

WORSHIP FOR SUNDAY, MARCH 17, 2024

Pacific Presbyterian Church and First Presbyterian Church of Union, Missouri

FIFTH SUNDAY in LENT

GATHERING

PRELUDE

CALL TO WORSHIP *(from Psalm 105)*

One: "Give thanks to the Lord, proclaim God's greatness."

All: "Tell the nations what the Lord has done."

One: "Sing praise to the Lord."

All: "Tell the wonderful things God has done."

One: "Be glad that we belong to God."

All: "Let all who worship the Lord rejoice."

***OPENING HYMN** "O Lord My God" GtG 625 *(Verses 1-3)*
(How Great Thou Art)

1. **O Lord my God, when I in awesome wonder
consider all the worlds thy hands have made,
I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder,
thy power throughout the universe displayed:**

Refrain: **Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to thee:
How great thou art! How great thou art!
Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to thee:
How great thou art! How great thou art!**

2. **When through the woods and forest glades I wander
and hear the birds sing sweetly in the trees,
when I look down from lofty mountain grandeur
and hear the brook and feel the gentle breeze: *(Refrain)***

3. **And when I think that God, his Son not sparing,
sent him to die, I scarce can take it in,
that on the cross, my burden gladly bearing,
he bled and died to take away my sin: *(Refrain)***

(next page...)

Words: Stuart K. Hine, 1953

Music: HOW GREAT THOU ART, Swedish folk melody; adapt. Stuart K. Hine, 1949
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UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION

**You have loved us, O God, with the great sacrifice of Jesus Christ;
but we have not loved you with all our heart and soul and mind and strength.
You have called us to share your love with our neighbors, near and far;
but we hog it for ourselves instead.
Forgive us for ignoring the lesson of your love.
Touch us once again by the example of Jesus Christ,
that we might be remade in his image
by the power and working of your Spirit.
In Christ's name we pray. Amen.**

SILENT CONFESSION

ASSURANCE OF PARDON *(from Mark 1 and Romans 5)*

One: "The right time has come, and the Kingdom of God is near! Turn away from your sins and believe the Good News!"
All: **The Good News is this: "God has shown us how much God loves us, for it was while we were still sinners that Christ died for us!"**
One: Friends, believe that Good News.
All: **In Jesus Christ we are forgiven! Thanks be to God! Amen.**

THE PEACE

One: The peace of Christ be with you.
All: **And also with you.**

(From your seat, a brief sign of peace may be shared: a wave of the hand, a nod of the head, etc.)

THE WORD

SCRIPTURE READING Mark 14:53-54,66-72

MARK 14:53-54,66-72 (New Revised Standard Version)

⁵³ *They took Jesus to the high priest; and all the chief priests, the elders, and the scribes were assembled. ⁵⁴ Peter had followed him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest; and he was sitting with the guards, warming himself at the fire.*

66 While Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant-girls of the high priest came by. 67 When she saw Peter warming himself, she stared at him and said, "You also were with Jesus, the man from Nazareth." 68 But he denied it, saying, "I do not know or understand what you are talking about." And he went out into the forecourt. Then the cock crowed. 69 And the servant-girl, on seeing him, began again to say to the bystanders, "This man is one of them." 70 But again he denied it. Then after a little while the bystanders again said to Peter, "Certainly you are one of them; for you are a Galilean." 71 But he began to curse, and he swore an oath, "I do not know this man you are talking about." 72 At that moment the cock crowed for the second time. Then Peter remembered that Jesus had said to him, "Before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times." And he broke down and wept.

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON "From a Distance" by Pastor Bill Vincent

We do well not to throw stones at those who denied and deserted Jesus – Peter and the disciples. Would we really have done any better, in a hostile environment, with our world falling apart, and fear gripping our heart?

The point in these stories, in many ways, is not so much what they tell us about these other people, as what they tell us about ourselves.

Yes, it would be easy – from a distance – to throw stones at Peter...were it not for our own failings.

In what ways – small or large; in our words, in our deeds, in our lives – do we deny that we know this Jesus?

-When we say we follow Jesus, but our choices say otherwise.

-We pretend we don't see the needs of our neighbors – near or far – and turn a deaf ear to their cries for help.

-We hide the fact that we go to church, when it might be unpopular or we might be ridiculed.

-We go along with off-color jokes that poke fun at people different from us...those who are also made in the image of God.

-We keep silent when we see a brother or sister walking down the path that leads toward real danger and self-destruction.

These are our weaknesses and failings.

Weakness in face of embarrassment, ridicule; hostility, ostracism; fear.

This is our test. This is our trial.

Earlier that night

Peter said to [Jesus], "Even though all become deserters, I will not. ...

Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you." (Mark 14:29-31)

We may have said similar things: “Oh yes, I’ll follow you wherever you lead.”
Only to have second thoughts.
Only to back down when we see where he leads.
Only to fail miserably when the heat is on: when a voice is needed to speak the truth, and we keep silent. When the situation calls for someone to risk doing the right thing, and we shy away.

