit lives in each of you, and you also have the support of your church family.

Along the way, you will receive encouragement or counsel, and you will also have the opportunity to give others encouragement, counsel, or challenge.

I'm going to invite you to come forward. Pastor Lois and I will ask you a few questions about your intentions as you are baptized, and then your moment arrives.

- Lois: Do you believe in God, the Creator, maker of heaven and earth; in Jesus Christ, God's Son, our Lord; and in the Holy Spirit, the giver of life?
- C: Do you renounce the evil powers of this world and turn to Jesus Christ as your Savior? Do you put your trust in his grace and love and promise to obey him as your Lord?
- L: Do you accept the Word of God as guide and authority in your life?
- C: Are you willing to give and receive counsel in the congregation?
- L: Will you live without giving in to violence – resisting what is evil and taking risks for what is good?
- C: Are you ready to participate in the mission of the church?

PRAYER (CALEB) (ADAPTED FROM VT 934 AND 933)

Faithful God,

We pray for these young people who will be baptized today.

We give thanks for the way they have committed their lives to you.

We ask for your guidance as they journey in faith.

Be with them in their questioning,
 in their doubting,
 and in their wondering.

Be with them in their confidence,
 in their desires,
 and in their hopes.

Be with us in discerning our common life and guide our counsel.

Open us to faith as it grows
 in ways both familiar and new
 so that we may journey together
 as your beloved children.

We ask this in the name of Jesus,
 who prayed that we might be one
 by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

WORDS OF BAPTISM

___, upon your public confession of faith before God and these witnesses, I baptize you with water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. May God baptize you from above with the Holy Spirit, filling you with power to live as a faithful follower of Jesus Christ.

Rise and walk in newness of life by that power that raised Christ from the dead.

I give you the right hand of fellowship as a sister/brother in Alexanderwohl Mennonite Church.

(Offering certificate of baptism) _____, you belong to Christ and are welcome into Christ's body. May God bless you and make you a blessing in our midst.

REFLECTION – CALEB

Psalm 139:1-18

[To the youth:] Thank you for your help in reading Psalm 139. This is a beautiful psalm about how God knows each of us fully and is near to us.

While today is a special Sunday with these baptisms, we are in the midst of a worship series about finding peace in our relationship with God, with ourselves, with others, and with creation.

What we are talking about with the word peace is not simply the absence of violence or harming each other, but being whole and complete.

SUMMARY OF THE PSALM

In poetic language, the writer of the psalm talks about how God knows us, not just in some static way, but is intimately acquainted with what we are doing in each moment:

Sitting down or getting up. Traveling or lodging for the night.

God knows what we are thinking before we open our mouths.

There is no place we can flee from God's presence – or literally, God's face. God is facing us all the time. Of course, not with a literal face we can see, but metaphorically.

The psalmist goes on to make the point that there is no way to get away from God. The psalm poetically describes the extent of God's incredible world – taking the wings of the morning and setting on the farthest end of the sea. Or go to the farthest galaxy, or to the earth's core, or get squashed in a black hole... Well, your body won't make it, but God's presence will permeate those places just the same.

How do we respond to the idea of God facing us, being near to us all the time?

Recently at Austin's T-ball game, I overheard a grandmother warning her granddaughter: "God is watching. Watching to see what kind of person you are. I didn't have the full context of the conversation, but this sounded like a disciplinary threat, not a comfort.

Maybe some of us feel uncomfortable with the idea of God's nearness. The psalmist ends with: "Search me, O God, and know my heart... See if there is any wicked way in me." And in verse 5, the psalmist says, "you hem me in, behind and before" (which could also be "you barricade me in.")

That all can sound threatening, but the overall tone of the psalm is one of praise, wonder, and delight. The writer is glad to submit to God's examination. Some think that these are words of someone who was falsely accused.

Whatever the case, God is not out to get us. God loves us and delights in us. Even the places where God calls us to transformation, God is interested in what makes for peace for us, not trying to destroy us.

We journey toward peace with God and ourselves when we embrace God's nearness.

Sometimes we reduce the Christian life into being a good person. There are dos and don'ts to follow. You live a pure, upright, moral life – which might be envisioned differently depending on the church. But the bottom line is about being good people. Everything we do in church or in the life of faith is about reinforcing that.

Now, the way we orient our lives *is* important. Following Jesus *does* have implications for how we live as individuals and as a congregation. But to make this the sole focus misses the point. You don't need God to try to improve yourself as a person.

Even in baptism, we are not simply making a commitment to be good people. We are expressing our faith and confidence that God is at work in the lives of these young people through the Holy Spirit.

It won't always be fun, and the Spirit will lead us to spaces that feel uncomfortable or ask us to let go of our own agendas for our lives. But the goal is much more than simply being "good people."

Another way we sometimes miss the point is by reducing the Christian faith into knowing stuff: knowing about the Bible, knowing doctrines, holding to all the right ideas about God, how God wants us to behave, what God says will happen in the future, and so forth.

Once again, knowledge of the biblical story and the basic message of the Gospel is important. And there are certainly beliefs that go along with having a deep faith. But to make knowledge the sole focus also misses the point.

Thomas Aquinas is renowned as the most prolific Christian theologian. He lived during the Middle Ages and his unfinished Summa Theologica is about 3000 pages. Yet during worship one day, Thomas had a profound spiritual experience that caused him to stop writing. He said he could not continue writing, because “all that I have written seems like straw to me.”

Whatever he experienced, it was beyond words, and it felt much weightier to him than any of his many words had been.

So what is the life of faith, of following Jesus, about if it is not simply knowing everything or being a “better person”? Let’s look again at the continuation of the psalm starting at verse 13:

*13 For it was you who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother’s womb.
14 I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works;
that I know very well.
15 My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
16 Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.
In your book were written
all the days that were formed for me,
when none of them as yet existed.*

We have the picture of being knit together in our mother’s womb, and a few lines later, the picture is of being woven together in the depths of the earth. God knew us and was forming us, even before we were born.

All our days were written in God’s book from beforehand. Some people take this as a kind of predestination – God has everything charted out, but that leaves us without any role in shaping our own lives.

Another way to look at it might be that God has dreams for us. Just like an architect draws up plans for a house, God has written out all these dreams in a book.

It doesn’t mean that the whole journey is easy or joy-filled. Some of God’s dreams only come to fulfillment when we experience loss, or when everything that is of lesser value is stripped away.

This also doesn’t mean that we are unable to make mistakes, or play no role in making choices. It simply says that we are valuable.

One of the deepest wounds we can carry and barriers to peace within is to not believe that we are worth much. We each have tremendous worth and value. We have that value not because

of winning any kind of competition against anyone else or by being perfectly sinless, but by the fact that God has dreams for us, and is always at work making those dreams happen.

How exciting – especially as a part of the journey we take through baptism – to make our life’s purpose to be about discovering God’s dreams and living God’s dreams.

God’s blessings to all of you, but especially to these young people, as you walk each day trusting in God’s nearness and love, working out the dreams that God has written for you each day.

BENEDICTION

Whether you sit down or rise up,
whether you stay near or flee far,
whether you live in sunshine or in shadows,
God is with you, before you, and behind you.
The presence of God surrounds you,
the love of God leads you,
the peace of God dwells within you,
empowering you to live out your baptismal covenants.
Now and always. Amen.