



February 21, 2021

Melville United Church

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Melville United Church
February 21, 2021
First Sunday of Lent

Presiding today - Rev. Marion Loree

Welcome

My name is Marion Loree and I am the minister here at Melville United Church in Fergus, Ontario. We gather in community today - February 21, 2021 virtually. Because of Covid-19 restrictions in our area there are no worshippers here with me. We are in code red right now but as restrictions are lifted gradually we will keep you informed about when in-person worship might resume. Until then, on-line services will continue to be our normal mode of operation with printed copies being distributed to those without internet access.

So here we are - the first Sunday of Lent. Lent encompasses the few weeks leading up to Easter. During this time we focus on the activities of Jesus as he journeyed toward the city of Jerusalem where he would end up executed on a cross. It is believed he was resurrected in some form and appeared to some of his followers three days later and that event is what we call Easter.

I invite you to join us now for a time of worship and contemplation. Today we will celebrate communion so, if you wish to participate in that you will need to have a small piece of bread or cracker and a drink of juice or wine ready.

Acknowledgement

We acknowledge with respect the history, spirituality and culture of the Indigenous peoples with whom Treaty 4 - also known as the Haldimand Tract - was signed and the territory wherein our church resides, and we acknowledge our responsibilities as treaty members.

Sharing the Light: Sharing the Light *(If you are watching this on-line or reading it from a page I invite you to take a moment to light a candle, centre yourself and prepare to enter in to a time of worship and prayer. As you light your candle repeat the following words)*

We light a candle today to remind us
that there is a mysterious power or presence that connects us all -
we call it God.
that this mysterious presence dwells within each of us -
as it did in the person of Jesus whom we call the Christ.
that we *cannot* be separated from this presence that is
the Spirit of love which created us and that is part of us always.

Call to Worship: (based on one written by Juanita Austin. Gathering. Lent/Easter 2021. Page 30. Used with permission.)

I invite you in, wherever you are this morning,
despite whatever doors are locked to keep you in or out,
we have found a way to be together.
We are not alone, we live in God's world,
We are God's people.
So come, let us worship together.

Hymn: Called by Earth and Sky (sung) **MV 135**

Chorus:

Called by earth and sky, promise of hope held high.
This is our sacred living trust, treasure of life sanctified.
Called by earth and sky.

Precious these water, endless seas,
deep ocean's dream,
waters of healing, rivers of rain,
the wash of love again.

Called by earth and sky, promise of hope held high.
This is our sacred living trust, treasure of life sanctified.
Called by earth and sky.

Precious this gift, the air we breathe;
wind born and free.
Breath of the Spirit, blow through this place,
our gathering and our grace.

Called by earth and sky, promise of hope held high.
This is our sacred living trust, treasure of life sanctified.
Called by earth and sky.

Precious these mountains, ancient sands;
vast fragile land.
Seeds of our wakening, rooted and strong,
Creation's faithful song.

Called by earth and sky, promise of hope held high.
This is our sacred living trust, treasure of life sanctified.
Called by earth and sky.

Precious the fire that lights our way,
bright dawning day.
Fire of passion, sorrows undone,
our faith and justice one.

Called by earth and sky, promise of hope held high.
This is our sacred living trust, treasure of life sanctified.
Called by earth and sky.

Words of Wisdom:

"Everything in life has its own time. There is time to celebrate and there is time to mourn. This is the time for reflection and transformation. Let us look within and change into what we ought to be." -- Aaron Saul

Opening Prayer: Psalm 25 (Psalms for Praying: An Invitation to Wholeness, Pg41, Nan C. Merrill)

To You, O Love, I lift up my soul!
O Heart within my heart,
in You I place my trust.
Let me not feel unworthy;
let not fear rule over me.

Yes! May all who open their hearts
savour You and bless the earth!

Compel me to know your ways, O Love;
instruct me upon your paths.

Lead me in your truth,
and teach me,
for through You will I know
wholeness;

I shall reflect your Light
both day and night.

I know of your mercy, Blessed One,
and of your unconditional Love;
You have been with me
from the beginning.

Forgive the many times I have walked
away from You
choosing to follow my own will.

I seek your guidance, once again,
I yearn to know your Peace.

Companion me as I open to your Will!

