

## **Welcome to Worship**

-Prayer cards & Connect Cards, along with gift bag for guests.

### **\*Hymn**

*O Spirit of the Living God*

UMH 539

### **\*Passing of the Peace**

## **Sharing of Joys and Concerns & Pastoral Prayer**

-Prayer Board:

-Prayer Chain: Nancy's grandson has copper build up in his system; Some of our families volunteers at Lunch is Served, packing 375 sandwiches (a record high!)

*The chapel space is available anytime the building is unlocked if you'd ever like a quiet space to sit, read, pray, or otherwise escape from the busy-ness of your day for a time.*

### **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, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.*

### **\*Hymn**

*O God, Our Help in Ages Past*

UMH 117, vs 1-4

**Scripture**

Psalm 126 (NRSV)

*When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then it was said among the nations, "The Lord has done great things for them." The Lord has done great things for us, and we rejoiced.*

*Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like the watercourses in the Negeb. May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy. Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed of sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.*

This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

## Children's Moment

-Today, I brought some of our old church directories. It's fun to look through the photos, and see all the people who were part of this church, to see the activities and events we put on over the years, and such. Maybe you have a family photo album of your own you have looked at from time to time, or maybe they still do yearbooks at school?

-Sometimes we need to remember the old times, remember those who came before, the experiences we had and enjoyed back in the day. You know, when Jesus was nearing the end of his time on the earth he left us something to remember him by... It isn't a directory or photo album, but it is a great reminder of what Jesus did for us... We call it Communion.

-Before Jesus was crucified, he had a meal with his disciples. He took a piece of bread and told the disciples it was a reminder of his own body, broken for them. Then he took a glass of wine and told them it was a reminder of his blood that he would shed for them. He told them that whenever they ate bread or drank the wine, it was to remind them of Jesus and what he did for them. We use juice now, and don't sit around a single table, but we still use the bread and the cup to remember Jesus, and to remember the love that he has for us. That reminder is something we can hold onto even when things get hard, knowing that God is always with us. Let's pray!

|                                  |                             |                           |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|
| -Dear God                        | Thank you for giving us     | this picture to remind us |
| Of what you did for us           | when you died on the cross. |                           |
| Help us to remember              | and be thankful.            | We love you               |
| And we praise you                | For all that you are        | And all that you do.      |
| It is in your name that we pray. | Amen.                       |                           |

**\*Hymn**

*Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise*

UMH 103

## Sermon

### *Fill Me with Laughter*

Will you please pray with me and for me? O Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each and every one of our hearts be holy and pleasing to you, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Many of us know what it is to look back fondly. Have you ever watched an old home movie, or gone back over old photos and felt overwhelmed by a dreamlike nostalgia? I felt that recently... As many of you probably know, my mom passed away in 2015. Her 67th birthday would have been last Saturday, and one of the ways I honored her memory was to look at some of the old photos of her and our family. There were some from a Thanksgiving way back in 2011 that I was looking at... I'd like to share a few with you here... **Here is one of my self, back when I still had hair on top of my head, along with my mom, my dad, and my brother.** Just seeing this picture brings me back to Grandma's house... I can almost hear the conversations and laughter, the smell of the bread my Grandma was baking... Cousins shouting with joy, running around in good-natured fun. And if your family is anything like mine, **you probably had an uncle who is clowning around in the background...** It was a wonderful time... And probably the last great **family gathering** we had before my mom got sick. In those moments of looking back, I remember the truth of how happy and precious those days were. Other truths are harder to recall... Like the hardships my family was enduring that were unseen, and unknown... Like the cancer that may have already started to take hold of my grandma.

I know that even beyond my family, beyond even *your* families, entire communities and cultures can carry a sense of "collective nostalgia." Church's are not exempt from that, either... On Wednesday I caught some of our volunteers looking over

some of our old church directories from years past... They were reminiscing in their own way, **looking over familiar faces such as these...** And other photos of events or activities put on by the church that brought smiles to our faces, just as it did to those twenty, forty years ago. We often remember easier, better days when God was doing great things. As a relatively younger pastor, I hear a lot about the “good old days” when the church was full, when we were in a golden age of sorts. And yet, remembering such stories can mask an unresolved lament.

