

03-17-2024 Worship Service

Welcome to this final Sunday in Lent before we enter Holy Week on Palm Sunday. It's good to see many of you back from spring break and whether you're a "regular" here or a visitor, whether you're here in-person or watching on zoom or at a later time, you're very welcome. We pray and we trust that the Holy Spirit will be present and moving in ways that each of us needs as we worship.

Are there opportunities to share with one another?

Let's join in the Call to Worship

Call to Worship and Opening Prayer

One: "The days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel. No longer will they teach their neighbors, or say to one another, 'Know the Lord!' because they will all know me, from the least to the greatest."

Many: This new covenant is being offered to us.

One: "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds."

Many: Death must come before resurrection. A seed fallen to the soil and broken open can become life for many.

All: This new covenant is being offered to us: to lay down our life and follow.

One: The life-giving ways of God have been placed within our minds and written on our hearts.

Many: We are forgiven and our sins remembered no more.

All: We are God's people and God is our God.

Prayer – O God, we are grateful to be gathered here as your people. We come with hearts open. With ears that want to hear your good news. We release any distractions that might prevent us from receiving your words for us and we make ourselves fully available to your wisdom and guidance. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Message – Pastor Lois Harder

Jeremiah 31:31-34; John 12:20-33

Jeremiah was a bonafide doomsday prophet, like all the others. I mean, really, what other kind of prophet is there? He lived and preached from about 650-570 BCE and he was known as the weeping prophet. Like the others, Jeremiah had a lot to weep about. His people were worshiping other gods, they were leaving the poor, the orphans and the widows poor, orphaned and widowed – not caring for them at all, as was their mandate from God. There was deep moral decay with people doing whatever they wanted, basically, and not being attentive to God or to the law that God had given them – the law that was for their own benefit as well as for the good of others. Jeremiah prophesied the fall of Jerusalem and the consequent

Babylonian exile as a result of his people's disobedience. Jeremiah wept, he doubted his own prophetic calling, he loved God and his people passionately, and longed for the people to repent and return to God. Understandably, Jeremiah was depressed, he was angry, he was lonely and sad.

But here... in chapters 30 and 31 we find what scholars call "The Book of Comfort". These two chapters are a collection of promises from God to the people who ARE, at this point, in exile and in despair. Here we have God speaking to the people through Jeremiah using the familiar language of covenant. The same Yahweh God who has made covenants with Noah, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Then there was the renewal of the covenant with Moses on the plains of Moab and with Joshua at Shechem. Samuel led the tribes in a covenant when the kingship was established. And in Jeremiah's own time there had been the hope of reestablishing the covenant under the young and faithful King Josiah. But each of these covenants had been broken by the people's inability and unwillingness to abide in God. And now, in this passage we hear God weeping. Some translate the Hebrew this way: God said, "I took them by the hand," as a mother leads a child, when I brought them out of the land of Egypt. They broke the covenant, although "I was their husband." Apparently God has no problem mixing metaphors of intimacy when it comes to describing God's love for the people.

And so God extends yet another covenant. It's not really new – it's renewed, as it has been many times before. And each time God renews the covenant, there's a renewed attempt to figure out how to make it doable, how to create a covenant that humanity will actually honor. God just keeps trying!

THIS renewal would have something truly novel and surely it would be fool-proof... God says, "No more teaching. This time I'm going to put my law WITHIN them! I'm going to write it on their hearts. So no more teaching, and also, no more sinning. I'm going to forgive them upfront, knowing that they'll mess up, but let's just go right to the forgiveness. And also, no more question about who "knows" me and who doesn't. From the least to the greatest – they'll ALL know me, which means there will be no more "least" or "greatest". And the most intimate, sweet, grace-filled part of this covenant is that God says, I will be theirs and they will be mine. I will be their God and they will be my people.

Despite infidelity, despite corrupt kings and leaders, despite injustice and exploitation of the earth and her people, despite idolatry, despite greed and violence and fear, despite all the brokenness, God refuses to break relationship with the people. If this isn't gracious, humbling, faithful love, I don't know what is.

