

◆ MELROSE UNITED CHURCH ◆

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◆ **Sunday January 24, 2021** ◆
Third Sunday after Epiphany

MELROSE UNITED CHURCH

* indicates a time to stand, if you are able
congregational responses are in **boldface type**

◆ GATHERING ◆

PRELUDE

*OPENING HYMN – *Dear God, Who Loves All Humankind* VU 608

*1 Dear God, who loves all humankind,
forgive our foolish ways;
re clothe us in our rightful mind;
in purer lives thy service find,
in deeper reverence, praise.*

*2 In simple trust like theirs who heard,
beside the Syrian sea,
the gracious calling of the Lord,
let us, like them, without a word,
rise up, and follow thee.*

*3 O sabbath rest by Galilee!
O calm of hills above,
where Jesus knelt to share with thee
the silence of eternity,
interpreted by love!*

*4 Drop thy still dews of quietness,
till all our strivings cease;
take from our souls the strain and stress,
and let our ordered lives confess
the beauty of thy peace.*

*5 Breathe through the heats of our desire
thy coolness and thy balm;
let sense be dumb, let flesh retire;
speak through the earthquake, wind and fire,
O still, small voice of calm!*

WELCOME AND LIFE AND WORK OF THE CHURCH

LIGHTING OF THE CHRIST CANDLE

One: We gather from our homes as a community of seekers,
looking for the light:

**All: The light that will give us clarity, the light that will guide
our way.**

One: May God refresh our perception that we may discover
God's manifestation in Christ.

**All: Let us glimpse here today the truth revealed in the life
and love of Jesus.**

One: May epiphany be not just a word

All: but a gasp of wonder at the promise revealed.

CALL TO WORSHIP

One: As individuals, as a group, as a community of faith

All: We gather in our own places.

One: To listen.

All: to communicate.

One: to worship.

All: to pray.

One: To be with God. Because we know

**All: It is out of God's authority, it is out of God's love, that we
live. Alleluia!**

*1 My soul finds rest in God alone,
on whom my help depends,
who is my fortress and my rock, who sure salvation sends.
My foes conspire to bring me down;
they scorn my troubled state.
Their lips are quick to sound my praise,
but in their hearts they hate.*

*2 Find rest, my soul, in God alone,
on whom my hope depends,
who is my fortress and my rock, who sure salvation sends.
My aid and honour come from God,
my refuge strong and sure.
Now, all you people, trust in God;
in whom we are secure.*

*3 The great of earth are less than dust;
all mortal strength is vain.
And fools alone rely on wealth
or prize ill-gotten gain.
I know, O God, that you are strong,
and strong your loving Word.
Our every deed for good or ill,
you surely will reward.*

OPENING PRAYER (said together)

Sit beside me, My Friend, and reflect, connecting the past with our future, reminding us of faith, hope and love.

Sit beside me, My Friend, and pray, so many hearts full of need, pain, loss, and grief, so many thankful moments of the amazing life you have given us.

Sit beside me, My Friend, and rejoice!

We worship you together with the Holy Spirit. So, please sit with all of us as we celebrate your holy presence today. Amen.

A TIME FOR CHILDREN AND THE CHILD WITHIN US

Story: Caught in God's Love

◆ SERVICE OF THE WORD ◆

Reader: Michael Clase

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

One: We know the stories of long-ago days when you saved your people. We know the stories of long-ago days when our people knew your presence. Yet we forget, O God, that these stories show us how you always act. May they be constant companions as our journey continues with you. Amen.

THE WISDOM OF ISRAEL: Jonah 3:1-5, 10 – Jonah calls on Ninevah to repent

One: The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"

And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil

ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

One: The Word of the Lord.

All: Thanks be to God!

REFLECTION: No, I don't want to go! – Jonah 3: 1-5, 10

Jonah's story begins before this account of his travel to Nineveh and proclamation to the people to repent and change their ways. This is actually scene two, take one.

We need to be aware of the events leading up to this dramatic change of heart – both on the part of the people of Nineveh and Jonah because it reveals certain truths for us to learn. God called Jonah to go to the Ninevites. Jonah refused. Jonah tried to run from God, but as we learned last week, there is nowhere to hide from God. Jonah was rescued by God from a ferocious storm that came up at sea. His ship mates realized that he was the cause of the storm and threw him overboard. He was swallowed by a fish and spit out on the seashore. A tall tale to be sure. Is it fable, or farce? Or is it a form of revelation? This is a God of second chances. Needless, to say, Jonah had a change of heart and reluctantly carried out God's command. This story plays out as a human response to a call of God rather than focusing on the reasons for the call. Everything about this story is extreme. Jonah trying to run away; the rise of the storm; the fish that appeared to swallow him; the rescue on dry land; the dire proclamation to the Ninevites for impending destruction; the unequivocal turn around by the entire population; God's reprieve and mercy.

