

Prelude:**[Annie Schulz]****Gathering Thoughts & Prayer:****[Doug Schulz]**

Welcome, everyone, to this fifth Sunday in Lent as we move toward Palm Sunday and Easter Week with our focus on the theme of “Wilderness Calls to Deep Faith”. Today’s service will be reasonably brief so that we can also include a short Annual General Meeting for the acceptance of annual reports and budget matters, at the conclusion of our worship time. When the worship service closes this morning, Pastor Beth will explain our transition to the meeting time and will provide an opportunity to slip out of the sanctuary if you won’t be remaining here for the AGM. All are welcome to remain and observe, of course. Our meeting is really an extension of our worship together, after all. May God bless us in all of it!

Of course, we recognize that we live in a difficult, constraining time when a global pandemic complicates our local lives. But we are grateful for much today: that we have been free of this killing COVID-19 flu in our congregation so far; that we have had a richly meaningful year of worship experiences – even learning how to worship in new ways, such as “on-line” and by hearing and reading things at home, sometimes, rather than being together in pews in this building.

So, in that spirit of gratitude we acknowledge that though we do live these days still in a kind of “wilderness space”, here at Grace we seek always to deepen our faith. May this service enrich us in that way. Let us pray:

We gather today, O God, to feel your good presence in our lives as persons individually, and as people together in this congregation. Please bless us in our worshipful thoughts, enrich our spirits to be ever-more motivated to reflect your will and your ways in our world. We celebrate your constant love even as we seek to know more deeply the richness of your goodness and grace, the guidance of your gentle hand, and the radiant promise we can imagine as the look of perfect love as we meet you here today, imagining ourselves coming to you face-to-face. AMEN

Let’s sing now to express our gratitude (with masks on, hum or whisper-sing).

Hymn:**“For the beauty of the earth”****[HWB #89 vv. 1,2,4,5]**

*For the beauty of the earth, for the glory of the skies,
for the love which from our birth over and around us lies:*

Refrain: *Lord of all, to thee we raise this our hymn of grateful praise.*

For the beauty of each hour of the day and of the night,

hill and vale and tree and flow'r, sun and moon and stars of light: [R]

*For the joy of human love, brother, sister, parent, child,
friends on earth and friends above, for all gentle thoughts and mild: [R]*

*For thy church that evermore lifteth holy hands above,
off'ring up on ev'ry shore her pure sacrifice of love: [R]*

Passing of the Peace & Prayers of the People

[Doug Schulz]

Now let's 'raise' a greeting to each other as we stand – if you're comfortable doing so – and turn and make gestures of friendship and love, passing the peace to each other with waves of various kinds. Blinks and winks are permitted, but cartwheels on the benches between each other are not! "May the peace of Christ be with you."

With this shortened service, we will not take time for sharing of prayer concerns or points of celebration. I invite you to join your hearts with mine in some brief silent spaces within which to hold up inside yourself and toward God, so to speak, the deepest matters of our hearts. This will be followed with "The Lord's Prayer":

O God, to whom we call out today as the Heart holding all of our hearts, we pray that we might trust in your Presence and Power for every day of our lives, and be grateful for every hour of awareness of your grace, by which we find comfort and encouragement, direction and inspiration, correction and motivation. To You we come humbly and hopefully; You, our candle-light for life, our search-light for truth, and our burning hearth of eternal hope - the fire of love that sustains us and compels us to share joy, peace, hope and love with one another and out into our world. We see the Light of you before us, within us, around us, right now. [Silence]

Today, O God, we confess how easy it is to fall away from true surrender of everything in our lives to You, how difficult it is to fully trust all the time. We thank you that you do not judge, but you invite, you guide, you enrich, you prepare us, over and over, to live by deep faith all of the time. Though life has so much of wilderness in it, you are there. You are everywhere. You are here, now. And in this silent moment we hold up to you in our hearts our various concerns – some simple some complex, some sad or distressing - for self and others, for our church, our community, our country, our world. [Silence]

We lift up as well our gratitude for all that is good in our lives, today including this congregation and its life and ministry in this city. And for our denomination of Mennonites, for its desire to witness to your holy peace as faithfully as we can. We humbly confess our shortcomings at times and in ways, but we happily praise you that we feel guided and encouraged as a people trying to be faithful to Jesus together. [Silence]