You are gracious and just,
O Spirit of Truth,
happy to guide those who
miss their way;

You enjoy teaching all who are open,
all who choose to live in truth.

Your paths are loving and sure,
O Holy One, and
those who give witness to You
through their lives
are blessed beyond measure.

Yet, all too often glorious gifts
of Grace, of Love and Light,
are veiled by my busyness.

I bow down before You;
instruct me, that I might choose,
the way of love and truth.

I would live in your abundant Love,
and my children as well.

Your friendship is offered to all
whose hearts are open;

You make known your promises
to them.

My eyes are ever on You. Beloved,
keep my feet from stumbling

along the way.

Turn to me, O Holy One, and envelop me
with your love, for
I am lonely and oppressed.
Relieve the blocks in my heart
that keep me separated from You;
See all the darkness within me;
fill it with your healing Light.
Look at my pain and all my fears;
they shut out love and life.

Protect me and free me;
let me not live as unworthy,
for I would return Home to You.
May integrity and wholeness fill me
as I dwell with You,
O Loving Presence.

May we, together with the angels
and the company of heaven,
help unfold your Plan
For planet Earth. Amen.

Ministry of Music: Around You, O Lord Jesus

Scripture: Genesis 9:8-17 (*The Inclusive Bible: The First Egalitarian Edition*)
(The covenant between God and Noah)

God said to Noah and his family, "I hereby establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you and with every living creature that is with you - birds, cattle, and the earth's wildlife - everything that came out of the ark, everything that lives on the earth. I hereby establish my covenant with you. All flesh will never again be swept away by the waters of the flood, never again will a flood destroy all the earth."

God said, "Here is the sign of the covenant between me and you and every living creature for ageless generations. I set my bow in the clouds, and it will be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth, my bow will appear in the clouds. Then I will remember the covenant that is between me and you and every kind of living creature, and never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all flesh. Whenever my bow appears in the clouds I will see it, and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature on the earth." God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all living things on the earth."

Reflection: Signs of Promise
Genesis 9:8-17

So here we are at the beginning of Lent once again and what better place to begin, especially this year, than with a conversation about promise, and specifically for us in the church - God's promise.

In the story of God's relationship with humankind the story of the covenant God made with Noah is

one of the first ones and it is a foundational one. There are other covenant promises made elsewhere in Hebrew Scripture, yet this one is interesting because it offers a sign: the rainbow set in the clouds; the glory, hope and promise after the fear and chaos of the storm. But this sign is not for us - though its wonder certainly speaks to us. This is a sign to help *God* remember.

Why does God need to remember God's promises, we might ask? We *know* that humanity will forget the covenant. Much of the Hebrew Scriptures and, in fact, much of our lives follow the classic pattern: make a promise - to God or ourselves - try and fail to keep that promise, get into a giant mess, repent, promise again. Repeat. But this time God is the keeper of the covenant. God remains faithful. Always.

Note that the rainbow doesn't come until *after* the storm. The sign doesn't appear until the damage is done. Noah and his family survive along with the remnant of life tucked away on the ark - plants and animals preserved to allow for the possibility of new life. This is a story of death and resurrection - and hope. Although it seemed that all was lost, new life springs forth.

Flood stories - both ancient and modern - generally hinge on devastation. Flood waters wreak havoc, but this holy story hinges on hope. The flood story represents a cleansing, a washing clean but the key to the story is not so much about the destruction but the invitation that was extended to Noah - or perhaps we should say the invitations because there was more than one.

If we back up a bit we see that he was first invited to believe and trust enough to build the ark in the first place. Not a small thing when he didn't even live near the sea. Next he was invited to extend God's care to the natural world by taking the animals into the ark with him. Then he was invited to be patient and to, once again, trust that God would let him know when it was safe to exit the ark.

Only then did the sign come - the rainbow. This sign, God told him, will remind me, God, of the promise I make to you this day. It will be a constant reminder of how you, Noah, accepted the invitation to trust in and love me, God, above all else.

Noah was so focused on following Spirit's prompting, his relationship with God was so strong, that he did not hesitate to do as instructed even though it appeared ridiculous. Imagine!

