

Sunday, March 15, 2020

Friends,

Grace, mercy, and peace be with you from God our Creator, and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Since we are not gathering today due to the COVID-19 pandemic, what is offered here is the home version of worship at Takoma Park Presbyterian Church. You are welcome to read this alone, or join with family members or close friends to read it together. (Please excuse the imperfect grammar of the sermon, and the extra commas. I write my sermons as spoken documents and not for the page.)

In the days ahead, I plan to post a daily reflection through both the Web-site and church e-mail. Also, next Sunday we are planning to have interactive worship through Zoom. We will be notifying you on how you can participate in that worship service.

In the meantime, please keep the people of this church in your prayers, and I will be praying for you, for your health, and for your well-being.

Jim Reisner  
Interim Pastor



Takoma Park Presbyterian Church

Sunday, March 15, 2020

Online Worship

### **Welcome**

Good morning! And welcome to worship with Takoma Park Presbyterian Church. God has gathered us in this format so that together we may be the body of Christ. Welcome friend and stranger alike. Welcome all. Let us worship God!

### **Call to Worship**

Psalm 96:1-2

O sing to the Lord a new song;

**Sing to the Lord, all the earth.**

Sing, and give praise to God's name.

**Tell the glad news of salvation from day to day.**

### **Opening Prayer**

O Lord our God, you are always more ready to bestow your good gifts upon us than we are to seek them. You are more willing to give than we desire or deserve. Help us so to seek that we may truly find, so to ask that we may joyfully receive, so to knock that the door of mercy may be opened for us; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

### **Prayer of Confession**

Holy and Merciful God, in your presence we confess our failure to be what you created us to be. You alone know how often we have sinned in wandering from your ways, in wasting your gifts, in forgetting your love for us.

By your loving mercy, help us to live in your light and abide in your ways, for the sake of Jesus Christ, our Lord.

### **Assurance of Pardon**

Lord, have mercy upon us.

**Christ, have mercy upon us.**

Lord, have mercy upon us.

Jesus knows our every weakness and loves us still. Awaken now to the promise of Christ's amazing grace. Friends; believe the good news of the gospel.

**In Jesus Christ we are forgiven! Amen.**

### **Prayer for Illumination** (to be spoken or sung)

*"Thy Word is a Lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path."*

### **First Lesson**

II Kings 2: 19-22

Now the people of the city said to Elisha, "The location of this city is good, as my lord sees; but the water is bad, and the land is unfruitful." He said, "Bring me a new bowl, and put salt in it." So they brought it to him. Then he went to the spring of water and threw the salt into it, and said, "Thus says the LORD, I have made this water wholesome; from now on neither death nor miscarriage shall come from it." So the water has been wholesome to this day, according to the word that Elisha spoke.

### **Second Lesson**

Luke 12:13-21

Someone in the crowd said to [Jesus], "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." But he said to him, "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?" And he said to them, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."

Then he told them a parable: "The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' Then he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in Your sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

## Sermon

## Love in the Time of COVID-19

I would have much preferred to listen to the Faure Requiem this Sunday, but proper caution does not permit for that. I suppose there is a fine line to be drawn between living by one's fears and acting with prudence. In moments when I have faced difficult decisions in my life, I have learned that a good question to ask myself is: "What is the healthiest thing I can do?" I lived with that question for much of this past week, and decided to err on the side of caution. Perhaps later this spring, or at an further away date, we will be blessed to hear the Faure Requiem on a Sunday morning. That moment of worship will be all the more meaningful and poignant for our living through this remarkable time.

The two lessons from scripture I have selected today are not from the lectionary. These verses came to my mind this week as I took in all the news about the Covid-19 pandemic, and also as I did some grocery shopping late in the week.

