

East Durham Methodist Circuit:

27 February 2022

Prepared by Rev Dawn Brown

**Theme: Living in the promised Land
Preparing for Ash Wednesday and our Lent Journey
Eternity Now**

Prayer of Invocation:

O God, who led the people of Israel through the wilderness and sustained Jesus through his time of testing in the desert,

Come to us again in our Lenten journey, lead us through this time of reflection and repentance and establish your Reign in our lives again.

In Jesus 'Name

Amen.

Hymn: The Steadfast Love of the Lord StF 66

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases
His mercies never have come to an end
They are new every morning
New every morning
Great is Thy faithfulness, O Lord
Great is Thy faithfulness

Prayer of Adoration:

Psalm 63:1-8: O God, You are my God; I earnestly search for You. My soul thirsts for You; my whole body longs for You in this parched and weary land where there is no water.

**I have seen You in Your sanctuary and gazed upon Your power and glory.
Your unfailing love is better than life itself; how I praise You!**

I will praise You as long as I live, lifting up my hands to You in prayer.
You satisfy me more than the richest feast. I will praise You with songs of joy.
I lie awake thinking of You, meditating on You through the night.

**Because You are my helper, I sing for joy in the shadow of
Your wings. I cling to You; Your strong right hand holds
me securely.**

God of Challenging Grace and Transforming Love,

We praise you for seasons of reflection when we can take stock of our lives, and re-order our priorities;

We praise you for the practices of prayer, fasting and giving, that re-align our hearts with your values, and reconnect our ways with your purposes;

We praise you for your presence, and for your guiding Spirit, that daily calls us to follow Jesus, and that enables us to know eternity now.

We praise you, Triune God, for not allowing us to settle for a life that is less than the Promised Land you offer and for empowering us to live as true citizens of your Reign. Amen.

Hymn: O for a heart to praise my God

StF 507

1. O for a heart to praise my God,
a heart from sin set free,
a heart that always feels thy blood
so freely shed for me.

4. A heart in every thought renewed
and full of love divine,
perfect and right and pure and good,
a copy, Lord, of thine.

2. A heart resigned, submissive, meek,
my great Redeemer's throne,
where only Christ is heard to speak,
where Jesus reigns alone.

5. My heart, thou know'st, can never
rest
till thou create my peace;
till of mine Eden repossessed,
from self, and sin, I cease.

3. A humble, lowly, contrite, heart,
believing, true and clean,
which neither life nor death can part
from him that dwells within.

6. Thy nature, gracious Lord, impart;
come quickly from above;
write thy new name upon my heart,
thy new, best name of Love

Prayer of Confession:

Let us confess our sins together: A responsive paraphrase of Psalm 51:1-17

Because your love never fails, and your compassion is immense, O God, have mercy on me and remove every sin-stain from me. Wash away my guilt and make me clean, even though I have often rebelled against you - a truth which continues to haunt me.

You are the one I've hurt, it's your eyes that see the evil in me; when you call me out, you're right on target and you are absolutely correct in your assessment of me. I have always been prone to destructiveness, but you ask me for honesty, and you teach me tough wisdom. If you make me clean, then no smudge or stain will remain; I'll be as pure as the freshest snow.

I long for you to restore me to joy; after this much needed time of humbling and brokenness please free me to celebrate again. Take me past the wrong I have done and remove any record of my sin. Make my heart new and my spirit faithful, keep me close to you, and keep your Spirit still moving in and through me. Help me to follow you closely again and keep me joyfully mindful of how you have saved me. Then, I will help others to find you again and I will teach them what you have taught me;

When you forgive me, I will sing it out with such celebration and praise, It's not sacrifices and burnt offerings that you're asking for, God; all you want is my heart - humbled, broken and open to change.

And so we continue to pray the prayer you taught us:

**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,
For ever and ever. Amen**

Reading:

Joel 2 : 1-2, 12: 1-17

New International Version

¹Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy hill.
Let all who live in the land tremble, for the day of the LORD is coming.
It is close at hand - ²a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness.
Like dawn spreading across the mountains a large and mighty army comes,
such as never was in ancient times nor ever will be in ages to come

¹²“Even now,” declares the LORD, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.” ¹³Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity.

¹⁴Who knows? He may turn and relent and leave behind a blessing - grain offerings and drink offerings for the LORD your God. ¹⁵Blow the trumpet in Zion, declare a holy fast, call a sacred assembly. ¹⁶Gather the people, consecrate the assembly; bring together the elders, gather the children, those nursing at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his room and the bride her chamber. ¹⁷Let the priests, who minister before the LORD, weep between the portico and the altar. Let them say, “Spare your people, LORD. Do not make your inheritance an object of scorn, a byword among the nations. Why should they say among the peoples, ‘Where is their God?’”

