



***“I know the plans I have for
you...plans to give you
hope and a future”***

CALL TO WORSHIP

When we are lonely and feeling lost . . .

Jesus calls us and brings us hope and peace.

When we are angry and frustrated . . .

Jesus heals our wounds and soothes our tempers.

When we are sorrowful and broken . . .

Jesus binds up our wounds with his healing love.

Come, let us worship the one who cares so abundantly for us.

OPENING PRAYER

For the healing love you have offered to us; for the patience you have with us; for your presence that will never fail, we give you thanks, O Lord. Bring our hearts and spirits to you that we may grow in our faith and service to you by serving others. We ask this in Jesus' Name. Amen.

HYMN #385 Come, Worship God

1. Come, worship God, who is worthy of honor; enter God's presence with thanks and a song!

You are the rock of your people's salvation to whom our jubilant praises belong.

3. We are your people, the sheep of your pasture; you are our Maker, and to you we pray.

Gladly we kneel in obedience before you; great is the one whom we worship this day!

4. Now let us listen, for you speak among us; open our hearts to receive what you say.

Peace be to all who remember your goodness, trust in your word, and rejoice in your way!

CALL TO CONFESSION

Despite our foolish and angry words, God continues to speak of mercy to us. Despite our best efforts to be faithless in our living, God remains faithful in keeping the promise to forgive us and restore us to wholeness. Let us confess our sins to God, that God's hope and grace might endure in our brokenness.

PRAYER OF BROKENNESS AND CONFESSION

Patient Lord, you know how easy it is for us to whine and complain bitterly about all those things in our lives that are difficult. We focus on them as though they were the only things that ever happened to us, forgetting the many blessings that you have given to us and the opportunities you give us to serve you. We feel alienated--you call us beloved. We feel lost--you seek us. We feel broken and battered--your love is a healing balm.

Forgive us when we forget those things. Help us to always look to you for our healing and to return thanks to you by praise and serving others in your name. For we offer this prayer of confession of our failures and gratitude for your blessings. Amen.

WORDS OF BLESSING AND ASSURANCE

*Turn again to the Lord, for you are beloved of God and have been given many blessings. Rejoice in God's love for you. Believe this truth and say it aloud: **Jesus died for me. Jesus forgives me. Jesus loves me. Jesus is good to me. Amen.***

GLORIA PATRI

FIRST SCRIPTURE LESSON Matthew 6:25-33

²⁵“Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? ²⁶Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ²⁷And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? ²⁸And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, ²⁹yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. ³⁰But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? ³¹Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ ³²For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. ³³But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

TIME WITH THE CHILDREN

HYMN #687 Our God, Our Help in Ages Past

1. Our God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come,
our shelter from the stormy blast, and our eternal home.
2. Beneath the shadow of thy throne thy saints have dwelt secure;
sufficient is thine arm alone, and our defense is sure.
6. Our God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come,
be thou our guard while life shall last, and our eternal home.

SECOND SCRIPTURE LESSON Jeremiah 29:4-11

⁴Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. ⁶Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. ⁷But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. ⁸For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let the prophets and the diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, ⁹for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, says the Lord.

¹⁰For thus says the Lord: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. ¹¹For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.

SERMON Faith in Our Future

Calvin, of the cartoon *Calvin and Hobbes* said, "Sometimes I think the surest sign that intelligent life exists elsewhere in the universe is that none of it has tried to contact us." Maybe that's because he observed Woody Allen's sentiment when he said, "Life is divided into the horrible and the miserable." On the very first page of his book *The Road Less Traveled*, psychiatrist Scott Peck tells us something we know is true, but wish were not true, when he says, "Life is difficult." Life is hard, and no matter how much we wish that life was easy, our wishing doesn't change it. Life is hard, and it is full of heartache.

Chippie the parakeet never saw it coming. One second he was peacefully perched in his cage. The next he was sucked in, washed up, and blown over.

The problems began when Chippie's owner decided to clean Chippie's cage with a vacuum cleaner. She removed the attachment from the end of the hose and stuck it in the cage. The phone rang, and she turned to pick it up. She'd barely said "hello" when "ssssopp!" Chippie got sucked in.

The bird owner gasped, put down the phone, turned off the vacuum, and opened the bag. There was Chippie -- still alive, but stunned.

Since the bird was covered with dust and soot, she grabbed him and raced to the bathroom, turned on the faucet, and held Chippie under the running water. Then, realizing that Chippie was soaked and shivering, she did what any compassionate bird owner would do . . . she reached for the hair dryer and blasted the pet with hot air. Poor Chippie never knew what hit him.

A few days after the trauma, the reporter who'd initially written about the event contacted Chippie's owner to see how the bird was recovering. "Well," she replied, "Chippie doesn't sing much anymore -- he just sits and stares."

It's hard not to see why. Sucked in, washed up, and blown over . . . That's enough to steal the song from the stoutest heart.

How's that for a cheerful beginning to a sermon? As much of a downer as it might be, I dare say that many today feel as if they have been sucked in, washed up and blown over. When most people view this life and what we face today, their general synopsis is that life right now stinks. Is it any wonder what with increases in domestic violence, murder, kids driving us crazy, unemployment, divisive politics, hurricanes, wild fires, terrorism and, of course, the coronavirus pandemic? Some may be feeling a whole lot like Job right about now.

