

Sunday Worship
A Service for Your Use at Home
St Paul United Church of Christ
5312 Old Blue Rock Road
Cincinnati, Ohio 45247
Allen M Fluent, Pastor

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Because of the pandemic caused by the corona virus, our congregation, along with many others, has decided that we must forego gathered worship services at this time. Each Sunday until we gather again, we will provide worship materials that members and friends can use in our homes in the knowledge that we are not alone, but are celebrating these holy days with our friends and neighbors in the faith. As you use this worship service, I hope you will pause and remember the tune to a familiar hymn as you read the words, and pray as partners in the fellowship of Christ.

If you have access to a computer or cell phone, you may want to open the video recording of the Scripture and Sermon provided by the pastor on both our church website and the message sent to all who are on our email list.

Today is the Seventh Sunday of Pentecost Season.

As we begin our worship today, let's listen in our minds' ears to a familiar hymn written in the 18th Century by Robert Robinson, usually sung to the tune Nettleton, composed by John Wyeth. The hymn makes reference in the second verse to a stone raised by the Biblical patriarch Jacob when he woke from sleep. The stone was called Ebenezer, meaning "rock of help."

***Come, thou fount of every blessing, tune my heart to sing thy grace;
Streams of mercy, never ceasing, call for songs of loudest praise.
Teach me some melodious sonnet, sung by flaming tongues above;
Praise his name – I'm fixed upon it – name of God's redeeming love.***

***Here I raise my Ebenezer, hither by thy help I've come;
And I hope, by thy good pleasure, safely to arrive at home.
Jesus sought me when a stranger, wandering from the fold of God;
He, to rescue me from danger, bought me with his precious blood.***

***O to grace how great a debtor daily I'm constrained to be!
Let thy goodness, like a fetter, bind my wandering heart to thee;***

*Prone to wander, Lord I feel it, prone to leave the God I love;
Here's my heart, O, take and seal it, seal it for thy courts above.*

Our Psalm for today is a message about God's closeness to our lives. We read from Psalm 139:

*O Lord, you have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away.
You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways.
Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely.
You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.
Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.
If I say, "Surely darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,"
even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is
as light to you.
For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's
womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that
I know very well.
My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately
wrought in the depths of the earth.
Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that
were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed.
How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!
I try to count them – they are more than the sand; I come to the end – I am still with
you....
Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts.
See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.*

Our lesson from the Hebrew Scriptures for today is from the Book of Genesis, chapter 28, verses 10-19. It is the story about how Jacob, the son of Isaac who had stolen his brother Esau's birthright, found his eyes opened in a dream to see the stairway to God's dwelling place. The story tells us that Jacob erected a standing rock to signify this location. The rock was called "Ebenezer," which means "rock of healing." And he called the place "Bethel," which means "house of God."

Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. He came to a certain place and stayed there for a night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And the Lord stood beside him and said, "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.

Then Jacob woke from his sleep, and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place – and I did not know it!" And he was afraid, and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. He called that place Bethel; but the name of the city was Luz at first.

Consider with me for a moment this wonderful story, about Jacob, a refugee from his own family, having insulted his brother Esau and stolen his birthright, now running for his life to the family's ancestral homeland in Haran. Exhausted at the end of the day, he falls to the ground in horror of what may become of him, lays his head upon a stone and finally falls asleep. What will he dream? As he closes his eyes, the terror of his circumstances fades, and his dream is about the stairway to heaven, the presence of God. He awakens with his mind strangely illumined and transfigured. The sleep has been a transforming gift from God. He went to sleep feeling abandoned and alone, hated by his own brother, fearful of his father, guilty and ashamed of what he had done, but unwilling or unable to change it. The place where he slept had been unwelcoming; a rock had served as the only available pillow for his head. But now...

I have awoken and been struck with truth. Surely God is in this place, and I didn't know it. How awesome is this place. I see it now! It is the house of God

and the gateway to heaven. How did I not see it before? How is it that I have just now woken to this great truth?