Now to the gospel passage that is paired with Jeremiah the prophet for this final Sunday in Lent. The way John tells the story, it was at this point when Jesus knew that "his hour had come". Because there were several times prior to this that Jesus was quite clear that his hour had NOT yet come. Right off the bat in John, the second chapter, at the wedding in Cana when Mary, Jesus' mother asked for his help with providing more wine – Jesus' first response was to try to deny her request because his "time had not yet come" but when your MOM asks you to do something there can be serious consequences if you don't do it. And Jesus obliged. But his

glory (his identity) was only revealed to his disciples. This was not a public miracle. Then, in chapter 7 when his teaching was astonishing all of Jerusalem and making the religious leaders none too happy – they tried to arrest him, but they failed “because his hour had not yet come”. They tried to arrest him again in chapter 8 but still, it wasn’t time.

Here, in chapter 12 things change abruptly. Jesus had just raised his friend Lazarus from the dead. This miracle, of course, created MANY, many believers. And Jesus was clear – he announced that his hour had now come.

The very act that created so many believers and followers was the same act that clinched the certainty of his death. In verse 19 the Pharisees exclaim to one another, “You see, you can do nothing. Look the world has gone after him!” It was time. Jesus was now making himself available – and vulnerable – to the whole world. It’s understandable, perhaps, why the religious leaders were so upset. The crowd (who had come to Jerusalem for the festival) travelled right past the temple, seeking the one they had heard so much about. And suddenly Jesus himself had become the location of God’s glory and presence – not the temple.

When “the Greeks” came to Philip, their request was to “see Jesus”. In the gospel of John, the words “come and see” are used by Jesus often as he calls his disciples. The word for “see” can also be translated “know”, “experience”, “understand”. We want to “see” Jesus, we want to “know” and “understand”. We want to be a part of this People who have Love written on our hearts, to be in intimate relationship with this God, to be part of the covenant of forgiveness, to help bring the kingdom in which there is no difference between the “greatest and least”, but in which all are loved and gifted. If Jesus or his disciples were under any illusion that his mission was exclusively for the Jewish people, these “Greeks” are proof otherwise. The world, had indeed, gone after him. Some wanted to follow him, some wanted him dead.

When Jesus offered this typical agrarian parable about the grain of wheat, he was explaining a very simple truth of nature that everyone who’s ever planted a seed knows. If a single seed is expected to produce fruit, it has to experience death first. God cannot contradict the laws of the very nature He created. God’s love that is written on the hearts of God’s people will bring trust in God’s ways that produce life beyond death.

This is the kind of love that will draw all people to it because it’s bigger than infidelity. This love is more powerful than any corrupt kings and leaders. This is love that transforms injustice and creates justice and turns back exploitation of the earth and her people so that the earth can flourish and people can live in health and wholeness. This love overcomes idolatry and shows how to worship God in spirit and in truth. It allows no space for greed or violence, and this love has no fear. This love heals brokenness. This is God’s gracious, humbling, faithful love that is written on our hearts. All we have to do is live it out.

O God, we want to be people of the renewed covenant – people who “see” you, who “know” you, who “understand” and experience your law of love. We want be people who follow Jesus

faithfully – in life, in death, trusting in your love to produce fruit and to gather in the whole world. Hear now our prayer of confession:

Prayer of Confession

One: O God, we gather before you, seeking your mercy. Hear us, we pray.

Many: We confess that we sin against you.

One: O God, wash us, make us clean. Create in us a new spirit.

Many: Stay close to us, restore to us your truth,

All: so that we can cry out with joy, cleansed in your abundant mercy.

Prayer of Dedication - #746

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

Benediction –

We've praised the Word of God. We've learned the Word of God. Go now and LIVE the Word of God – doing justice, loving mercy, walking humbly with Jesus towards Jerusalem.