I'll start with the parable of the rich fool who builds bigger and bigger barns to hold his wealth. This is the story that came to mind as I tried to buy some milk and eggs on Friday night at the supermarket. There was no milk, no eggs, no bananas, no potatoes, no beef, no pork, no chicken. (However, I did find plenty of bratwurst. What was that about? Is bratwurst not worth hoarding?) The cashier told me that someone had bought out all the light bulbs.

People generally feel comfort by surrounding themselves with things. Sometimes it becomes pathological. I had a parishioner in the I served in New Jersey who went to jail for credit card fraud. She could not stop buying things beyond her needs until she broke the law filling up her house. And her house was full. She owned at least six complete China sets. They were laid out on her dining room table, but there was no place to eat.

Clearly, her behavior was pathological, driven by a desire to protect herself in an irrational and self-destructive way from demons that were beyond fathoming.

The mass hoarding of common household products that is going on now is similarly irrational. A virus is coming to our town and our homes, and no amount of bathroom tissue will make us invulnerable. Not only that, but the hoarding hurts our neighbors, and people who really need basic necessities. Luke especially warns us about the dangers of our possessions and how easily they come between us and God.



My guess is that you have never before encountered the first lesson. (I'd like to hear from any of you if you have.) It is remarkable brief story told about the prophet Elisha. Now, Elisha is the prophet who followed the greatest of Jewish prophets, Elijah. As Elijah is carried off by the chariot into heaven, it is Elisha who is on the ground watching. He is the one who picks up Elijah's mantle.

Not many stories appear about Elisha in Sunday School or in the lectionary because Elisha was a gruff and hard-edged man. Some of the stories told about him are not in any way edifying, and a few are downright appalling.

But this little story of Elisha cleansing the water of a city is a gem. I think of it as the first example of public health found in scriptures. Most of the healing stories in the Bible are about the healing of individuals, but here we have a story of the bringing of health to a whole city. Elisha takes a brand new, unused cup, puts some salt into it, and pours that salt into the city well. The waters had previously caused sickness, miscarriages, and death. The waters were cleansed of their impurities.

Elisha solves a public health crisis. Especially at this time when the whole world faces a public health crisis, can we not see the healing ministry of the church, inherited from the healing work of Jesus, our Great Physician? One of the hymns in our new hymnal is “We Come to You for Healing, Lord” (#796). The third stanza reads:

*You touch us through physician’s skills,  
Through nurses’ gifts of care,  
And through the love of faithful friends  
Who lift our lives in prayer.*

The notes at the bottom of the page add: “... this text appropriately includes the ministry of medical personnel as instruments of God’s healing activity.

Some of you are familiar with Mr. Rogers (Presbyterian minister, the Rev. Fred Rogers) advice about how to find comfort and strength in a time of tragedy and crisis: “*When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, "Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping."*

As the world faces this scary Coronavirus, I hope that the church will not only look for the helpers. I hope that the church will be the helpers. I also hope that Takoma Park Presbyterian Church will discern and accomplish some way to be a helper to our neighbors, to our nation, and to the world. This has always been the Christian way when disciples have followed the example of Jesus.

This week a friend sent me a link to a meditation on the early Christian response to epidemics. <https://oaklandcitychurch.org/going-deeper-rodney-stark-and-the-early-christian-response-to-epidemics/> It summarizes a book by Rodney Stark, The Rise of Christianity, particularly the fourth chapter, “Epidemics, Networks, and Conversions.” Stark’s purpose was to explain how Christianity had spread so quickly through the Roman Empire. Stark cites “*various epidemics of plague that swept through Roman Empire. In 165 AD and 251 AD, two plagues devastated cities and social networks. Death rates from 7% to over 50% were estimated. These plagues were socially and psychically devastating, killing a significant percentage of the community. Communities were shattered and individuals couldn’t make sense of the world in light of it.*”

Whereas all others ran away from the plagues, Christians stayed to care for the ill. They cared for their own, and they cared for strangers. They did it because they had the confidence of a faith that whatever befell them in this life, they were always and ever in

God's eternal care. Many of these Christians died, but their sacrifice and their witness transformed human hearts and drew many to faith in Jesus Christ.