Sometimes our nostalgic remembrance of the past occurs when the present is unhappy, or difficult. My love, my lament, my lingering sorrow surrounding my mom is what drove me to look for her picture. I was trying to hold onto something that has been lost, using my memory to try to grip onto something that always seems to slip through the gaps of my fingers. It can leave a somewhat weird combination of mixed emotions.

In this season of Lent, we’ve been exploring some of the Psalms... These are ancient songs, written to express some of the deep, honest emotions that make up the human experience. In that way, they are some of the most human writings we have in our Scriptures. The Psalm of choice today seems to capture some of those mixed emotions I felt this last week. Psalm 126 was likely written sometime after Israel had been exiled by Babylon, and after they were allowed to return home to rebuild their nation. And yet even though they were back home, they were still waiting for that full restoration. This psalm, short as it is, points to a deep reality. It highlights the dual nature of life, with its mixture of laughter and joy, along with the weeping tears and struggles.

This is a psalm of two moods. The first three verses begin with happiness, with the people of Israel looking back at the good old days, when it seemed that their dreams had finally come true. After years of loss and exile, God made a way for them to come back home. God restored them to a land they loved and had lost, to livelihoods and neighborhoods. Restoring their city walls and structures was like restoring their very sense of community. People pulled together. They remembered. They laughed and shouts of joy filled their mouths, filled the air, and floated up like balloons to carry the message far and wide: “The Lord has done great things for us!” Their joy is infectious, to the point where even the surrounding nations who worshiped other gods were drawn into Israel’s rejoicing, and say in response: “The Lord has done great things for them.”

And then there’s a shift... In my Bible, there’s even an empty space between the first 3 verses and the second... Within that space, we step out of a happy past and stand with the psalmist in the present. “Restore our fortunes, O Lord.” This is a hopeful prayer, but hear it carefully. If fortunes need restoring, that means they have fallen. Something has taken away the laughter and shouts of joy. Something has made the present unhappy, precarious, or even unbearable. We do not know what hardship the psalmist is enduring, but we can see the effects of it because the whole mood of the psalm shifts from remembered happiness to expressed sorrow.

And yet the psalm does not become solely a lament. There is certainly reference to sorrow... It mentions those who sow in tears, and those who go out weeping. But it mixes lament with hope for the future. The ones who went out weeping will return with shouts of joy, carrying the harvest of joy that they had gathered from sowing their tears.

The Psalm expresses a sure confidence in God's power and ability to restore them, that God will take their very real anguish and tears and transform them.

The physical image the psalm references is the Negeb, a region to the south of Jerusalem, where creek beds dry up from lack of rain. A period of hardship and grief can feel like a drought in the soul. Life recedes; we become hardened, with cracks appearing in our emotional and physical well-being. The image of sowers weeping as they plant reminds us that in grief, we struggle to go on living, carrying out our tasks and responsibilities. At the end of our own strength, we look to God, as Israel does here. They ask God to relieve the dry, parched places within them, just as God sends rain to the Negeb. They know how suddenly those dry watercourses fill, the waters spilling over the banks into surrounding fields. New life springs up. Israel has planted their tears, and with arms empty, they wait for God to act. The tears become the shower that God uses to restore fertility to the desert and send a harvest. Weeping is not denied, but God redeems it and transforms it into a means of blessing. Even a dry season or a season of weeping can be fruitful for soil *and* soul if lament and hope in God find a balance. The attention we give to seasons of sorrow and grief can become the ground of new life.

We tend to be uncomfortable with the reality of our tears, impatient with the hard work and slow process healing requires, whether it is physical healing, emotional healing, or spiritual healing, but it is worth it to dwell with those images, those feelings long enough to understand them. We say that we believe that God can redeem all manner of pain and disappointment, even tears. That kind of affirmation is easier to say when the tears belong to someone else, or when the "sorrow" come from a relatively minor disappointment. But that trust in God is just as true when the tears are shed over

the death of a friend or loved one. It is true even as the bitter tears are shed by an abused spouse, or as tears are shed by refugees who long for a home they cannot regain. Whatever the source of tears, our confident affirmation that God will eventually redeem our sorrow means that we have to recognize human pain and grief. Denying our pain only gives it more power. As uncomfortable as our tears and hardship may be, we move *through* pain towards redemption, not around it. That is the insistent message of Lent — we encounter the cross on the way to the resurrection.