Scripture: Mark 1:9-15 (*The Inclusive Bible: The First Egalitarian Edition*)

(The baptism, temptation, and mission of Jesus)

It was then that Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized in the Jordan River by John. Immediately upon coming out of the water, Jesus saw the heavens opening and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. Then a voice came from the heavens: "You are my Beloved, my Own, On you my favour rests."

Immediately the Spirit drove Jesus out into the wilderness, and he remained there for forty days, and was tempted by Satan. He was with the wild beasts, and the angels looked after him.

After John's arrest, Jesus appeared in Galilee proclaiming the Good News of God:

"This is the time of fulfillment. The reign of God is at hand! Change your hearts and minds, and believe this Good News!"

Reflection: The Good News!

Mark 1:9-15

After Jesus' baptism the writer of Mark's gospel tells us that "immediately the Spirit drove Jesus out into the wilderness." It appears that his ministry, even though his call was felt very strongly, was not to begin immediately. It appears that he had to think about it in a deep way first. So he went to the desert, the wilderness, to be alone and sort himself out. He was tempted there. He was with the wild beasts there and he was tended to by the angels there.

Like Jesus, to truly be and become all that we are meant to be, to live an authentic life in other words, we, too, need to do the hard work of self-reflection and internal examination. We, too, need to face our fears and conquer our demons. It takes great honesty on our part. It is also an ongoing process as we constantly face and overcome the temptations that bombard us from every direction every day. It can truly feel like a wilderness experience.

And we have all faced those wilderness times. Times when we felt lost or alone or confused. Times when we didn't know who to listen to or where to turn for help. Times when we wondered if we would make it through. It may have been a time of loss or illness or a major life transition or an event that simply overwhelmed us. We are all facing one right now with this Covid-19 pandemic as the protocols and restrictions affect every aspect of our lives.

These are all times that test us. Times when we have to face our demons and our fears and make deep decisions about how we are going to be from now on. And no matter how you manage to work your way through and no matter whether you end up strengthened and better off for it or damaged and bitter - one thing is for sure - you will never be the same again.

These kinds of times also remind us that we are not islands who can survive alone in the world. We are social beings and we need each other. The motto that has been used profusely during the past year is "we are in this together" and it is true - we *are* in it together. There is not one person on this earth whose life has not been touched in some way by the Covid-19 pandemic. But there is good news - we are not alone. We have each other and we *will* get through this pandemic together. And - we have a loving God who is with us always. As I have said many times, I don't see God as a human-like being who lives out there somewhere pulling strings like a great puppet-master, but rather my God is the Spirit of Love from which we came and to which we will return. My God is Universal Energy. My God is the Life Force that is in, around and part of everything that is. My God lives in me and you and everyone. My God is the Spirit of Life that animates every living thing and from which we *cannot* be separated.

And there is more good news, as if that were not enough - when we open to that Spirit of Love and let its wisdom guide us from the centre of our hearts and lives we *will* find the strength to face the demons of our fears. We *will* find the courage to move forward with confidence, knowing we *will* overcome our problems together. We *will* find the patience to allow all to participate in the new things which are being birthed through these trying times.

Bottom line? We are loved. I want leave you with my favourite quote- words from the ancient mystic Julian of Norwich.

"All shall be well, and all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well."

Good news! Believe it.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Sacrament of Holy Communion

Invitation:

As we come to this table we are reminded that this is not the table of Melville United Church; nor is it the table of the United Church of Canada or any particular denomination. It is the table of Jesus the Christ, the family feast of the whole people of God. All who seek to be nourished and sustained in the journey of faith and long to live justly and in peace with their neighbour, are welcome here.

God be with you

As God is also with me.

Lift up your hearts.

As we lift our hearts together.

Let us give thanks to God.

For it is good to give God thanks and praise.

Prayer of Thanksgiving

Gathered in this place of rainbows,
reflected in the light of heaven is the bread and wine of promise;
the body and blood of covenant;
the symbol and action of love.

Promise-maker:

they are waiting here to be broken and shared for this world,
itself broken in warring, in prejudice, in hatred, in loneliness,
in arrogance, in power.

We speak to these places as we remember that night
when Jesus took bread and broke it,
took wine and shared it,
took promise and opened it;
and we speak to these places as we journey with all
the angels singing;

Holy, holy holy

God of power and might.

