

St Paul United Church of Christ
5312 Old Blue Rock Road
Cincinnati, Ohio 45247
Allen M. Fluent, Transitional Pastor
Order of Worship for The Fourth Sunday in Lent
One Great Hour of Sharing
March 14, 2021

(Although we are now holding worship in our building, we are conscious of the ongoing challenge of in-person worship while the coronavirus persists, and the need many feel to avoid the possibility of contagion. Therefore, we will be continuing the practice of sending a worship bulletin to all who are on our mailing lists for email or hard copy. Those who will be worshipping from home and who have computer access will also be receiving a recorded version of the service that will be sent out by email on Sunday afternoon and also can be seen on our Facebook page. We welcome your participation in any way that is convenient for you, and we encourage you to share our worship service with any person you know who may appreciate receiving it.)

Morning Announcements and Prayer Requests

Today is One Great Hour of Sharing Sunday. On this Sunday, congregations of the United Church of Christ have the opportunity to share in an offering for global ministries of our denomination. This special offering provides help for people in crisis in many parts of the world, including fresh water and sanitation projects in Africa and Southeast Asia, agricultural assistance to small farmers in Central America, refugee assistance programs, and help for Californians whose lives have been devastated by massive wildfires. "Let Love Flow" is the theme of this year's offering.

(Portions of our liturgy this morning are from OGHS worship resources written by Kent Gilbert, Lead Pastor, Union Church, Berea, Kentucky)

Prelude (recording begins)

Hymn

"By My Side"

Diana Ridener, Tina Tuck
Paula Weil

Mission Moment

One Great Hour of Sharing

Jo Ann Bertram

The Prophetic Testimony

Isaiah 49:8-13 (Responsive)

Thus says the Lord:

In a time of favor I have answered you, on a day of salvation I have helped you;

I have kept you and given you as a covenant to the people,

to establish the land, to apportion the desolate heritages,

saying to the prisoners, "Come out,"

to those who are in darkness, "Show yourselves."

They shall feed along the ways, on all the bare heights shall be their pasture;

they shall not hunger or thirst,
neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them down,
for the One who has pity on them will lead them,
and by springs of water will guide them.
And I will turn all my mountains into a road,
and my highways shall be raised up.
Lo, these shall come from far away,
and lo, these from the north and from the west,
and these from the land of Syene.
**Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth;
Break forth, O mountains, into singing!
For the Lord has comforted his people, and will have compassion on his suffering
ones.**

Call to Worship (responsive)

We are yearning for the day
The day of God's hope made real!
The day when nobody is hungry, nobody thirsty!
The day of God's love flowing freely!
Shade from Sun and Shelter from Wind,
The Compassionate One guides us to springs of living water in the Word and in
mighty deeds!
Let us worship our God and let love flow!

Hymn

"O Love, How Deep, How Broad"

#244 vs, 1 - 5

Worship and Rejoice Hymnal

***O Love, how deep, how broad, how high, how passing thought and fantasy:
that God, the Son of God, should take our mortal form for mortals' sake.***

***For us baptized, for us he bore his holy fast and hungered sore;
for us temptations sharp he knew, for us the tempter overthrew.***

***For us he prayed, for us he taught, for us his daily works he wrought,
by words and signs and actions, thus still seeking not himself, but us.***

***For us to evil power betrayed, scourged, mocked, in purple robe arrayed,
he bore the shameful cross and death, for us gave up his dying breath.***

***For us he rose from death again; for us he went on high to reign;
for us he sent his Spirit here to guide, to comfort and to cheer.***

Opening Prayer

You who are the Source of Love-made-flesh among us, we flow to you from East and West seeking what is right and holding on to the holy. Settle us body and soul in the land of hope proclaimed by your prophets. Free our hearts and minds to hear anew the call to compassion, the challenge of community, the needs of our neighbors. Call to us in this One Great Hour that we may gather in Spirit and in Truth and be changed. This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Hymn

"O Love, How Deep, How Broad "

#244 vs. 6

***All glory to our Lord and God for love so deep, so high, so broad –
The Trinity whom we adore forever and forever more.***

A Wilderness Story: Numbers 21:4-9

From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. The people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food." Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people so that many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said to Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

Hymn

"God Loved the World"

#208

New Century Hymnal

***God loved the world, and loving gave a wondrous gift, the lost to save,
That all who would in Christ believe should blest eternal life receive.***

***Christ Jesus is the ground of faith, who was made flesh and suffered death;
All who confide in Christ alone are built on this chief cornerstone.***

***If you are sick, if death is near, this truth your troubled heart can cheer;
Christ Jesus saves us all from death; that is the firmest ground of faith.***

Be of good cheer, for God in Christ forgives the flock, by sin enticed,

And justified by Jesus' blood, your baptism grants the highest good.

Gospel Lesson:

John 3:14-21

And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.

For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.