Hymn:

Glorious things of thee are spoken

StF 748

1. Glorious things of you are spoken,
Zion, city of our God;
he whose word cannot be broken
formed you for his own abode:
on the rock of ages founded,
what can shake your sure repose?
with salvation's walls surrounded
you may smile at all your foes.

2. See, the streams of living waters
springing from eternal love!
well supply your sons and daughters
and all fear of want remove:
who can faint while such a river
ever flows their thirst to assuage?
grace, which like the Lord the giver
never fails from age to age.

3. Round each habitation hovering
see the cloud and fire appear
for a glory and a covering,
showing that the Lord is near:
thus they march, the pillar leading,
light by night and shade by day;
daily on the manna feeding
which he gives them when they pray

4. Saviour, since of Zion's city
I through grace a member am,
let the world deride or pity,
I will glory in your name:
fading are the world's best pleasures,
all its boasted pomp and show;
solid joys and lasting treasures
none but Zion's children know.

“Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. ² “So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. ³ But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. ⁵ “And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. ⁶ But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

¹⁶ “When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. ¹⁷ But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. ¹⁹ “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. ²⁰ But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Message:

From the Lent devotional book: Living in the promised Land

with permission from Rev John van de Laar

Eternity Now

In Stephen Covey’s book, *Everyday Greatness*, the story is told of Angela Brown who dreamt of being an opera soprano. At her father’s instruction she trained as a secretary (in order to have something to fall back on), but then went on to study voice at Oakwood College in Huntsville, Indiana. It was here that her dream of singing opera was birthed, and it led her on to Indiana University after graduation, to study with the famous soprano Virginia Zeani.

Through her years of study she worked hard, competing three times in the Metropolitan Opera National Council auditions, but each time failing to make the final round. At thirty-three she had one last chance to compete before passing the age limit, and she took it, winning the competition. But, in spite of this victory, it took her three more years before she became an understudy. Finally, at age forty, she had her chance to sing the lead in *Aida* when the principal singer fell ill. She triumphed and, from that moment, her career has gone from strength to strength.

Angela Brown took decades to reach what she felt was both a dream and a calling. But it also took commitment, perseverance and the refusal to settle for a quicker and easier alternative. Once, when she was wrestling with whether she would ever reach her goals, her teacher, Virginia Zeani said to her, “If you want to be the next Aretha Franklin, go, you need no more lessons. But if you want to be the best Verdian soprano this world has ever seen, you must work.”

Settling For Less

I have become convinced that one of the greatest challenges of our time is that we have learned to settle for too little. We have lost the art of delaying gratification, and so we have learned to accept the failure of our grand dreams and callings, and settled for a life that is less, but that we can enjoy sooner and more easily. Our world has fallen prey to a disease of the now. We cannot expect our corporate or political leaders to make decisions which will be tough in the short term, but bring long term benefit, when they are measured after three months or one hundred days. We cannot expect to attain the very reachable goal of an end to extreme poverty when the wealthy cannot delay fulfilling their desires long enough to change the system that created it. We cannot hope to create the time and space for our planet to heal when our immediate needs take precedence over the rain forests and the changing climate.

Our instant world has left us with a deep insecurity that if we slow down, if we delay gratification, we will miss out and somehow fall out of step with our peers. Our loss of the perspective of eternity has left us with a deep cynicism of eternal values and practices, and so we have become addicted to quick fixes, even when experience shows us over and over that they don't work for any substantial length of time. Yet, in the depths of our souls, we live with a growing uneasiness, an unspoken suspicion, an unacknowledged dream that our lives and our world—that we—can be more than what we experience. We long for wholeness, for fullness, for real, vibrant, meaningful life. In truth, we long to touch eternity.

In spite of the rapid rate of change, and the ease of accumulation that has grown out of the industrial, technological, and information revolutions, this quest for the immediate is not a new disease. In the prophecy of Joel that is set for Ash Wednesday every year in the Revised Common Lectionary, it appears that the judgment the prophet utters in the first section of the book has to do with just such a condition among the people of Israel. There is little that is known about Joel - we have no information beyond that which is provided in the book that bears his name. All we know is that Joel proclaimed a coming judgment on God's people for becoming so engrossed in their lives that they had fallen away from God.

