

Home Service for August 14, 2022

Welcome and Announcements

You may also find listening to some of your favorite hymns helpful in worship.

As the ancients remind us, we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. Life is around us, even in the memories of ghosts and loved ones long gone. Death is but the other side of the coin of life. Hope is but the other side of the coin of despair. Unity is but the other side of the coin of division. Flip a coin. Choose your side. For life and hope await us on the other side.

Call to Worship:

God of the ages, we sing your praises in the vineyards of our lives. Tend the garden of our love. Where we have become ragged and wild, prune us in the way we should grow. Nurture the soil of our hope. Let your hand be upon us, leading us to Jesus, the perfecter of our faith. Heal the roots of our faith. Bring us rain in drought, shade in scorching heat, and protection in the wilderness. Protect the growth of our spirit. Amen

Opening Prayer:

Lord of light and life, you have called us this day to open our hearts, our minds, our spirits to hear your words of encouragement, healing, and hope. Give us patience and willingness to serve you in all that we do. In Jesus' Name, we pray.
AMEN

Prayer of Confession:

God of healing mercies, we come to you this day as imperfect people. We know that you desire for us hope, happiness, and love, yet we have found so many ways in which to block your gifts, or to grab hold of them as if we were entitled to them. We have been given the pathway to peace in the witness of Jesus Christ. He taught us to live as people of compassion and service. But our service has been mostly for ourselves, for our own gratification. We have failed to be your church, your witnesses on earth. We have neglected the needs of others in our rush for our own comfort. Forgive us, O merciful God. Heal our wounded spirits. Turn us again to you, that we may again learn of your love and mercy. Help us to become partners in peace and hope for others. For we ask this in Jesus' Name. AMEN.

Words of Assurance

Turn again, O people, to the Lord who always loves you. Remember God's loving mercies and faithfulness. AMEN.

Read Psalm 80:1-2, 8-19

Hear us, Shepherd of Israel,

you who lead Joseph like a flock.

You who sit enthroned between the cherubim,

shine forth ² before Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh.

Awaken your might;

come and save us.

⁸ You transplanted a vine from Egypt;

you drove out the nations and planted it.

⁹ You cleared the ground for it,

and it took root and filled the land.

¹⁰ The mountains were covered with its shade,

the mighty cedars with its branches.

¹¹ Its branches reached as far as the Sea,^[a]

its shoots as far as the River.^[b]

¹² Why have you broken down its walls

so that all who pass by pick its grapes?

¹³ Boars from the forest ravage it,

and insects from the fields feed on it.

¹⁴ Return to us, God Almighty!

Look down from heaven and see!

Watch over this vine,

¹⁵ the root your right hand has planted,

the son^[c] you have raised up for yourself.

¹⁶ Your vine is cut down, it is burned with fire;

at your rebuke your people perish.

¹⁷ Let your hand rest on the man at your right hand,

the son of man you have raised up for yourself.

¹⁸ Then we will not turn away from you;

revive us, and we will call on your name.

¹⁹ Restore us, LORD God Almighty;

make your face shine on us,

that we may be saved.

Prayers of the People:

We are such a fickle people, O Lord. It is easy for us to accept greedily your blessings in times of peace, and to cry for mercy in times of difficulty. We want you to pamper us. We want to be your special people. We don't like the idea that you might indeed care for those whom we would reject. Such is our lot! We need once again to be reminded of the many ways in which we have chosen to be the "wild grapes" rather than the faithful vines. We have been given opportunities time and time again to serve you by helping others. Today we have gathered in worship to praise you and to offer our gifts. But it is our commitment and our lives of service that you would appreciate. Witness and service to you are not easy. They may require some sacrifice. We may face some misunderstanding and ridicule from others. But you call us to be faithful, to be steadfast. Help us, O Lord, to make the kinds of commitments which will bring healing and hope in this troubled world in which we live. In Jesus' Name, we pray. AMEN.

Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day, our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is The kingdom, and the power and the glory forever and ever. AMEN

Read the Lesson: Isaiah 5:1-7

I will sing for the one I love a song about his vineyard:

My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside.

²He dug it up and cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vines.

He built a watchtower in it and cut out a winepress as well.

Then he looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit.

³“Now you dwellers in Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard.

⁴What more could have been done for my vineyard than I have done for it?

When I looked for good grapes, why did it yield only bad?

⁵Now I will tell you what I am going to do to my vineyard:

I will take away its hedge, and it will be destroyed;

I will break down its wall, and it will be trampled.

⁶I will make it a wasteland, neither pruned nor cultivated, and briers and thorns will grow there. I will command the clouds not to rain on it.”

⁷ The vineyard of the LORD Almighty is the nation of Israel, and the people of Judah are the vines he delighted in. And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress.

Read the Epistle Lesson: Hebrews 11:29-12:2

By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as on dry land; but when the Egyptians tried to do so, they were drowned.

³⁰ By faith the walls of Jericho fell, after the army had marched around them for seven days.

³¹ By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient.^[a]

³² And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah, about David and Samuel and the prophets,³³ who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions,³⁴ quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies.³⁵ Women received back their dead, raised to life again. There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection.³⁶ Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment.³⁷ They were put to death by stoning;^[b] they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated—³⁸ the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground.

³⁹ These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised,⁴⁰ since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.