Heaven and earth are full of your glory,

Hosanna in the highest!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of our God.

Hosanna in the highest!

We speak to all these places as we break

and share and offer each other the food of heaven.

And at this time we remember all with whom you would have us share your feast. We pray for all who are in sorrow or in pain, all who are ill or alone; all who live with fear, oppression, or hunger, for all whom the world counts as last and least.

We pray for the church and its varied ministries, for nations as they strive for peace and justice, for all our families and friends.

We pray for our brothers and sisters of Belwood-Metz Pastoral Charge and for all those who work on our behalf in other parts of our country and the world.

And we pray for ourselves as we open our hearts to offer the joys and concerns which we find there. Hear the prayers of our hearts.... (silence)... We pray today for a world suffering from the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. We pray for those who are sick with the virus; for those who have lost loved ones to it; for those who are finding the isolation and restrictions difficult; for those who are working to produce vaccines; for those essential workers who risk their own health every day so we can have what we need; and for government and medical leaders who are trying to so hard to figure out the next best steps for all of us.

God of all and everything, we offer these and all of our prayers in the name of the one who came to be with us, to guide us to right choices and who listens to us now, Jesus the Christ, and we share together the prayer that he taught us, saying...

Lord's Prayer:

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

Words of Institution

We remember that on the night before he died, Jesus gathered with his friends. He took bread and broke it, and after giving thanks he gave it to them saying "Take. Eat. Each time you do this, remember me."

In the same way he took the cup and after giving thanks gave it to them saying "Take. Drink. Each time you do this, remember me."

We pray, O God, that you bless what we do here, and that we and these gifts, touched by your Spirit may be signs of life and love to one another, and to the world. Amen.

The gifts of God for the people of God. Come, for all is now ready.

Sharing the Elements:

Jesus Christ - bread for the journey.
Jesus Christ - the wine of arrival.

Post-Communion Prayer:

Eternal and gracious One, though we live in a world of need,
 here we have tasted your goodness and hungered for a world more just.
Though afflicted by brokenness and division,
 here we have heard your call to be a people of healing community.
Though daily we touch our limits,

here we have received the fullness of your grace.
Send us forth, O God,
in faith, in hope, and in love. Amen.

Offering:

If you would like to do your part by making a monetary donation to Melville United church, there are several ways to do that.

1. Cheque (post-dated cheques are welcome) made payable to: Melville United Church - which can be mailed to the church at P.O. Box 41, Fergus, ON N1M 2W7 or put in the mail slot beside the parking lot door.
2. Donate online through the Canada Helps website
<https://www.canadahelps.org/en/charities/melville-united-church>
3. Call Lynda, to arrange Pre-Authorized Remittance payments (PAR)
4. E-transfer directly from your bank. E-mail to secretary@melvilleunited.com

Offering Prayer:

Creator God, in all that we do, all that we say, and all that we give, may we live out your covenant to care for all creation. Bless what we give and bless us. Amen.

Hymn: O Jesus I Have Promised *(spoken)* **VU 120**

- 1 O Jesus, I have promised to serve you to the end;
remain for ever near me, my Saviour and my friend:
I shall not fear the journey if you are by my side,
nor wander from the pathway if you will be my guide.
- 2 O let me feel you 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, then draw nearer and shield my soul from sin.
- 3 O let me hear you 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;
now speak, and make me listen, O guardian of my soul.
- 4 O Jesus, you have promised to all who follow you,
that where you are in glory your servant shall be too.
And Jesus, I have promised to serve you to the end;
O give me grace to follow, my Saviour and my friend.

Blessing/Sending Forth: (adapted from Meister Eckhart)

Love God in all things equally,
for God is equally near to all creatures.
And among these God does not love any one
more than any other.
Apprehend God in all things, for God is in all things.
If we spent enough time
with the tiniest creature - even a caterpillar -
we would never need sermons.

So full of God is every creature.
Go and spend time in God's Creation
and in the amazing presence of God in all things.
Go - knowing you never go alone,

For God is with you - always. Amen.

Postlude:

Prayer of the Week:

God, who has created all things, draw us into a closer relationship with you. When life's waters threaten to overwhelm us, help us to trust that you are with us at all times. Re-orient us away from poor choices and help us to choose life with you. Amen.