We let our Lord down. We even, in our own way, deny him.

Lamar Williamson notes:

[the story] **depicts the human condition. If in Jesus we see how God always is, in Peter we see how we...are.** (*Mark*, Interpretation series, p.267)

So the story speaks to us clearly, even if uncomfortably.

One writer says,

[the story of Peter's denial] **comes close to everyone who has ever failed – and whom does that leave out?** (Halford E. Luccock, *Interpreter's Bible*, p.892)

And Peter “*broke down and wept*” when it dawned upon him what he had done.

We might do well to do the same. For in the response of sorrow, we acknowledge that we have failed our Lord. But in our tears, we also cling to the hope that our deliverance and discipleship depend, not upon us, but upon God.

You see, that’s the good news in this story of failure.

Again, Williamson:

The dark side – the bad news – of the message is that we do not follow Jesus, despite our high intentions and loud protestations; but, like Peter, we in fact deny him. The good news is that our salvation depends not on our petty performance, but on the faithfulness of God. ... [God] who, not sparing [God’s] own Son but giving him up for us all, redeems even those who deny him; [God] who, from most unlikely material – like you and me – builds a church, a temple not made with hands; [God] whose power is made perfect in weakness (p.268)

...even our weakness.

As Paul knew all too well:

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. (II Corinthians 4:7)

Yes, Peter failed his Lord, and failed miserably. Let us not forget that...and what it says about us.

But remember too: that was not the end of the story – praise God!

And it's not the end of our story, either.

Paul Achtemeier points out,

If Peter later played a leading role in Christ's church – which he did – it was not because he had earned it by his loyalty under fire. ... Peter is thus [a servant of God] by God's forgiving grace, not by his [own] strength of character or moral purity. (*Invitation to Mark*, pp.208 & 212)

A hard lesson for Peter – so strong, so forthright, so gung-ho – a hard lesson for Peter to learn: not to rely upon his own resources, but upon God's. And the fact that he did learn that lesson is probably why we have this story in the first place.

Think about it.

William Barclay did; and concluded,

There is only one source from which this story could have come – and that is Peter himself. ... He used his own shame as a magnet to draw [people] to Christ. ... He told [others], "I hurt him and I let him down like that, and still he loved and forgave me – and he can do the same for you." (*The Gospel of Mark*, Daily Study Bible Series, p. 353)

Halford Luccock notes,

Peter's failure, Christ's forgiveness, and the final restoration as told in the Gospel of John, have meant much to all who blunder and compromise. It brings the hope that a life gone to smash may yet be made over. (*Interpreter's*, p.892)

And that is a good hope, a certain hope, a comforting hope: to know forgiveness, restoration, and another chance.

Still, we might wonder: how can we avoid the mistake in the first place, let alone the same mistake again? What steps can we take to do better?

If we look at the story, I believe we can discern a hint.

For it may be that Peter's biggest mistake – and ours as well – is to follow Christ only from a distance. What one person terms,

the danger of remote discipleship. (Luccock, p.892)

We follow from a distance – half-committed, half-hearted – not wanting to get too close, unwilling to risk too much. We don't want to put all our eggs in one basket, so we keep our distance, keeping our options open. We keep Jesus at arm's length, not willing to give our self whole-heartedly, and so failing to love God with our whole heart and soul and mind and strength.

Admittedly, there may be good reason for following from a distance.

I mean, let's be honest: there are aspects of following Jesus that frighten us. To follow him is to go against the flow. To love even our enemies as ourselves, when the world says, "Take care of your own." To forgive 70 x 7 times, when the world says, "Only if it gets you something."

Again Luccock:

To follow him puts us out of step with much of the passing parade. Jesus is an "irregular." If we try to keep step with him, we get out of step with the crowd. (*Interpreter's*, p.880)

Living while paddling upstream, going against the flow.

But the way to "keep step with him" – if we are truly committed to that – is not from a distance, but up close and personal. If we find it difficult to follow Jesus, the solution is not to pull back, not to distance ourselves, but to draw nearer.

Draw me nearer, nearer, nearer, blessed Lord,
("I am Thine, O Lord")

Fanny Crosby would have us sing.

In another hymn, Annie Hawks makes the affirmation,

Temptations lose their power / When [You are near].
("I Need Thee Every Hour")

And shortly, we ourselves will sing,

**Be Thou forever near me,
My Master and my Friend:
I shall not fear the battle
If Thou art by my side,**

("O Jesus, I Have Promised" words by John E. Bode)

With Christ near us, we can share his strength, we can know his comfort, we can hear his encouragement.

He knew that. And so he said,

"Abide in me and I in you. ... Whoever abides in me and I in them, will bear much fruit. Just as a branch cannot bear fruit by itself, but can do so only if it abides in the vine." (John 15:4-5)

That's how we draw near to Christ: by abiding in him.