Besides the story of Job, there are many stories in the Old Testament about people who have been through the ringer. One concerns the patriarch Jacob who was on the run from his brother Esau after he stole the birthright. Fearing for his life, he laid down and had a dream where God told him that God would protect him. What did he do when he awoke? He realized that Almighty God had spoken to him, Jacob the cheater. This was a holy place so he constructed a

pile of rocks to remember and honor God who, in the dream, promised safety along his journey to take him to a good future.

This is similar to the story of the Israelites who after forty long and difficult years of wandering in the desert with one challenge after another, finally get to what appears to be a dead end at the mighty Jordan River. How would they ever get across that? They had boats and swimming wasn't something desert people have a lot of skill with. But it wasn't the end because God held back the water just as God did at the Sea of Reeds and they crossed in safety to the Promised Land. As a reminder of God's faithfulness leading them through the treacherous wilderness in the past and providing for their future by helping them to cross the mighty river, each leader of the twelve tribes was to take a stone from the riverbed. These were to be piled together in the Jordan to proclaim God's glory in which they put their trust.

Another story of God's protection and deliverance was after a great battle where the Israelites, instead of annihilation, were miraculously delivered victory and thus hope in their future. The prophet and spiritual leader of Israel, Samuel, set up a big stone and named it "Ebenezer" – which, in Hebrew, means 'stone-of-help' – because, "God has been and will be our helper." Again and again stones served as reminders of God's faithfulness, God's power, and God's care for God's people as well as serve to offer confidence on what might appear to be an ominous future. Remember that Jesus is called the corner stone of the church – the ultimate stone of help. Stones served as reminders and we how need reminders.

Remembering past faithfulness helps us to trust in God's continuing help taking us into the future/land that God has promised and made for us. A future of good things.

Perhaps Israel needed some stone piles, or cairns as they are called, to remind them of God's help in ages past when they found themselves taken as exiles into the foreign land of Babylon after their definitive defeat in 587 BC. This is the point of history we find ourselves in today's second lesson. The prophet Jeremiah wrote a letter to homesick exiles in order to bring comfort and much needed advice to those who found themselves under imperial rule a long way from home and all things familiar.

This letter reflects a traumatized community who lost everything: their loved ones, their homes, their beloved city Jerusalem, their language and culture in addition to the familiar expressions of their religion connected to the temple that had been destroyed. The underlying question addressed by Jeremiah's letter is one that may also live in many other uprooted individuals and communities, who face the rocky road of uncertainties and consequences of unintended change. It is a message for those facing loss of employment when a company downsizes. It is a message for those who become new parents and the familiarity and freedom and private personal time is eroded by the demands of parenthood. It is a message for those who were able to scrape by on personality and natural intelligence but are now forced to study and prepare in a demanding classroom. It is a message for those who have received an unfavorable diagnosis and now face unpleasant treatments at best and the loss of ability or even life. It is a message for those who lost their homes in a fire or flood. It is a message for those who find themselves

isolated and restricted because a virus is ravaging lives near and far. The question this message addresses is how does one go on after such a devastating disaster that seems to have robbed all the basics and comforts of life?

Jeremiah's words exhibit something of the drive present in many displaced communities, then and since, that refuse to give up. It speaks of the desire to pick up the pieces of their lives and to start living again. The prophet speaking on God's behalf mentions a range of activities that signal a return to some kind of normalcy -- such as building houses, planting vineyards, celebrating weddings -- and serves as a powerful testimony to resilience. These ordinary activities express the basic yearning for being safe and secure in the comfort of your own home, having enough food to eat and wine to gladden your heart. It also reflects a return of joy as evident in the reference to wedding celebrations that express hope for the future through shared food, wine, community, and commitment.

Jeremiah's message was radically practical and innovative as well as faithful. He told the Israelites that rather than resisting, resenting, or rejecting their present circumstances, they should put down roots, and become productive. You know, bloom where you are planted.

It is a message for all who live in what they believe has become an alien culture, made so by technology, immigration, reversal of racial injustice, divisive political campaigns and yes, coronavirus. Seemingly gone are the Norman Rockwell scenes of barber-pole streets, grocery clerks who know us by name, dinner with friends and loved ones around a big table closer than six feet apart or even as basic as seeing the expression on another's face.

Let's imagine for a moment the strength of these words that call the community to settle down and settle in -- for a while. When Israel was conquered and the Temple destroyed it was as if God had abandoned them. So to think about having life again was hard to imagine. Could God possibly be with them and get them through even this?

By Jeremiah's telling them to unpack their suitcase he is also telling them to keep their hope alive. Look, it isn't as bad as you might think or believe. Be thankful that the Babylonians are giving you enough freedom to own property, build your own homes and produce your own food. Compared to the life of your ancestors in Egyptian slavery, this exile is bearable for you—you can handle it with God's help. See the hope for you and your children in these every day, ordinary activities. God is with you and through all of this, if you have the eyes of faith, you will see God at work.

