

Grace Mennonite Church

Second Sunday of Easter

April 19, 2020

GATHERING

Today we continue in the Season of Eastertide, that period in the Christian calendar bracketed by Easter and Pentecost. Holy Week and Easter this year has been like few of us have experienced in our lifetime. I imagine the same would be said by those who lived in the days leading up to Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. In what seemed incomprehensible at the time, God was at work; even doing a "new thing."

The scripture readings for the day tell of ways God has been understood to be present in times of adversity. On that first Easter Sunday, the idea of Jesus being resurrected took some time to catch on. Until people did, the empty tomb only added to the anxiety followers of Jesus were experiencing. It was only once their hope, faith and reality connected, that the people could see the hand of God in the resurrection of Jesus.

And so, it is for us today, as the season of COVID-19 merges with the Season of Eastertide, that we continue in our conviction of the resurrection to see how and where God is at work in our own time of adversity. May our "worship" in these weeks enable us to catch glimpses of the resurrected Jesus in our midst; perhaps even doing a "new thing."

PRAYER *Adapted from Vanderbilt worship resources*

Mighty God, creator of all things, the source of resurrection power,
come and stand among us the dark shadows of our days.

In the days of COVID-19, it feels like Your good creation is being disfigured by sickness and death.
Yet by faith we declare the wonders of a new creation in the resurrection of Jesus.

While it feels like the world as we have known it is changed forever,
teach us to hold fast to our resurrection faith.

As we move through the trials of the day uphold us with the knowledge of that glorious morning
when the women encountered the risen Jesus face to face.

As they bore witness for all the world to see,

may we too bear witness to the endless love you have for us,

so that justice, love and peace may flourish to the glory of Your name. AMEN.

HYMN *This joyful Eastertide* HWB #276 (vs1)

This joyful Eastertide away with sin and sorrow!

My love, the Crucified, hath sprung to life this morrow.

Had Christ that once was slain, ne'er burst his three-day prison,

our faith had been in vain. But now hath Christ arisen, arisen, arisen, arisen.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Though it is a difficult time with the current curtailment of our favourite activities that get us out of the house and into fellowship with others, such as at church, we can still celebrate God's resurrection power in our lives... through being grateful. Today's *Prayers of the People* [based on "I Lift My Heart To

You In Gratitude” by Edward Hays] invite us into thankfulness as a source of strength for us and blessing for others.

I lift up my heart to you in gratitude

For this gift of a new day filled with possibilities
Even in my place of seclusion and safety-keeping.

I lift up my heart to you in gratitude, O God,

For the gift of this prayer I can pray for myself and others.

In gratitude, I thank you for the cup of beverage that refreshes me today,

And for the bread or meat or salad or sweets or anything healthy and good.

I lift my heart in prayer for the leaders of nations trying to do what is best in a time of crisis,

For health care workers pouring their very lives into saving the lives of others,

For people in places of employment that serve the public with necessary provisions,

For people unemployed or financially strapped in a time of economic inactivity.

I thank you for all the people I am thinking of right now in my family...

In my building or neighbourhood...

In this country or in other places of the world, whether they be friends or strangers...

And right now, especially for those in my congregation...

With gratitude for your healing presence and power, I ask for strength and comfort

For those who are ill or uncomfortable, hospitalized or in treatments

Or recovering from conditions of illness...

Or those who have new grief in their hearts...

I lift up my heart in gratitude

For the gift of music that delights my ear, heart and soul.

I lift up my heart in gratitude, O God,

For the ability to read, and the wonder of words that speak to my mind and heart.

I lift up my heart in gratitude

For the way I can feel expressions of love from you, O God, in silence, in prayer,

In glimpses of nature through my windows, in my memories of love and life.

I lift up my heart to you in gratitude

Even for the present pain I feel,

Because it frames with greater joy the pleasures and blessings of life. AMEN.

SCRIPTURE READING Acts 1:1-5

The Promise of the Holy Spirit

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning² until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen.³ After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.⁴ While staying^[a] with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. “This,” he said, “is what you have heard from me;⁵ for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with^[b] the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

REFLECTION *Eastertide in the Time of Covid-19* **by Laur Steven**

The period from Easter to Pentecost—from Jesus’s resurrection to the disciples’ baptism with the Holy Spirit—is traditionally called Eastertide; it parallels the 50 days from Passover to Pentecost in the Jewish year—commemorating the period of time from the passing over of the Angel of Death during the Exodus from Egypt, to the gift of the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai. This year, the period from Easter on April 12th to Pentecost on May 31st will in all likelihood be the time remaining in our Covid-19 lockdown, as Canada seeks to “flatten the curve” by enforcing “social distancing.” Perhaps the time will be shorter, perhaps longer, but most projections say the lockdown will happen at least until the end of May. I would like to reflect upon some parallels between the Covid-19 lockdown and the Christian and Jewish traditions spanning this period.

For Christians like us the usual emotion in this season is happiness and joy. Christ is risen, indeed! Hallelujah! Surely the first Christians must have been jubilant at seeing the crucified Christ among them again. And surely the early Israelites were similarly joyful about their unlikely exodus from Egypt. But for us, this year, that happiness is not simple, clear, and unmixed, is it? We have an unexpected guest stalking the world this year. Well, I doubt that their happiness was any less mixed for the early Jesus followers or the early Israelites either.

Think of the apostles and the earliest Jesus followers. They had gone from the high of the triumphal entry to the death of their Lord by the cruellest execution the Romans could devise, and then to the spikes of joy and depression at the almost incomprehensible repeated reappearances and disappearances of their Lord. In addition, they were terrified that the Jewish and Roman authorities would identify them as Jesus followers and punish them as well. After all, that potential for persecution had been building for some time. According to John’s gospel, Jesus had actually been leading the disciples away from the encroaching authorities in Jerusalem when he heard of Lazarus’s death and abruptly turned back toward Judea, to the dismay of the apostles. And now, in the aftermath of the crucifixion, Peter, the very recently petrified denier of his Lord, was faced with holding the group together in faith as the rumours, stories, reports, and firsthand witness testimonies—including his own—of Jesus’s resurrection swirled throughout the followers, but also throughout Jerusalem.