The people who are addressed in Chapter One give a glimpse of what may have been the reason for the judgment. Drunkards and wine-drinkers, farmers and vine-growers (who, it seems, may have been seen as 'enablers' of the drunkenness and indulgence), priests and those who serve before the altar (who should have been, but clearly weren't, instructing and challenging the people to stay faithful to God's ways, and keep their lives aligned with God's Reign) are all instructed to weep and wail because their fields, their grapes and crops, anything that might make an offering, will be consumed by locusts. While the cause of the judgment remains in the realm of speculation, it seems that the people had grown comfortable and complacent and had lost the divine perspective and their commitment to higher values. And so, the very wealth that was putting them to sleep, is to be taken away. The 'now' had crowded out the eternal, and the result was that they would end up grieving the shallow and temporary values that they had lost.

But then, in the reading assigned for this day, the prophecy turns to invitation and restoration. Joel's proclamation of judgment now gives way to words of mercy. The people are called to return to God. Unlike other prophets, Joel's call is very simple. There is no talk of required justice. All that the people need to do is return to worship - to lives that are oriented around God, and that embrace something more than the immediate world. They are to embrace again the gathering of the people in God's

presence, and the practices that ensure that their lives remain focussed on and directed by God. The problem with the people of Joel's day was not that they wanted too much. It was that they settled for too little. God was calling them to long, once again, for eternity.

In the sermon on the Mount, Jesus addresses a similar issue. His basic premise is that the Reign of God is something completely different from the systems of the world, be they political, economic or religious. He challenges the hypocrites (hupokrites - literally, play-actors) who have become addicted to the immediate reward of applause and admiration, and have rejected the hidden, eternal values of true prayer, true fasting, and true, selfless giving. Again, the problem that Jesus confronts is not that they are seeking after too much, but that they have settled for too little. They have allowed themselves to be satisfied with what is not truly satisfying, they have built their lives around what cannot last, what can be stolen, moth-eaten, or rusted away. But, for those who respond to the call of the Gospel, Jesus offers a slower, quieter life, with little, if any, immediate gratification, but with the guarantee of eternal reward.

Part of the reason we have always struggled to follow through on our spirituality is that we have framed faith in deeply flawed and unhelpful ways. When we have considered eternity, we have made it into a future, everlasting (but often rather unattractive) bliss. Our current world, then, has been relegated to a classroom in which we have nothing to do but learn how to enter this eternal 'Promised Land'. This world, and our lives in it, end up with little or no value, but eternity, which is supposed to be what really counts, remains an elusive dream, unavailable until death. And so we end up in a double life. We cannot enjoy eternity now, and whatever we may enjoy now, we will lose in eternity. So, spirituality becomes about drawing lines around what little enjoyment can be legitimately experienced in this world, while ensuring that we have an insurance policy on hand for the next.

When this version of spirituality fails to satisfy us, we have a different, but equally inadequate alternative. Eternity can be forgotten - if it exists at all. It has no bearing on our lives now, so there is no need to worry about it. Rather, we need to connect with 'our higher power' in order to 'attract' whatever wealth, happiness, and security we desire. This is a religion tailor-made to a consumer culture in which our only problem is failing to learn how to work the system, and in which spiritual practice is required only as a key to unlock our desires now. In its goals and principles, this kind of faith, is hardly different from the kind of materialism and nihilism that characterises basic materialism.

In different forms, the people of Jesus' day embraced very similar alternatives to what he was offering. One thing is certain, though, no one was teaching the Way that Jesus lived and proclaimed. The Reign of God, in Jesus' message, is no unattainable future dream. Nor is it a quick way to get to the top of the systems of wealth and power. Rather, it is an invitation to change, to embrace now the values and purposes of God, and to live in this world, the life that we hope for in the next. The invitation of Jesus, and of the Lenten journey - accepted through the counterintuitive practices of humble prayer, generous, unreciprocated giving, and disciplined, gratification-delaying fasting - is to experience eternity now. The Promised Land is neither some future dream, nor some immediate indulgence. It is the daily reality of deep, life-giving connection with God, others, and the world - and God is covenanted to welcome into this Promised Land anyone who will take Jesus at his word, and embrace the purpose and values and practices of the Reign of God - the practices to which Joel called the people back, and which Jesus taught as the way to divine reward.

The Tough Choice To Turn

Before we can experience the presence of eternity or, to use Jesus' words, enter the Kingdom of God, there is one primary act that must be performed. This is not about being 'saved' by a work. This is about, once we have recognised our salvation in Christ, learning to live its reality in our daily routines. This one act is known as repentance and it is the focal point of the Lent journey.

