

Home Sunday Worship, May 24th, 2020

Call to Worship & Opening Prayer

Come and worship, people of God!
Let's celebrate with songs of praise!
For our God—the Most High—is seated on his holy throne,
Sovereign over all the earth!
Let's worship God together.

Prayer

Lord of all time and space,
who was and is and is to come,
we worship and adore You
for You alone are worthy of our praise.
There is none before you,
none above you.
Your glory is ever before us
and this morning we are glad to take our place alongside all those
who even now, on earth and in heaven,
are raising their voices to exalt You,
their minds to know You
and their hearts to love You.
May our worship be a fitting offering –
a gift in return to the giver
of every good and perfect gift.
In Jesus' name, we pray; Amen.

Scripture

1 Peter 2: 4-10: "4 As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him— 5 you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. 6 For in Scripture it says: "See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame." 7 Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, "The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone," 8 and, "A stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall." they stumble because they disobey the message—which is also what they were destined for. 9 But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. 10 Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy."

Matthew 6:10: "your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

Sermon

Hello to St Andrews in Duncan and St Columba in Parksville! It is my delight to be bringing the sermon this week to both of our communities. St Andrews, I miss you all and eagerly anticipate the day that we can continue to wisely gather and worship together in spirit and truth. St Columba, although I have not met you, I feel in this season that we are graced to worship and be in unity together. Your pastor, John, speaks highly and fondly of you. He helps us to feel the joy of being together in spirit.

Before I continue, I must apologize that the longer passage of scripture read today will likely sound very familiar to us, as John preached a sermon from it only a few weeks ago. You see, what I began to work on for this week was born out of my processes and responses to our current circumstances, and the situational nature of this sermon had me already considering the principles that reside in these texts before I realized that they had only recently been read and taught on. Hopefully, we can appreciate that God's word is such that we can return to passages over and over again, and always glean something new, something presently impacting.

I trust and pray that you are all doing well despite the unique and challenging circumstances we find ourselves in. If you are anything like me, these past 2 months have been incredibly turbulent. Our lives have been disrupted- routines, systems, what we expect to be normal. All of that seems to have changed in the blink of an eye and has left us in many ways bewildered and scrambling to adjust to a "new normal."

I think that many of us feel on a practical level that we have adjusted to life as it is now, or at least we have stopped resisting the fact that things aren't going to be the way they were for some time! I certainly feel that way. And as I reflected on the past several weeks, I realized that my struggle wasn't only in the practical, mental and emotional adjustments needed, but also in the spiritual.

At many points it was apparent what to be praying for, what to turn to God for, how to rely on him and what to expect from him. But there were also countless occasions where media articles had me confused, uncertain and anxious. Or circumstances right in front of me had me confounded and lacking the seemingly quick thinking needed to adjust on the fly, so to speak. I found over the weeks that whenever I was unsure of how to speak, pray, respond or act, the same phrase kept coming up, filling in the blank spaces and unknown places. That phrase was, "your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." This became my go to prayer when I had nothing, knew nothing. When I was insecure and unconfident. When what seemed in front of me unconquerable, I would turn to a plea for God's kingdom to continue to grow and expand on earth, even if I didn't know what that looked like!

This phrase in many ways began to bring much needed comfort, certainty and assurance as I faced problems and situations, I had no familiarity with. And, unsurprisingly, it brought the subject of God's Kingdom, especially here on earth, to mind much more often; it caused me to consider what that looked like in deeper and wider ways.

As I pondered, and read sources on it, everything began to focus onto a point that was to me in one way simple, and in another way challenging. That point was this: God's Kingdom is meant to be on earth. Not just in heaven, but on earth.

As I said in one way this sounds so simple. Like of course we know it. But equally it challenges us because in many ways we have taken the habit to read Gods word and allow the passages we find in there to inform us and stoke our hope for the future- our final destination. We read the scriptures and we use them to look forward in time and space. And then we look here and now and consider how our actions might at worst “earn” our place in that future, or in a lesser way assure us that a long awaited future is coming.

But the truth is, the first century Jews, Paul and the early Christians understood and wrote with the understanding that God’s story of Isreal and the nations was not that they would all eventually get whisked away to a paradise in the sky, but that he would build his Kingdom amongst them in real time. The Jews anticipated the messiah with the expectation that their real-world, real-time circumstances would be affected by his coming. While they were wrong about who the messiah was, they were not wrong about the real-world implications he would bring. When Jesus and John the Baptist proclaimed, “The Kingdom of God is at hand,” they meant it was here among those they were speaking to. When Paul travelled the Roman empire, he nearly almost always went first to the synagogues to proclaim that God’s story had come to fulfillment in the person Jesus, or more so that the fulfillment of God’s story started with Jesus, and was meant to be walked out in an immediate manner from that point.

So instead of adopting a set of behaviours and beliefs that would one day usher them into a future of blessing and salvation, the idea was that in Jesus, HERE is the kingdom of God, and its time to start living like citizens of that kingdom- not once we get to heaven, but here and now, until the ultimate fulfillment of that Kingdom arrives!

So, if we can see that Gods Kingdom is meant to be here on earth, among us, and growing as time progresses, what does that look like? Well the important thing to look at is that God is the one building his kingdom. And as we now look into our passage today, we see rich language used to describe what he is building.

He is building a temple to house his glory and his presence on earth. And that building is made of a very special material, living stones. Jesus is the capstone, the one and only thing that can make it work, but on, or around that is a construction made of living stones. And what are the living stones? We are.

If you doubt, then you only need to read further to see that Peter embellishes this idea by calling the followers of Christ a “chosen people, a royal priesthood and a holy nation.” If these words do not describe a kingdom being built right before our eyes, I don’t know what does!

