

11-17-2024 Words of Worship

Welcome –

- We don't always introduce friends or visitors, but this morning I'm going to first welcome Sharolyn Flaming Jackson (who grew up in this congregation) and the family from Ukraine who are staying with her: Antonina Broyaka, Volodymyr Lapshov, Sasha and Max.
- Several items of celebration to share:
 - o Jason Peters received recognition for his 500th win at volleyball at Hesston High
 - o Arlin and Maretta are featured in an article in the MMN pub. Written by T. D.
 - o A pastoral search committee was discerned and within 48 hours of having been asked 5 people graciously accepted the invitation! Karen, Megan, Tina, Weston and Julianna.
 - o Most joyfully, after ten years, Mary Schmidt had her LAST apt. with her oncol. this last week. She is officially cancer-free!
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Call to Worship

Prayer – Ever-present God, like the Psalmist, we thank you for being our refuge, our counsel, our security. We thank you for your presence here, with us as we worship. We ask for your blessing on our fellowship and our learning, that this time of worship may produce good fruit for your glory. Amen.

Morning Prayer –

Provider God, thank you for your good gifts, for all that you have provided for the earth and all who live on it. We confess that we humans don't do justice when it comes to distribution of the earth's resources. We ask for forgiveness, but not pardon, when we have stewarded resources badly, unjustly, in ways that don't honor your intentions. Give us courage and determination to be more caring and fair in the distribution of the earth's riches.

We thank you for the gift of rain that we've had recently – and it seems fairly certain there will be more tomorrow. May this moisture soak down, into the soil and replenish what's needed. We're grateful, God, that Sharolyn can be here this morning with Antonina, Vova, Sasha and Max. Grant them your blessing as they share their stories this afternoon and bless them in their continued work here.

Thank you, God, for the joyful things that were shared earlier – for Jason's success with his volleyball team, for Arlin and Maretta and the years they've shared with others doing service, for Travis who shares his gifts in his work and other areas of his life, for the newly formed pastoral search committee – we commend their work to you and to the guidance of your Spirit. And we're especially grateful, God, for Mary's cancer-free report this week. Thank you for your presence with her over this past decade in that journey. Be with her now, moving forward.

O God, we pray for those whose lives and well-being are threatened by violence of any kind. Domestic, in their community, or country. For those who live in war zones – in Ukraine, Gaza, Lebanon, Syria, Sudan... other places in your world, God, where your children are fearful or hurting, send your Holy Spirit presence to bring comfort, food, water, shelter, medical care and most importantly, your peace.

We pray for those who are giving attention and work to trying to care for the earth. Bless their efforts, wherever they're happening. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

2024-11-17 Discern, Detect, Disciple! Mark 13:1-8 and Hebrews 10:11-25

What did you hear in the verses from Mark? What did they make you think of? Frightening images of the end of the world? Signs and catastrophes? How did these verses make you feel? Uncomfortable? Fearful? Uncertain? Does the word “apocalyptic” come to mind?

Was Jesus talking about the end times in these verses in the Gospel of Mark? We’ll come back to that. One of his disciples just innocently commented on the huge stones and the grand edifice of the temple. And Jesus kinda goes off, talking about the complete destruction of the magnificent temple; this temple that had given meaning and order to the lives of so many people for so long.

But up to this point in Mark’s gospel, we’ve seen repeatedly how Jesus made it abundantly clear that it was precisely the religious leadership – those who were in power – who had displayed their hypocrisy and unfaithfulness as they manipulated and oppressed the poor and the vulnerable while they themselves lived in wealth and comfort. The temple offered false security; in reality, it had become a den of robbers and Jesus was calling them out.

Of course, these comments were deeply disturbing to the disciples and their immediate questions were, “When, exactly, is this temple destruction going to happen? And how will we know? What will be the signs? We need a time table so we can plan and prepare!”

Jesus completely ignored their inquiries and went right on to give them more warnings – that sounded equally scary and apocalyptic. Look out! Beware that no one leads you astray. Jesus warned his disciples that there would be charismatic, powerful people who would say that THEY were the Messiah – and people would believe them and follow them. And Jesus warned them that there would be bad news, all kinds of bad news, wars and rumors of wars, nations and kingdoms would rise against each other and the earth would groan with disasters like earthquakes and famines.

But don’t be alarmed, he said. These things have to happen, but they don’t indicate the end.

According to Jesus, the END is not what matters. The END is completely unknowable. There is no timetable and there are no signs – Jesus said he didn’t even know when the end would be. And knowing when the end is coming and what the signs of it are completely misses the point.

The point that Jesus was making was that between now and the end, the people of The Way, those who follow Him, constantly need to discern. Now, he said that 2,000 years ago, so apparently we’ve been in the “end times” for at least 2,000 years already! The Greek word that he used, discern, means look, see, detect, find out what’s really going on. Be aware. Read! Listen! Pay attention! Ask God for eyes that see beneath the surface, to understand the nuances and the true significance, the implications of what is happening in the world and in our communities. It’s pretty hard to really do this kind of thoughtful observing and perceiving sort of half-way, especially if one simply accepts the status quo. A person has to discern and detect with intensity – with full attention.

So this off-handed comment that the disciple made about the temple may have triggered Jesus precisely because the disciple wasn’t paying attention. Jesus pointed out that the temple was big

and opulent and beautiful. But inside, in its inner workings, it was corrupt. The religious leaders wore beautiful robes and made a show of saying their prayers and teaching publically, but inside, in their hearts, their intentions, they were corrupt. Jesus said that the discerning community would be able to see that the widow who sacrifices out of her poverty honors God. The faithful community of discerning, detecting disciples honors God. He said, “Those who follow me will likely experience persecution; but they should not overlook opportunities to minister, to speak truth to power in those times.”

The letter written to a group of people known as the Hebrews was almost certainly written after the Romans did destroy the temple in the year 70. So, in the decades since Jesus had been there, in person, teaching his followers, Hebrews was a letter of encouragement, spurring on the believers to stay strong in the faith in spite of their world seeming to have been turned upside down.

It’s a reminder that the way of Jesus is completely counter-cultural. The way of Jesus is sacrificial love, which makes continuing the thousands of years of sacrificing animals or offerings completely unnecessary. It’s an entirely different way of doing things.

This letter is a reminder that the priest used to have to stand day after day to offer the sacrifices, but the loving sacrifice of Jesus has given him the opportunity to sit – beside God, waiting to rest his feet on a footstool made of his enemies.

It’s a reminder of the covenant that God made with the faithful – a covenant written on our hearts and our minds. A covenant of forgiveness where there is faithfulness.

This letter to the Hebrews is a reminder that living out sacrificial love is what Jesus’ followers are called to do. Sacrificial love is not soft or easy. It’s not giving up or giving in. It’s not rolling over and it’s certainly not avoiding conflict. Sacrificial love means discerning and detecting so diligently that one can see the world with so much clarity that fear becomes small. Knowing when and how the end of the world will come becomes unimportant. What matters is how we live right now, right here, helping each other to be faithful – provoking one another to love and good deeds. To meet together regularly for worship and fellowship so that we know and trust each other well enough to provoke one another!

Both the gospel of Mark and the letter to the Hebrews were written in times of great uncertainty and fear. There were powerful world dominators that made life scary and disconcerting. There were deceivers and messianic pretenders, wars and disasters. Jesus arrived in the midst of this kind of familiar havoc. He came preaching good news for the poor, sight for the blind, freedom for the oppressed. He came to show how sacrificial love wins and to give us the hope and courage we need to be his provocative, discerning, detecting, loving disciples. Thanks be to God!

Benediction – VT 1068