Imagine with me that you and I are Jacob. We went to bed last night tired and weary of our world, troubled by the circumstances life has given us, frustrated with our inability to change the things that seem mixed up or wrong – in our personal lives, our families, our disputes with others, our worries over finances or health, our jealousies, our embarrassment over our own sin, our grief, our loneliness, our despair over the political order, and most of all, our disappointments about our own inability to overcome it all. If there is a god, we do not know him; we have not seen him; we dare not trust him; and there is no comfort in our world, because it is a barren place. Now sleep with me, and let us see what we will dream. But first, let us listen to some words from Jesus:

Our Gospel lesson for today includes two parables told by Jesus to his disciples about how the Realm of God will come to inseminate the world with a new kind of truth. We read from Matthew 13, verses 24-35.

These are the words of Jesus:

Jesus put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.” He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.” Jesus told the crowds all these things in parables; without a parable he told them nothing. This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet: “I will open my mouth to speak in parables; I will proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world.”

The Sermon:

(Note: For those who want to see and hear a video of the complete sermon delivered by the Pastor, you may do so by going to the church website or opening the message that you will receive if you have given us your email address.)

Now let us wake from our sleep, and ask what has been hidden from us. How often have we gone to our beds unaware of the world as it is in the sight of God? How often have we found a place to rest, but have been unable to rest, because we felt alone in a rocky wilderness world that we thought we could not change? Have we ever thought that we would arise like now, hearing and knowing that this place we have accepted as mundane and ordinary, barren sometimes, is really the house of God? Have we ever thought that the Realm of God that we have awaited for so long might be here already in our midst, like a mustard seed that will grow from nothing in our garden plot, until the entire garden is overshadowed by its branches, or a bit of yeast that, when we apply it to the dough, transforms the whole loaf and lets it rise? The Realm of God is a community of trust and a fellowship of love that bears fruit in hard and unfriendly soil, to soften the hardness of heart of those who do not believe in the goodness that can be.

Today I will go into the garden of my mind. I will plant just one mustard seed, and I will believe it will make a difference. I will raise a standing stone in the midst of the garden, and I will name it Ebenezer, and I will believe that this world is the house of God, and in the garden of my mind God's help will come, and the wonderful dreams of the Realm of God will act like yeast to enliven the world to respond in faith that its truths will prevail. And God's world will be new again, and my mind will be readied to receive it.

Go now, into the world you know, but do not be fooled by its rules and limitations. Do not be guided by its prejudices and its narrowness of heart. Do not be fearful of its dark places, but shine the light that is within you. Don't even be afraid of your own dark places – the shame over something we did long ago, the anxieties that have limited us. The light and truth of God is a reality already born, like a mustard seed, yet strangely undiscovered by the world of practicality and convenience. We are not politicians; we do not ask if food and shelter and health care are possible for all people, or if a global peace is realistic, or if we should be willing to wait and compromise until the inequities of this present time dissolve incrementally on their own. Faith in the dreams of God is what we start with. We assume that what is good is, by definition,

possible in God's world, and worthy of our effort; so that when Jesus sends us out to proclaim the Gospel and bring healing, we go and do what we can, and maybe extend what we can do to a little more than we used to think.

Our Time of Prayer

We pray, God, for the world of your dreams, and for our own faith and trust in it. We pray that we may overcome the biases that keep us from trusting that world, and cause us to be bound instead to the world conceived by selfish interests and material power. We pray that we may put aside our inclinations toward disbelief, our fears of letting go of timeworn habits and prejudices and defensive practices that keep us from experiencing all that your world affords. We thank you, God, for awaking us to each new day, and for every new opportunity each day provides, to treat all our neighbors with grace and compassion, to earnestly pray for all of them, especially those with whom we have had conflict or disagreement; to examine our own lives critically, and seek greater justice and equity for any in our world who may feel the weight of oppression, exclusion and need.

But let us not get lost in lofty things. Teach us instead to trust that every human encounter, a transaction at the grocery store, a moment of play with our kids or grandkids, a visit or phone call with someone who needs company, or an email or a tweet that calms the spirit of an agitated soul, when invested with grace and kindness, is the way we begin to build a caring world.

Let us pray in the words of our Lord Jesus:

**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.**

**The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Love of God our Heavenly Parent, and
the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.**