12 Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us,² fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Read the Gospel Lesson: Luke 12:49-56

“I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! ⁵⁰ But I have a baptism to undergo, and what constraint I am under until it is completed! ⁵¹ Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but

division. ⁵² From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three. ⁵³ They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.”

⁵⁴ He said to the crowd: “When you see a cloud rising in the west, immediately you say, ‘It’s going to rain,’ and it does. ⁵⁵ And when the south wind blows, you say, ‘It’s going to be hot,’ and it is. ⁵⁶ Hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and the sky. How is it that you don’t know how to interpret this present time?”

Message

In today’s lessons we found that they highlighted the unexpected truth of lives of faith: Destruction happens. Division happens. Faith does not always yield happy endings. Whichever passage we focus on today, we discover that faith does not yield a predictable or “happily ever after” ending. But it does require perseverance, as we move forward with God; even when moving forward with God divides us from those who are on different journeys, endangers our lives along the path, or even leaves us in a barren wilderness awaiting life and salvation. Perhaps this is why resurrection is such an important aspect of the Christian journey. The reality is this: Death comes. Destruction comes. Division comes. Hope arises in the miracle that life goes on anyway. New life emerges. Resurrection calls us to start again every time death comes to call. For within the knowledge and faith of Resurrection we find hope, comfort and strength.

Each lesson can provide a sermon, but I chose to speak on our Epistle Lesson from Hebrews, because I can easily relate to it and I feel it gives the most hope and comfort during difficult times in our lives. Besides I like the idea of a “great cloud of witnesses” cheering us on each and every day. The thought of those who have gone before us, who while here helped us to grow in our faith and being there in our lives for both the good and bad times, still present cheering us on is comforting to say the least. Also the fact that Paul compares our spiritual life here on earth to a race, when he said we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses,” those who have gone before us, their lives are examples of faith and service. As Christians we are surrounded by the saints who have already run the race and won their crown of righteousness. When we confess in the Apostles’ Creed, “I believe in the communion of Saints.” This is what we mean by the “great cloud of witnesses.” When the going gets rough and life seems to be falling apart, all of us can draw strength from the truth that we are not alone. From our faithful ancestors we read

about in the Bible, to those who guided us at the beginning of our faith journeys, our parents and grandparents, to our Sunday school teachers, the people sitting next to us in these pews, our sisters and brothers who care for us, therefore every one of you. You are God's witnesses.

As for the church, despite all the splits and various denominations, the church is still alive. Lives are still being changed and given meaning and purpose. The gospel still brings hope and new life, partly because of the faithfulness and encouragement of the saints, but also, because of our lives. For our lives is the other aspect of the "cloud of witnesses." There are folks outside the church or on the fringes of the church who sit and watch to see if we practice what we preach. They may base their faith decisions, even their lifestyle on what we do and by what we say. Consequently, we must be faithful. We never know when, where or what influence we have in someone else's life. We never know how our lives and faith will influence or touch those around us.

We cannot run the race of Christian living effectively until we get rid of the stuff that weighs us down. That's why Paul writes, "lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely." We cannot live life fully if we are bogged down with unfinished business, regrets, grievances, hurt feelings. We are called to keep our eyes on Christ and get rid of anything that slows us down. In fact, anything that will interfere with our ability to share God's Love with others.

The Christian life is not a short dash to glory, it is a marathon which demands endurance. We have to guard against all potential distractions. We have to run with the intention of winning. It is important to run a straight and intentional course following Christ every step of the way. If we get confused and turned around we must make the corrections that bring us back to following Christ. Next to faith, perseverance is possibly the one quality we need the most. Sometimes we think we're alone or the race is too hard and there's no hope. Remember, we are not alone. We are "surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses." We are to encourage one another. And Christ comes to our aid when we grow weary.

Isaiah and the psalmist proclaim that God lovingly planted the vineyard Israel, but its walls have fallen and the vineyard is being destroyed. The image of the vineyard becomes a metaphor for the people of God, human, flawed, willful, and contrary. There are times when we may find ourselves resentful of our need for God's strong, nurturing, and judging hand. We cry out in pain, feeling abandoned. Yet, when we ask for help, God is there. God is not just the one who plants us like a vineyard; God is the one who destroys the vineyards that bears bad fruit. And yet,

it is this same God, in the midst of our destruction, to whom we look for our salvation; salvation through fire and baptism. But while Isaiah claims that this is God's doing in response to Israel's injustice and bloodshed, the psalmist holds out hope that God will yet save the people and give them new life. Hebrews' "great cloud of witnesses" directs us to look to Jesus as our example, our hope and our redeemer. The great cloud of witnesses testifies to our need to follow Christ who is our hope.

Jesus calls us to live for him. He calls us to a life of loyalty, a life of commitment, a life that is lived on the cutting edge of society. He calls us to live with conviction, to a life in faith. He calls us to live with courage, to draw on His strength and He calls us to be tested. He calls us to make a stand, to live by our convictions even when those convictions might bring separation or pain into our lives. For we know that Jesus is truly the way, the truth and the life for us. May we live into our faith of Resurrection every day and enjoy the hope, comfort and strength it brings. Amen.

Benediction:

*Go forth into the world,
singing a love-song in the vineyard of life.
Remember the Gardner who nurtures your faith
and provides for your needs.
Grow into the promise of Christ,
secure in the knowledge that you are loved.
Help us to grow in our witness and service to you by serving others.
May your peace always be with us! AMEN.*