And we thank you, O God, for the teaching of Jesus, such as the beautiful prayer we now share together, saying:

“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

Musical Interlude: “Create in Me a Clean Heart, O God” [Annie Schulz]

Reflection: “Rest, Receive and Enjoy!” [Beth Woelk]

The scripture passages that today’s lectionary presents for us are intense, dense and complex. They are full of tension and paradox. As with many of the texts we’ve been exploring during our Lenten journey thus far, they invite us to look with honesty at our lives and confront us with our attachments. As we walk with Jesus through these weeks, we know what we are walking toward and so his words seem to carry extra weight. When I began to sit with this week’s passages, I found myself operating from my head trying to sort, sift and understand these weighty things, wanting to untangle metaphor and meaning. Yet these texts seem to offer an invitation not to operate from a place of achieving understanding, figuring things out or striving and grasping in discernment or action. Instead, we are invited to engage the heart where God’s law of Love is written as Jeremiah says, the secret heart where we receive the steadfast love and abundant mercy, truth and wisdom, joy and gladness that the psalmists sing of. It is here in our hearts that God’s cleanses and renews, restores and sustains.

And so as we sit with our gospel passage this morning, Jesus does something that he does so often and profoundly throughout his teaching, he offers a beautiful metaphorical image to savour in our inner being, in our hearts.

“Very truly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit”. John 12:24

I have been captured by this image of the grain of wheat, falling into the soil, sitting there in the dark, resting, receiving, and being, until the time comes when it swells, cracks open and transformation begins. A green shoot emerges and climbs toward the light until it breaks through becoming a golden stalk that bears much fruit. If we dig around in the soil looking for the seed it’s no longer there. In the image of the seed, we see a surrender to dying that is not really dying at all. An image full of mystery, wonder and creativity.

So what is the Lenten invitation to us in this image?
How do we surrender the grain of our life for transformation?

Writer and United Methodist Minister Jan Richardson writes “We work so very hard at letting go, sometimes, trying to train ourselves to release our grip on all that is not God. But what if it’s not about giving up but giving in? Falling into dirt, as Jesus says. Going where grain is supposed to go. Following the spiral within the seed that takes us deeper into the dark but also—finally, fruitfully—out of it.” What if our invitation is not to “figure things out” but to rest and receive, even in the wilderness of unknowing and uncertainty in our lives? To cease from wrestling with the questions and mysteries and to simply to be with them. To hide our souls in the care of the Beloved like a seed in the earth and to see what grows. What if we trust that it is not in our doing but in our receiving that we are transformed? There is such a great pressure in our culture to push, strive, reach, acquire and perform. But the heart of transformation is when we realize that Love comes to us and is gracious to us. The heart of transformation is in receiving.

“Create in me a clean heart, O Gracious One, and put a new and right spirit within me. Enfold me in your arms of Love, and fill me with your Holy Spirit. Restore in me the joy of your saving grace and encourage me with a new spirit.” (Psalm 51:10-12 Psalms for Praying by Nan Merrill).

Restore to me the joy of your salvation. In Psalm 51, we hear the longing of the psalmist, not to wallow in his sins or to punish himself eternally for his brokenness, but to rest in a God who does not abandon him. To rejoice in a Creator who knows and holds all the broken pieces. To enter the restoration that God is always working to bring about. To have faith in the One who calls to us in the midst of our realities. I loved the picture that Laur painted for us in his devotional last Sunday of God not simply responding to us or answering our beck and call, but a sort of reversal where “God IS the everlasting call from the heart of life. God is always there at the secure center of life, loving us.” Laur wrote. This is the salvation we rejoice in.

How do you lean into this joy? How do you open yourself to let it in even when you don’t feel whole? Even when life is uncertain and unknown, how do you live into the joy of your salvation - the wholeness, restoration, and freedom - that God intends for you?

This Lent, I have been savouring a poem by St. Teresa of Avila - 16th Century Spanish Mystic and Carmelite Nun - that speaks to me of opening to the joy of my restoration in Christ. I’d like to read it for you, “Just these two words He spoke changed my life, “Enjoy Me”. What a burden I thought I was to carry, a crucifix as