The succinct answer to the question “What is the Kingdom of God?” You are. You are a living stone. You are an essential part of what God is doing on earth. Not in the future. Not somewhere else. Here and now. You are the Kingdom of God. What a beautiful assurance, and what an immense, exhilarating challenge that is set before us in these words!

It can be awkward to consider the idea of being built together into God’s Kingdom while we are compelled to be apart. But this time, no matter how long it lasts, is temporary. I think that it can be considered as an opportunity to us. as we have all had to pause and pull away from the habits, the systems, the routines that have sustained us and moved us through life we can use this time to reflect, and to be inspired to move into new spaces, because right now those spaces exist.

We can consider in deep and honest ways what it means to be a living stone, a building block for God's kingdom. We can explore what is unique in us as a living stone, but also what is common with the other living stones around us that we are to be vitally connected to.

As we gain knowledge, we can compare that knowledge to what was, and consider if we need to change what was to reflect what we now understand better.

As we look toward being back together and in the world, we can observe what has changed in our absence and consider what of that change is for the better, and could be improved upon. What if when we got back together, we had all connected with God in deeper ways, and bring that passion, energy and creativity into our corporate gatherings? What if the necessity of engaging in new ways of community was just the beginning of the juices of innovation flowing, and that our worship gatherings made room for that creativity and hunger rather than just returning to the way things were?

What if when we got back together, our separation from one another stimulated a hunger for connectedness, realization that in spite of people's flaws they are treasures, and we reengaged with the joy of knowing that no matter who is in front of us, they are a living stone in the thing of beauty that God is building here on earth?

What if our time spent more alone led us to embrace the love of the saviour in a way that allowed no more room for shame, guilt, condemnation, only acceptance and love? What if we led off on that foot as we regarded ourselves and those around us?

What if we looked around and realized that we are surrounded by a creation that God said was good and that it is on us to make sure it remains good? What if we saw the beauty of creation, and some of the beauty that is returning, and saw that as part of God's kingdom as it screams praise and glory to the creator more loudly and more pleasantly than most of us can sing?

What if we realized that the efforts that we as individuals, groups and societies put into stopping the rampage of this virus could be applied to other solvable societal problems? What if we looked at what we could do to affect basic food, water and shelter needs across the globe in the same light of urgency and perhaps see even more deaths prevented, and more lives improved for the better?

Friends, I do not even know where to stop. Perhaps I am an idealist but as I see it, we currently have the privilege of time and space to reflect on these things. That might not always be there. I pray that we all take brave looks inward and around us to see what we can do to come out of this having grown and increased our preparedness to be our part in the kingdom of God.

I want to leave you with a tool for reflection in case you need it. There are many areas we can consider when we are looking at what it means to be a part of God's kingdom here and now. But I think a lot of it can be simplified into some basic categories.

As Presbyterians we should be familiar with the image of the Celtic cross. It is the traditional image of a cross, but is distinguished by a circle placed behind the cross. Traditionally it is meant to represent the resurrection of Christ and the eternal life we are called to. But I invite you to consider a different way to look at this cross in light of seeking to grow in your place in the Kingdom of God.

The upper vertical arm represents our relationship with God. How can we grow in our understanding of Him, his ways and how he interacts with us as individuals?

The lower vertical arm represents our relationship with our self. We don't like to admit it but how we relate to ourselves often affects how we perceive and relate to all other relationships.

We are all a created being that is deserving of the same amount of honour and love that the rest of creation is due. How can we grow in this?

The horizontal arm refers to our relationship with one another. If we are to be a temple built of living stones, an interconnectedness is implied. How can we strengthen and enrich these relationships that serve as mortar and bond?

And finally, the circle represents creation. All around us, God has created things on the earth & sea, in the sky, fellow humans. These have been created to be cared for and to reflect his glory and goodness. How in this time can we consider what our relationship is meant to be with this constant thing of miracle and wonder?

The answers to these muses and reflections are uncountable and should be. What matters is that we all ask, be honest and grow. And as we continue to ask one question, and then another, slowly a great stream of Gods work among us will amount to a river of his goodness flowing through us and to the world around us.

I pray that you find time to reflect and be honest in this time. I pray that as you do, God meets you in powerful and meaningful ways, because it is HIS kingdom that is bring built. Be blessed, let us pray.

Prayers of the People

Good morning, let us Pray....

Almighty God, Heavenly Father, We come to worship you as Creator of the universe in all it's glory We come to praise you for the gift of your saving grace, through Jesus your son We come to thank you for the Holy Spirit who guides us in our daily walk.

We humbly ask your blessing on our lives, our families and friends, and our communities. Guide and direct, we pray, the leaders of our Churches, our Province and our Country that their decisions may be thoughtful and wise. Come Lord, rid the world of the Coronovirus and bring peace and safety to our homes again.

We uphold in prayer all those who are in ill health, those who are struggling financially, and those who have lost all hope. Restore and sustain us Lord, that we may see your light in the dark places.

Remind us of your promises, for we know that 'All things work together for good to those who love you, and are called according to your purpose'

And in the words that Jesus taught us, we pray.....

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 debts as we forgive our debtors, and lead us, not into temptation but deliver us from evil, For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever, Amen.

Benediction

Go out into the world.
and in your words and in your lives
bear witness to the Christ who has ascended
to be everywhere present.

And as you come to know him,
may God give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation,
may Christ Jesus lift up his hands and bless you,
and may the Spirit open to you all the riches of Christ's inheritance.

We go in peace to love and serve the Lord,
...In the name of Christ. Amen.