That too is a message of hope for us. Look, maybe things aren't as bad as we believe. We still have Zoom that allows us to worship together, be with friends and family. Many of us are able to work from home. Many children are able to go back to in-person learning and those who can't have the promise that it will begin eventually. Scientists are working on cures. And as far as politics are concerned, the ads end on November 4. Although injustice continues, people are talking and listening about how to make it better.

Do we have the eyes of faith to see God at work in and through us as we go about doing every day, ordinary activities of life – even in this current new way of doing things? Can we see where we can raise our Ebenezer, our “stone of help” a sign that acknowledges and reminds us that God’s help was here or there?

It has been 33 weeks since we last set foot in our sanctuary. For the past 33 weeks, we have been on a journey through this pandemic. Have you seen rocks along the way as God leads us into the future? God has promised not to abandon us.

This is the basis of our stewardship, the caring for and sharing of God’s good gifts that provide for all our needs. If we don’t have faith in the future, the good future God has planned for us, well, then why bother? We may as well just eat, drink and be merry right now because the future, well, there just isn’t anything to hope for.

Our faith tells us something very different. Our faith tells us that God has been our rock and refuge in the past, carrying us through the storms including the coronavirus and God is our hope for years to come.

Isaac Watts wrote the hymn “Our God, Our Help in Ages Past” in 1719. He was a person who knew suffering and times of trial. His own father was a deacon in a dissenting Congregational church and was imprisoned twice by Queen Anne for his beliefs. It was while he was in prison that Isaac was born. His mother took him regularly to visit his father. Throughout his life he suffered in poor health including having a complete breakdown. And yet he was able to write this strong hymn demonstrating his amazing faith in the God of the past, present and future.

Like Isaac Watts, we have our own trials to endure, but we also have a faithful God who will take us into our own future, a future that will prosper us and not harm. So, don’t give up, there is hope for us in the future if we but trust in God. Look, can you see the places of God’s help? As God’s stewards, we are called to use our time, talent and treasure to partner with God as God’s hands and feet in this trying life and build our Ebezers and help usher in the Kingdom. So I challenge you, to look for the places where we can build them this week. But there’s one more thing about them. Building random rock cairns is illegal along trails unless you have the authority to do so. Many think they are cool and so try to erect them themselves but random cairns can throw people off the path, so beware. Make sure the cairn that you build doesn’t send others down the wrong trail, a trail not where God has been at work, but rather the opposite. So look for places where God is actually at work and we are going to share those in the weeks to come.

This Ebenezer was built from yesterday’s event of the Halloween Trunk-or-Treat that several participated in. There was lots of laughter, smiles and pure joy as we ooo’ed and ahh’ed over children in their costumes, cleaver displays and the safety precautions we observed. Even in the season of a pandemic, there was holy joy. Looking at the faces of our children and adults, I knew that God helped us there in that moment in time and that God was leading us into a future of hope. So you look. Where can we build our Ebezers? I’ll be calling on you to share.

RECOGNITION OF THE OFFERING

DOXOLOGY

Praise God from whom all blessings flow; Praise him all creatures here below; Praise him above ye heavenly hosts; Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen

PRAYER OF DEDICATION

In a world of goodness and struggle, we are grateful for your blessings, O God. As we seek to endure life's struggles, as we seek to claim your life in those hard parts of our lives—the very places you teach us to look for your freeing presence—teach us to trust that you are always there. May these gifts be sent into our community and into the world around us, that others may claim the hope of your presence. Amen.

JOYS AND CONCERNS

CELEBRATION OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

INVITATION TO THE TABLE

HYMN #509 All Who Hunger, Gather Gladly

1. All who hunger, gather gladly; holy manna is our bread. Come from wilderness and wandering. Here in truth, we will be fed. You that yearn for days of fullness, all around us is our food. Taste and see the grace eternal. Taste and see that God is good.

3. All who hunger, sing together; Jesus Christ is living bread. Come from loneliness and longing. Here in peace, we have been led. Blest are those who from this table live their days in gratitude. Taste and see the grace eternal. Taste and see that God is good.

GREAT PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING

The Lord be with you

And also with you.

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them up to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is right to give our thanks and praise...

SHARING THE ELEMENTS (We will both eat the bread and drink from the cup together to demonstrate our unity in Christ.)

PRAYER AFTER COMMUNION

We thank you, eternal God, that you have fed us in this sacrament, uniting us with Christ and with all the faithful who have come before us who have served you with courage and with joy. Renewed for our daily living in this world, may we remember that we belong to you and that you lead us into newness of life. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

HYMN #475 Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing

1. 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 the mount! I'm fixed upon it, mount of God's unchanging love!

2. Here I raise my Ebenezer; hither by thy help I'm 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, interposed his precious blood.

3. O to grace how great a debtor daily I'm constrained to be!
Let that grace now, 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 hear; O take and seal it; seal it for thy courts above.

BENEDICTION

Now go from this time of worship with confidence that the God of Creation is with you. Go boldly into the world, offering peace, hope and healing love, in the name of Jesus Christ. And may the God of love, hope and peace be with you always. Amen.