The online book review, written by Josh McPaul of Oakland City Church, concludes by asking the question: *"What will be said about us, the Christians who face different crises in our cities and country today?"*

What will be said of us? We have an opportunity in the face of this plague to tell our story, to care for the sick, to live bold and holy lives. Let us live and serve in such a way that people will know we are Christians by our love.

Amen.

### **The Prayers**

O merciful God, we live in a time of fear and trembling. We pray for courage and for calm within our selves and in our world as we face an unknown future. As we come to you in prayer, help us to align ourselves with your intentions for your world. Expand our vision to see beyond our own perspectives and experiences, and grant us compassion for friend and stranger alike.

Lord, in your mercy,  
**Hear our prayer.**

We pray for your church in every place that it might embrace the ministry of healing. May this healing take place in human hearts, in institutions of medicine and care, and in desperate places forgotten or forsaken by human neglect and greed.

Lord in your mercy,  
**Hear our prayer.**

We pray for those who govern, for those entrusted with the common good. Give to them a heart for justice and for peace. Give them wisdom to serve rather than be served, to seek the welfare of all and not their vain ambition.

Lord in your mercy,  
**Hear our prayer.**

We pray for people afflicted by the COVID-19 virus. We pray for healing for those who are ill, for endurance and strength for those who care for the ill. We pray for comfort to those who mourn and feel deep loss.

Lord in your mercy,  
**Hear our prayer.**

We pray for those whose businesses and whose finances will be greatly affected by forced closures and by quarantine. We pray for those with mounting bills who have no way to pay. For those who have lost child-care, whose schooling has disrupted, whose plans for the future are threatened.

Lord in your mercy,  
**Hear our prayer.**

Keep us both outwardly in our bodies and inwardly in our souls, that we may be defended from all adversities which may happen to the body, and from all evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul.

Lord in your mercy,  
**Hear our prayer.**

As Jesus walked through the hills and villages as a healer, come to us as a healer now. Take from us all that gives us dis-ease, take all that diminishes us from being the people you want us to be, take from us our fear and cast it out by your perfect love. We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. And now with the confidence of the children of God, we pray as you taught us.

### **The Lord's Prayer** (Ecumenical)

Our God in heaven,  
    hallowed be your name,  
    your kingdom come,  
    your will be done,  
    on earth as in heaven.  
Give us today our daily bread.  
    Forgive us our sins  
    as we forgive those who sin against us.  
Save us from the time of trial  
    and deliver us from evil.  
For the kingdom, the power, and glory are yours  
    now and forever. Amen.

### **The Offering**

(Please consider mailing in an offering to the church office during this time of social-distancing. While Sunday worship is suspended, our expenses are not. Your gifts are gratefully received.)

### **Prayer of Dedication**

Lord of life, we seek to serve you by giving of our time, talents, and tithes. Especially in this strange moment, guide us by your Spirit to honor you with our use of time. Grant us generous spirits and creative minds to serve you gladly in the uncertain days ahead. Amen.

### **The Doxology** (spoken or sung)

*Praise God, from whom all blessings flow;  
Praise Christ, all people here below;  
Praise Holy Spirit evermore;  
Praise Triune God, whom we adore. Amen.*

## **Benediction**

You are loved. You are loved by the Creator of all that is, who dotes over you as a loving parent. Nothing in this world can take this love away from you no matter how hard the world tries. You are loved. With this confidence,

Go out into the world in peace, have courage,  
Hold on to what is good, return no one evil for evil.  
Strengthen the faint-hearted, support the weak,  
Help the suffering, honor all people,  
Love and serve the Lord rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit.  
And may God Almighty,  
Our Creator, our Redeemer, our Sustainer,  
Be with you all now, and remain with you always.

And the people of God said,

**Amen.**