Sermon:

“We detest this miserable food,” said the children of God, aligning themselves with children everywhere who prefer the fare available at McDonald’s or at Chuck E Cheese to anything their parents have carefully prepared. And Moses is at his wit’s end, and every mother and father on earth immediately understands. Only, the rebellion in this story seems even more aggravating, because the food being rejected here is the gift prepared by God – it is the manna provided in the wilderness to keep God’s people from starving to death – and though they sound childish, the rebels aren’t really children; they are adults complaining that God’s efforts at salvation are not good enough for them. Well, enough is enough: when they were slaves to the Egyptians, God led them out of bondage; when they complained that they were hungry, God provided manna and doves for them to eat; when they said they were thirsty, God had Moses strike the rock with his staff, and they had water to drink. Everybody knows that rewards work better than punishments, when you want people to behave themselves, but every parent reaches the point where authority needs to be established. I guess that’s also so for God. So he just sent an army of poisonous snakes out to bite them, and some of them died as a result.

Now don’t take everything you read in the Bible so seriously! You know that this is just a really good story, and, be honest now, weren’t you just about ready to see these ungrateful folks get their comeuppance? I know I was!

But Moses, the ever-loving parent in the story of the Hebrews in the wilderness, as angry as he no doubt was at the people in his charge, loves them anyway, so he begs God to make the serpents go away. The God of the Exodus, however, is not so soft-hearted. This is the God who challenges those who want to follow him. The wilderness, after all, is a test of faithfulness and

right behavior, so God wants the people to straighten up and fly right. The poisonous serpents will remain, and people will still feel the pain of being bitten; but God allows Moses to make a bronze serpent and put it on a pole and raise it up, so that when anyone looks at it, their life will be spared, and at the same time, they will be reminded that their lives are contingent upon the will of God.

I'll pause for a moment to allow you time to think, as I ask you a few questions about this tale: do you prefer the parenting style of Moses or the parenting style of God in this story? Which way do you think will work best to help the children grow up to be happy and responsible adults? Or do you think maybe both have an important role? Maybe we all should have the experience of being bitten by the world when we're acting badly, in order to develop the empathy for one another that responsible people need, and maybe we also need someone on our side to pray for us when we're at our worst, and keep us from the full punishment we deserve.

Whatever your conclusions, it's a good story, isn't it? It's the kind of story that starts your imagination moving, so that you begin to apply it to things happening in your life right now. That's how John the Evangelist seems to have thought about it, when he was looking for an image to explain God's careful love for us. "And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness," he wrote, "so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

It has always been a conviction among Christians that the consequences caused by the wrongs we do to others cannot be simply brushed aside in a kind of forgiving forgetfulness. The only way to salvation is by a change in the human heart. John's Gospel calls it being "born anew," and it entails looking at the suffering caused by our failures to love, as the Hebrews looked up at Moses' bronze serpent, and as Christians look up at Jesus on the cross. The cross has not done the work it needs to do for us until, looking at it, we are reminded of the suffering our actions or inactions can cause and we re-commit ourselves to the way of Christ in compassion for the world.

Musical Interlude

Jake Rizer

Pastoral Prayer

When we have crouched in fear, most holy, loving One, your presence has given us strength. When we have been alone and unsure, you have sent companions and messengers across deserts, across seas, across time itself to remind us that no one is forgotten. When we have hung our heads in despair, you have raised up children, generation after generation, who have proven that with you, all things are possible. We thank you for your unrelenting pursuit of our well-being; for the drops of mercy within us that make great rivers of compassion when we join them together. You immerse us

in healing waters, and we are glad. Guide us to take part in shaping a world where all people know such joy. Let hunger end by the open hands of generous hearts. Let none be thirsty, as your love freely flows! Let health be restored to the sick of body, mind or spirit, and in Jesus' name, let us help. We who have known mercy are a people of mercy, strengthened through you and through your Son, Jesus. With a renewed and holy Spirit, we are joyful; we pledge justice; and we will make peace on all of your mountains and plains. May such love flow through all your people, now and always. Amen.

As Jesus has taught us, so we pray:

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 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.

Closing Hymn

"For the Healing of the Nations"

#621

Worship and Rejoice Hymnal

***For the healing of the nations, Lord, we pray with one accord,
for a just and equal sharing of the things that earth affords.
To a life of love in action help us rise and pledge our word.***

***Lead your people into freedom, from despair your world release,
that, redeemed from war and hatred, all may come and go In peace.
Show us how, through care and goodness, fear will die and hope increase.***

***All that kills abundant living, let it from the earth be banned:
pride of status, race or schooling, dogmas that obscure your plan.
In our common quest for justice, may we hallow life's brief span.***

***You, Creator God, have written your great name on humankind;
For our growing in your likeness, bring the life of Christ to mind;
That by our response and service earth its destiny may find.***

Benediction

Now may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.

Postlude