Essentially, repentance is not about judgment so much as it is about invitation, two invitations to be precise. The first is to turn - or rather, re-turn to God. It is not that God wants to punish us for our sins, which is, unfortunately, the way repentance has come to be viewed. Rather, it is that God wants to free us from what imprisons us and keeps us from life. Repentance is about finally acknowledging that God's way really is the best way to live, then learning to invest our energies and resources in this new way. This does not mean that there are no tears of grief or 'sackcloth and ashes' moments of regret. There must be these moments, painful as they are, because they are the times of true insight when we recognise how inadequate our attempts to find life on our own have been. To change from a life oriented around ourselves and our desires to a life connected to an eternal perspective is hard. But the main gift that awaits those who embrace the healing pain is joy - quiet, vibrant, unspeakable, gentle, strong, overpowering, soothing joy.

The second invitation of repentance is to live eternity now. By accepting the call to change, we open ourselves to a miraculous experience - our hearts begin to shift their allegiance from the temporary, the material, and the immediate to the eternal. In other words, our hearts find their true home in eternity, and then eternity, with its values, purposes, and ways of being, finds its home in our hearts. The practices that Jesus teaches in the Gospel reading from the Sermon on the Mount (which is Matthew's summary of the basic message of Jesus) are what enable this transformation to happen. Since we become what we habitually do, embracing these practices as the habits of our lives changes us into people of eternity.

The practice of giving, not just of money, but of our time and our abilities as well, empowers us to resist the temptation of wealth, consumerism, and accumulation. It reveals the temporary, immediate nature of these things, and teaches us to use what we have in ways that contribute to the eternal work of God's Reign, rather than just our own immediate gratification.

The practice of fasting empowers us to resist our addiction to our appetites, revealing the truth that health is found in disciplining our desires, not indiscriminately satisfying them.

The practice of prayer empowers us to resist our need to control our world and have power over others. It is impossible to pray if we believe we are the ultimate authority in our lives. Prayer brings us into submission to God, reminds us that our lives are in the Divine hands, not our own, and enables us to release our need for control.

As we embrace these practices in quiet, hidden ways, we allow the generosity and compassion, the simplicity and discipline, the trust and obedience of God's Reign to take hold of us, and we discover that life takes on a new meaning, a greater depth, and a sense of eternity that keeps us joyful, secure, satisfied and fulfilled, because we are not at the mercy of temporary, immediate and fickle forces.

Practices like these are not easy to embrace, especially at the beginning. Like a musician who balks at playing endless, repetitive scales, we often feel like these

practices make no difference and have no real relation to the business of living. But then, one day, the muscle memory and flexibility, the fitness and accuracy that have been developed through the scales kick in, and we discover a freedom to make the most beautiful, expressive music.

In the same way, these simple, but difficult practices, habitually repeated, develop our fitness, our vision, our attitudes and our ways of being in such a way that, when their benefits finally kick in, we discover that life becomes an experience of awe and glory, of beauty and wholeness, and we know, to the very depths of our beings, that we have begun to know eternity now. It's a simple, daily choice about where we want our priorities to be placed, and what values, purposes, and attitudes we want to form the basis of our lives.

True life, eternal life, is found when we embrace the qualities and practices and values that are eternal. When we have chosen to make, the acceptance of God's covenant to restore and heal us, and the quest to enter the Promised Land of God's Reign. Then, as we live out the commitment we make today, through the practices of giving, fasting, and prayer that Jesus taught, we will find, a little more each day, that we are released from the dream of the immediate and transferred into the reality of eternity now.

Hymn: **Beneath The Cross **H&P 165****

1. Beneath the cross of Jesus I fain would take my stand,
The shadow of a mighty rock within a weary land;
A home within the wilderness, a rest upon the way,
From the burning of the noontide heat, and the burden of the day.

2. O safe and happy shelter, O refuge tried and sweet,
O trysting-place where heaven's love and heaven's justice meet!
As to the holy patriarch that wondrous dream was given,
So seems my Saviour's cross for me a ladder up to heaven.

3. I take, O cross, thy shadow for my abiding place;
I ask no other sunshine than the sunshine of His face;
Content to let the world go by to know no gain or loss,
My sinful self my only shame, my glory all the cross.

Prayers of Intercession:

God of Now and Always, in a world where news travels by the second, and progress is measured in days or weeks, teach us to expand our vision into eternity; In a world where we try to find satisfaction in the immediate and the material, teach us to strive for what has infinite value.

In a world where we get distracted so easily by our own particular concerns, teach us to open our hearts to the cosmos.

Fill us and our world with the patience, simplicity and generosity that brings peace where violence reigns, that brings sharing and justice where greed dominates, that brings hope where suffering and despair are rife and that gives a glimpse of eternity now to all who of us who need it.

Amen

