

## 7/16/23 WORSHIP SERVICE

### WELCOME

Welcome to Alexanderwohl both to those here and those joining remotely, as we celebrate God's goodness and our shared faith in Jesus. This morning we sing together, we pray together and we listen for God's word together, which never returns empty.

Shari's flowers are representative of the beauty of creation. Our theme today is again living in peace with creation as part of God's transforming work that brings us into peace with God, with ourselves, with others, and with creation.

### CALL TO WORSHIP

One: Let us seek God, who can be found.

**Many: Let us call upon God, who is near.**

One: As the thirsty soil receives rain from heaven,

**Many: let us receive the word of God offered in this place.**

One: Let us praise God joyfully with a loud voice!

**Many: For if we are silent, the stones would shout out.**

One: Let us burst into song with the mountains

**Many: and clap our hands with the trees.**

**All: Let us worship God together with joy**

### INVOCATION

Holy Creator,

we have come to be nourished by the wisdom of your word and the beauty of your creation.

May our hearts be fertile soil for growing the seeds of your will into the fruit of your kingdom.

We thank you for the privilege we have to join with all of creation in praise and worship. Amen

### MORNING PRAYER – PASTOR LOIS

God, you are the Designer and Creator of the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land, of every creature from the tiniest insect to the largest mammal – you made them all and you designed it all with amazing rhythms and patterns, checks and balances, seasons and diversity. God, we praise you for your wondrous creativity. And at the same time, we grieve the damage being done to this earth. We confess our unwitting complicity and we ask for your Spirit of Wisdom and Willingness to bring change.

God, you have promised to never leave or abandon us, so with bold trust we offer you our fears and concerns and we bring you our requests and petitions.

We pray for the children from our congregation who will go to camp this week – for Jaxson, Myra and Rosie. For other children we know and for all the staff who will be experiencing camp this week. We pray for continued energy and stamina for staff; by this point in the summer it can begin to feel long and hot; energy can start to flag. Help them to be attentive to each camper and to each nudge from your Spirit.

We pray for Tim Goertzen and the MDS crew serving with him at Dawson's Creek, KY. We thank you for them and for their willingness to serve. We pray your blessing on them and their work. We pray for those who will receive the benefits of their efforts; may your love be reflected and your good news be made real.

God, we pray for those who are experiencing life-changing events. We think of Jake and Aimee and their families, with the birth of Elias Daniel. We rejoice with them. We think of the family of James Harmon as they grieve his loss. We pray for all who are grieving the loss of loved ones and we acknowledge that life is forever altered when those losses happen. We pray for your love and comfort to surround those who grieve.

We pray for your comfort and healing for illness and brokenness – in body, mind or spirit. We pray for Braxton and his family. We're grateful God, for new information that they learned this past week and the Colorado Children's Hospital and we pray for continued guidance and wisdom as they move forward. God we thank you for what seems like successful surgery for Ronda's daughter, Maty. And we also know that it was a complicated and long procedure and that Maty has had a lot of pain in the last 24 hours. We thank you for the surgeons and all the medical people involved in Maty's care and we ask that you would continue to guide them to use their best skills for her comfort and recovery. Be with her husband and 2 children through this very difficult time. And we pray for Ronda as she tries to focus on her job and her life here while also making plans to go and be with Maty and her family. Help all of them to trust in your love. In these moments, God, we pray for others in our families or communities who we know are struggling. We offer our prayers for them. (silence)

We pray together the words that Jesus taught us: Our Father, who art in heaven....

#### REJOICING WITH CREATION – PASTOR CALEB

Isaiah 55:6-13

A big thank you to Glen for reading our scripture passage this morning. As we hear the words of the prophet, we are brought back in time to the situation of the Judean exiles in Babylon who had lived in a foreign land for about forty or fifty years. That's enough time that most of the folks who hear the words of the prophet have only known Babylon, and have never been to Judah.

The exile is the tragic, watershed event that stands out in the Old Testament. The faith of Israel had to "grow up" in light of the exile. The Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem, along with the temple, and exiled a significant minority of the population in two different waves. The Babylonian strategy was to keep Judah from resisting, by making sure all the powerful Judeans were either killed or exiled.

The exile served as a formative time period in which seemingly abandoned people discovered that God was with them even in exile, and that God was beyond the religions they had constructed to feel they could control God or completely comprehend God.

Some forty or fifty years later, exiled emigrants hear the words of hope of the prophet. You might be familiar with these words: “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for.” (Isaiah 40:1-2a).

When the Persians took over, they had a different method for controlling their empire and were willing to allow Jerusalem to be rebuilt, and its exiles to return. In later chapters of Isaiah, the prophet anticipates this return. In chapter 52 we read, “How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace... [and a few verses later:] depart, depart, go out from there!... you will not leave in haste or go in flight; for the Lord will go before you, the God of Israel will be your rear guard.”

What excitement, anticipation, and anxiety there must be in this time!

Now in chapter 55, the same theme continues. God is willing to show mercy and generously forgive, so now is the time to seek God. Just as the prophet earlier assured them they would leave on their return trip to the land without fear, now he assures them,

*“You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands.”*

This is poetic language, of course, but it is about this joyful return trip from exile back to the land. In the prophetic imagination, creation itself joins with the exiles and with God in rejoicing.

The return trip is still a long trip through wilderness, certainly not a non-stop flight from Bagdad to Jerusalem. Yet creation is caught up in the same drama as the exiles. They are not alone. They will see mountains, hills, trees, cypresses, and myrtle (and probably a few thorn bushes and briars as well).