Now think of the Israelites, those freed Egyptian slaves, running for their lives through one of the most inhospitable landscapes on earth. They too had been ecstatic at their release from captivity. Ecstatic means outside “stasis”, off balance. Think what they’d gone through: 10 plagues, each worse than the previous until the Angel of Death kills the Egyptian firstborn sons—and a devastated and bereft Pharaoh caves in and lets them go...only to change his mind yet again and pursue them to the side of the sea where the waters open and they cross safely, and Pharaoh’s army is drowned. They are free! Well...free to wander in a trackless desert with no apparent source of sustenance. And it falls to Moses, like Peter, to hold this “nation” together, a nation filled with traumatized escaped slaves who swing from ecstatic belief in a miraculous God to terror at being led by a madman to their deaths in the wilderness.

The challenge for both Peter and Moses was to keep a group of threatened people a safe community of faith until some indeterminate time in the future when an ill-defined promise would be kept by God. In Peter's case he has to keep the group waiting in the vicinity of Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit is poured out upon them. The group is not preaching or witnessing to the world around it, but is closed in on itself fearfully, where Jesus appears and disappears, both reassuring them and troubling them. Even with the resurrected Jesus appearing to them, they still don't fully get what he is about. They ask him yet again one of their favourite questions, whether this is "the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel" (Acts 1:6). After the ascension, Peter holds the group of about 120 followers close in prayer, hunkered down, waiting...with no sense of how long the wait will be beyond Jesus saying it would be "not many days from now" (Acts 1:5), but *with* Jesus's assurance that the Holy Spirit *will indeed* come to them, that they will be given power, that they will be his witnesses to the ends of the earth, whatever that might have meant to them.

Moses faces, if anything, a more daunting task. He has tens of thousands of people to lead and feed. Their common emotion is fear for their very survival. They are astonished at the miraculous deeds that freed them, but they need to be shaped into a people, one which has clearly laid out beliefs, and boundaries, and behaviours. Without such assurances that a larger patterned life will continue, their fear returns, and they complain that Moses is leading them astray. Moses's only recourse is to appeal yet again to God for help. It is only at Sinai that the books of the law are delivered to Moses, and through him to the people, providing them a framework with which to grow into the Chosen People, a people ready to enter—and conquer—the Promised Land.

We, in this first Sunday after Easter, also share the joy of the resurrection, our freedom from captivity to the principalities and powers of the world; but in this plague time our joy is muted, surrounded as it is by fear and uncertainty. We all know people who have lost jobs, or savings, who fear losing homes; because of underlying health issues we fear for ourselves, for our loved ones, and for our friends; we fear going out for basic supplies, but also fear those who may deliver them to us; and we fear also, perhaps largely, fear itself—the swirling, inchoate fear that grips us at unexpected moments and makes us cry out, with the psalmist, "How long, oh Lord? How long?"

Like the early Jesus followers, and the escaping Israelites, we have been promised power and purpose in the misty future. But for now we, like they had to, must wait. Our church community is separated and hard to reach; our missions to others are curtailed; simply being the church is difficult. Yet, if we remember the early Jesus followers, before there was a Christian church, we can see that despite the fear and uncertainty, there was a core conviction that the resurrected Jesus was Lord, and worthy of trust. Like that early group we have prayer and scripture, and though we cannot gather in person, we have the ability to share worship resources, such as these you are reading, over long distances. We can telephone each other for mutual support, and to maintain social ties. But even more importantly, we must remember that though we must wait for the plague to retreat, we don't have to wait for the Holy Spirit! We have already received the gift of the comforter and advocate whom Jesus promised to send us, in whose embrace we are bound together, despite our physical distance from each other. And despite Covid-19, that is a reason to shout Hallelujah!

RESPONSE ***Come, ye faithful, raise the strain*** HWB #264 (vs1)
Come ye faithful raise the strain of triumphant gladness!
God has brought forth Israel into joy from sadness.
Now rejoice, Jerusalem, and with true affection
welcome in unwearied strains Jesus' resurrection.

BENEDICTION *Adapted from Vanderbilt worship resources*
 As we leave this time of worship, O God, we continue in the living hope of our confession that the resurrection of Jesus makes all things new. May we who celebrate the forgiveness of sins in the death and resurrection of Jesus continue to live and pray so that by the Holy Spirit others too will come to know new life now and unto eternity. Hallelujah! AMEN.

SENDING ***I know that my Redeemer lives*** HWB #277 (vs3)
He lives, all glory to his name, glory hallelujah!
He lives, my Saviour, still the same, glory hallelujah!
What joy the bless'd assurance gives,
I know that my Redeemer lives, glory hallelujah!

POSTLUDE ***Hallelujah Chorus***, Christmas Food Court Flashmob
If reading this on your computer, place the curser on the blue print and press ctrl and enter to listen. If you have printed this, go to the email message and place the curser on the blue print and simply press enter.

<https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=hallelujah+chorus+flash+mob&qvvt=hallelujah+chorus+flash+mob&view=detail&mid=7A3F93EC64856D17C2DB7A3F93EC64856D17C2DB&&FORM=VRDGAR&ru=%2Fvideos%2Fsearch%3Fq%3Dhallelujah%2Bchorus%2Bflash%2Bmob%26qvvt%3Dhallelujah%2Bchorus%2Bflash%2Bmob%26FORM%3DVDRE>



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