So are we allowing ourselves to see human suffering and disappointment? Do we acknowledge it's existence, both in ourselves and in others? If not, then we are avoiding the cross. God is calling those who hear this psalm to pray it deeply, even with our own bodies and our own tears, and to walk with those who mourn until they can gather the promised harvest of joy. Here, in this fifth week of Lent, as we continue in this season of repentance and reflection, we are given a word of encouragement. Remembering God's care for us in the past and enduring this present season thoughtfully and prayerfully can prepare us to receive the future God has prepared. We can't just rush from the triumph of Palm Sunday into the triumph of Easter... We cannot ignore the sacred, painful moments of Thursday and Friday that give meaning to the resurrection and the empty tomb.

I don't know what your present reality is... But I know that many of us are struggling with something. It's a part of life, no matter how brave a face we put on each morning. And part of our call as Christians, as members of Christ's Church, means we support one another in our sorrows. Even though reality may be prosperous for some of us, even though some of us are able to laugh freely now, even though some of us feel



pretty good about the way life is going, many others are not in the same place. Some of those who mourn may be sitting among us today. Others, in their grief, may be trying to avoid places like this. This psalm calls us to acknowledge them, and stand with them in the midst of their tears.

So it's fitting that today is also a Communion Sunday... Where we recognize the hardship of what Jesus endured for our sake. It is a time to remember God's presence with us in our sorrow, in our uncertainty, in our tears. We bring them to God, turn them over to his care, and await with open hands for the harvest of laughter and joy that will come and transform us. Let us pray.

### **Holy Communion**

Hymnal pg. 13

Let us pray, and lift up your hearts and give thanks to God.

It is indeed right to give thanks to you, almighty God, for you have turned our grief into songs of joy, and clothed us in salvation and victory.

You planted the earth and all life, and called a people to be your light in the world. When they were taken weeping into exile, you promised through your prophets to bring them home to Zion, singing and laughing.

Salvation has come in your Messiah, Jesus — the one whose coming light has been foretold. Filled with your Spirit, Jesus came proclaiming good news for the poor, healing for the broken hearted, and the day of freedom to all who are bound. He was killed by the proud and powerful, but with your wonderful power you raised him to life. In his presence we are filled with expectant hope and joy, and eagerly embrace your eternal covenant.

On the night in which he gave himself up for us, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and gave thanks to God, saying:

*Barukh 'attah Adonai eloheinu **melekh** ha-olam ha-motsi **lechem** min ha-arets*

Blessed are you, Lord our God, king of the universe, who brings forth bread from the earth. He then broke the bread, gave it to his disciples, and said “take, eat, this is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”

When the supper was over he took the cup, gave thanks to God, saying:

*Barukh attah Adonai eloheinu **melekh** ha-olam, borei peri ha-gafen*

Blessed are you, Lord our God, king of the universe, who creates the fruit of the vine. He then gave the cup to his disciples, and said: “drink from this, all of you; this is my blood of the new covenant, poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Do this as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.”

And so, in remembrance of these your mighty acts in Jesus Christ, we offer ourselves in praise and thanksgiving as a holy and living sacrifice, in union with Christ's offering for us. Pour out your Holy Spirit on us gathered here, on these gifts of bread and fruit of the vine. Make them be for us the body and blood of Christ, that we may be for the world the body of Christ, redeemed by his blood. By your Spirit make us **one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world**, until Christ comes in final victory, and we feast at his heavenly banquet. Through your Son Jesus Christ, with the

Holy Spirit in your Holy Church, all honor and glory is yours, Almighty God, now and for ever. Amen.

**\*Song**

*Take My Life, and Let It Be*

UMH 399

**Announcements and Next Steps**

-Easter egg hunt coming up on Saturday the 19th! We would welcome donations of money or candy for the eggs, but please no chocolate and no nuts if you can avoid them!

-Our new directory photoshoots start on Monday! It's not too late to signup for a photoshoot in the afternoon or evening of April 7th and 8th.

-Holy Week schedule is in your bulletins, starting with Palm Sunday next week! We will also have Maundy Thursday service at 6:30, Good Friday at 6:30, Holy Saturday at 5:30, Easter Sunrise service at 7:00 am, breakfast at 8:00, and our Easter Service at our usual 9:30 time.

**\*Benediction**

*May the God of love bless you and keep you.*

*May Jesus the Christ smile upon you and be gracious toward you.*

*And may the Spirit of truth lead you in the path of wisdom and peace. Amen.*