We normally think of ourselves as separate from creation. Many of us are not terribly concerned with the intricacies of what goes on in the natural world, and we certainly don’t imagine the trees or the creeks, or the deer, or the flint hills care much whether we are well or in distress.

It seems either presumptuous or a kind of fairy-tale imagination to think that mountains and hills would be singing as the exiles made their way back to the land, or that cypresses and myrtle would suddenly do better because of Israel’s favorable fortunes.

It may be true that this is a matter of perspective.

I remember in childhood being angry one time and shouting aloud in front of the cows. They stared at me with their big eyes as they chewed their hay. I felt embarrassed. Then I thought, what are they actually thinking about anyway? Was I just a noise interrupting their solace?

## PEACE WITH CREATION

We have been talking over the last number of weeks about peace with God, with ourselves, with others, and with creation. Could it be that a fundamental part of living in peace with creation is the capacity to see ourselves as part of creation, as connected to creation?

Do we rejoice with creation when creation rejoices and groan with creation when creation is groaning?

Last week I mentioned climate change as the major preoccupation that is on many of our minds. We read in the news about life-threatening heatwaves in the Southwest and Europe that are really not normal. In Phoenix, the *average* temperature over 24 hours is 104 degrees. Air-conditioning is a matter of life or death or perhaps for healthy individuals, around-the-clock continual evaporation of sweat. Any power outage is sure to result in fatalities.

Last summer, Pakistan, a poor country, hit daytime highs of 120, and then was swamped by a monsoon season that flooded 1/3 of the country.

[SLIDE: FLOODS IN PAKISTAN]

In Kansas, we are fairly used to weather fluctuation, so climate change may not be as obvious as other places, and it is still controversial to acknowledge that that climate is changing due to human activity.

Greenhouse gases are just one variable impacting the weather. But we are seeing more and more extreme weather events that scientists say would be highly unlikely if it weren't for our carbon emissions.

A Minnesota forestry research predicts that without a major reduction in carbon emissions, central Minnesota will resemble Manhattan, KS by the year 2070. As for Kansas? We will resemble Arizona or Northern Mexico by 2070 if there isn't a major change to human activity.

I recall a well-educated and informed Honduran commenting that if everyone lived like Americans – I believe his words were – “the earth would explode.”

It is true, it is difficult to imagine how the earth could stay in balance or permit all countries of the world to consume resources the way the developed world does. With all these examples, it hardly seems like creation would be rejoicing. It seems that creation (and many of our fellow human beings) would rather be groaning.

Isaiah 55 is not the first passage we would connect to creation care, yet it speaks of the balance of natural cycles of water and growth. It speaks of God sending rain and snow to water the earth to allow plant-life to flourish before the precipitation returns to the sky.

The prophet compares God's word to the cycles of nature – indeed, in the creation account of Genesis, it is the word of God that brings into being the cycles of day and night, and domains of sky, water, and dry land. People reject or ignore God's word, but God continues to send the word like the cycle of rain until it brings the intended fruit.

In Isaiah 43, we have another passage where God speaks of the return of the exiles in conjunction with the natural world:

*See, I am doing a new thing!  
 Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?  
 I am making a way in the wilderness  
 and streams in the wasteland.  
<sup>20</sup> The wild animals honor me,  
 the jackals and the owls,  
 because I provide water in the wilderness  
 and streams in the wasteland,  
 to give drink to my people, my chosen,  
<sup>21</sup> the people I formed for myself  
 that they may proclaim my praise.*

If the exile was the watershed event for the ancient Israelites, climate change may prove to be the watershed event for us in the coming years. The prophets gave unheeded warnings of exile. When the exile came, they gave assurance that God had not abandoned the people and that God would bring them into a new future as they returned from exile.

We are at the beginning of a collective judgement you might say, as we reap the results of our unbridled industrialized growth with insufficient concern for environmental impacts, when scientists knew decades ago that this was going to happen.

The seed sown decades ago is what is being reaped. There is nothing we can do to stop heatwaves or extreme weather in the short term. But without major change, we will eventually see far, far worse.

Isaiah tells us that God's thoughts are higher than our thoughts and God's ways are higher than our ways. These are words that call us away from our human hubris and pride. We have been engaged in a dangerous experiment of hubris with the global climate.

Yet we also have to have compassion on ourselves, recognizing that most of us didn't individually choose this reality, nor is it very easy to live a different lifestyle than what our economy and culture is set up for.

Our faith tradition gives us a narrative of God bringing the **exiles home** after the exile, of God raising Christ from the dead after the cross, and bringing resurrection to all that is dead and without hope. This tenacious hope, so long as it is not detached from reality, is our most important spiritual resource.

The opportunity for the church is to provide a culture of contrast to that of the cultures of the world that are either in despair or in denial. The God that we worship is also the creator and lover of the natural world that we are a part of.

We can have a conversation about what it actually means to bring the gospel to bear in how we honor creation, recognize our participation in creation, rejoice with creation, and groan in creation.

As we take individual actions to live more simply and lightly, however small these may seem to be, we foster a contrast witness. May God give us wisdom, imagination, and tenacious hope to do this very thing.

## QUESTIONS

1. What does it mean to you to say that God's thoughts are higher than our thoughts?
2. What does it look like to remember that we are a part of God's creation, not separate, and to feel the joy present in creation?

## BENEDICTION (ISAIAH 43:19-21)

God says:

*See, I am doing a new thing!*

*Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?*

*I am making a way in the wilderness  
and streams in the wasteland.*

*The wild animals honor me, the jackals and the owls,  
because I provide water in the wilderness  
and streams in the wasteland,  
to give drink to my people, my chosen,  
the people I formed for myself  
that they may proclaim my praise.*

Friends, may you go out with joy  
and be led back in peace. Amen