Abiding in his presence through regular prayer. Coming to him in worship. Hearing his voice in the scriptures. Seeing him in the community of faith. Keeping him first and foremost in our minds and hearts, every minute of every day.

Yes, it may be difficult, hard. It takes effort, commitment, sacrifice.

Yet it may be that very difficulty, that commitment, that sacrifice that draws us nearer to our Lord, so we can follow him in his way.

Our prayer, then, is this:

**Nearer, my God, to Thee,
Nearer to Thee!
E'en though it be a cross
That raiseth me.**

("Nearer, My God, to Thee" words by Sarah F. Adams)

It is a cross that raises us, and draws us nearer.

And we come to discover that it is the cross of life – true life – for it is life and peace in communion with God.

The cross through which we know forgiveness and restoration – as did Peter – is the same cross that draws us "nearer, my God, to Thee, nearer to Thee."

***HYMN** “O Jesus, I Have Promised” GtG 724

1. **O Jesus, I have promised
to serve thee to the end;
be thou forever near me,
my Master and my friend;
I shall not fear the battle
if thou art by my side,
nor wander from the pathway
if thou wilt be my guide.**

2. **O let me feel thee near me!
The world is ever near:
I see the sights that dazzle;
the tempting sounds I hear.
My foes are ever near me,
around me and within;
but, Jesus, draw thou nearer
and shield my soul from sin.**

3. **O let me hear thee speaking
in accents clear and still,
above the storms of passion,
the murmurs of self-will;
O speak to reassure me,
to hasten or control;
O speak, and make me listen,
thou guardian of my soul.**

4. **O Jesus, thou hast promised
to all who follow thee
that where thou art in glory
there shall thy servant be.
And, Jesus, I have promised
to serve thee to the end;
O give me grace to follow,
my Master and my friend.**

Words: John Ernest Bode, 1866, alt.

Music: ANGEL'S STORY, Arthur Henry Mann, 1881
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***AFFIRMATION OF FAITH** (from “*A Declaration of Faith*”)

Christ calls us to live in the presence of God.

Jesus lived with a constant sense of his Father's presence.

He put God's claim on his life above all else.

He joined others in God's worship and praise.

He drew strength from the Scriptures.

He prayed and taught his disciples to pray.

We believe Christ gives us and demands of us

personal lives that are centered in God

and open to God's reality and rule.

Christ teaches us

to put obedience to God

above the interests of self, family, race, or nation;

to offer God joyously

our money, ability, and time.

It is part of our discipline

to observe a day of worship and rest,

setting aside our own working to enjoy God's work,

celebrating with sisters and brothers the Lord's goodness.

We need constantly to search out God's way in Scripture,

not expecting detailed directions for every decision,

but relying on the Word to tell us who God is,

to press God's present claim on us,

and to assure us of God's grace and comfort.

We are charged to pray for ourselves and others

with gratitude, boldness, and persistence,

confident that God hears and answers our prayers

in ways best for us all.

Life in God's presence issues in life for others,

for if we do not love sisters and brothers whom we see,

we cannot love God whom we do not see.

“A Declaration of Faith” is Copyright 1977, 1991, the Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.); adopted (1977) “as a contemporary statement of faith, a reliable aid for Christian study, liturgy, and inspiration, with the clear understanding that” it is not approved as a part of the *Book of Confessions*.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

One: Draw near, O Lord...

All: ...and deliver us in your mercy.

THE LORD'S PRAYER (Traditional)

**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,
and the power, and the glory,
forever. Amen.**

OFFERING

Invitation

Reflection

**Unison Prayer of Dedication*

**Most giving and forgiving God,
you provide for our every need.
You have touched us with your love
and showered us with your blessings.
You open our lips to offer you praise.
You strengthen our hands to respond to Christ's call.
With hearts, hands, and voices renewed by your Spirit,
we place now before you our commitment to serve.
Use us in ways that will benefit others,
and accept what we offer as a sign of our faith.
For it is in Christ's name that we pray. Amen.**

SENDING

***CLOSING HYMN** "O Master, Let Me Walk with Thee" GtG 738

- 1. O Master, let me walk with thee
in lowly paths of service free;
tell me thy secret; help me bear
the strain of toil, the fret of care.**

(continued...)

2. **Help me the slow of heart to move
by some clear, winning word of love;
teach me the wayward feet to stay,
and guide them in the homeward way.**

3. **Teach me thy patience, still with thee
in closer, dearer company,
in work that keeps faith sweet and strong,
in trust that triumphs over wrong.**

4. **In hope that sends a shining ray
far down the future's broadening way;
in peace that only thou canst give,
with thee, O Master, let me live.**

Words: Washington Gladden, 1879
Music: MARYTON, Henry Percy Smith, 1874
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***CHARGE AND BLESSING**

One: ...And let the gathered people of God say...
All: ...Amen.

POSTLUDE

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