There are several strong contrasts displayed in this story. After trying to save his own life by fleeing, Jonah then offers to be thrown overboard to save the lives of the crew. And following the Ninevite's expression of contrition, God rescinds the judgment that had been prophesied. The graciousness of God is held up against the vindictive attitude of the prophet. And finally, in the ensuing completion of the story, a plant that grew for shade for Jonah, was eaten by a worm and the loss bemoaned by Jonah in stark contrast to his concern for the proclaimed demise of the Ninevites. These reversals underscore the contrasts between human desires and God's will.

From this story, we learn of the persistence of God. After being rebuffed by Jonah, God persists in intervening in ways to bring Jonah to fulfil the divine command. The story shows how God cannot be circumvented or thwarted. In fact, if we think about it, the entire Bible reflects this enduring message. If Plan A doesn't work, God institutes Plan B.

We also learn of God's responsiveness to change of attitudes. First, God immediately stilled the storm affecting the sailors at sea, once Jonah was removed from the scene and, then upon seeing the complete conversion of the Ninevites, God renounces their doom.

Finally, we learn that God's power and mercy are not reserved for the Israelites alone; they are universal; they extend to the Gentile Ninevites and the Gentile sailors as well.

Prophets focus our attention on significant things that need to be done. They bring us into the present. Without them, we need a roadmap, a destination to focus our attention. We look to our Creed as a way of bringing us into focus with God. The Masai

people of East Nigeria rewrote their creed in 1960. I like the wording of it.

We Believe in One High God, who out of love created the beautiful world.

We believe that God made good his promise by sending his Son, Jesus Christ, a man in the flesh, a Jew by tribe, born poor in a little village, who left his home and was always on safari doing good, curing people by the power of God, teaching about God and man, and showing that the meaning of religion is love.

He was rejected by his own people, tortured and nailed hands and feet to a cross, and died.

He was buried in the grave, but the hyenas did not touch him, and on the third day he rose from the grave.

We are reminded that whatever goals we establish for ourselves, whatever direction we are headed, we should not be surprised by a sudden change in direction. Everyone in this story repents, even God. Everyone experiences a surprising change in direction. Heed the Jewish proverb: "Whenever someone says, "I have a plan," God laughs.

How do we read Jonah? It is structured like a joke, starting with the outrageous premise, Jonah's impossible assignment, his outlandish response and his comeuppance for his response. And then, the word of the LORD came to Jonah, a *second* time. Get up and go to Nineveh and proclaim its message I tell you.

Professional comedians call this effect a callback. Jonah, contrite now does what the LORD says. His message is dire. There is not one drop of hope. The unlikely happens, they do repent, every last single one of them, including the animals. Jonah sulks. He knows God is a merciful God and will save them. This is a

distinctively Jewish form of complaint. The kill-me-now joke is one of the great foundations of modern Jewish humour. Nineveh, the Assyrian capital represented the Assyrian king and enemy camp, no Jew would have wanted to lift a finger for the Ninevites.

There is no historical record of the Assyrian king ever turning towards the Hebrew God. This belongs in the realm of fantasy. However, this is a timeless message that could be drawn out of today's headlines. The point of the message is: if God really intends salvation for all the peoples, then in all seriousness, we must at least talk to our enemies. Amen.

PSALM: Psalm 62:5-12 – Be still and wait for God

One: For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from him.

He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken.

On God rests my deliverance and my honor; my mighty rock, my refuge is in God.

Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us. Selah

Those of low estate are but a breath, those of high estate are a delusion; in the balances they go up; they are together lighter than a breath.

Put no confidence in extortion, and set no vain hopes on robbery; if riches increase, do not set your heart on them.

Once God has spoken; twice have I heard this: that power belongs to God,

and steadfast love belongs to you, O Lord. For you repay to all according to their work.

THE GOSPEL: Mark 1: 14-20 – Jesus calls two sets of brothers

One: Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea – for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

One: The Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ

All: Praise to you, O Christ!

REFLECTION: Jesus, Split Second Decisions! – Mark 1: 21-28
“Follow Me and I will make you fishers of people!” And we are told, **immediately**, they followed Jesus. Karl Barth, the great theologian says that the disciples are “elected to discipleship simply through the fact that Jesus claims them.” Jesus is the ultimate fisher and they are the netted fish. The reign of God begins with the obedient responses of the four men. Split second decisions; no hesitation. They drop everything that is currently in

their present lives, to take up the challenge of discipleship to the One who came to save.

Recent theologians have concluded that Jesus' message and Jesus the messenger mutually reinforce and define each other. Jesus proves to be more than a model teacher, a spiritual guide, or an activist; Jesus is the actual transformative power of God. It has become evident to us that God calls rough mechanics like Simon, Andrew, James and John in order to show that none of us are called by virtue of our own talents or excellences. We are flawed, just like the disciples who misunderstood and failed Jesus at every turn. Yet, we too, are being fashioned and strengthened into becoming followers of Christ.

The intensity of their early decisions to follow Jesus were tested again and again. And again, and again, they failed. The gospel narratives illustrate their lack of understanding, and their abandonment in the face of fear. But even then, God does not use those moments as the final word. Their original decision is lived out in their life long fidelity, service and finally sacrifice. Christianity occurs in a moment, but lasts for the long haul. It may be a split-second decision, but it becomes a lifetime reaffirmation.

We understand spontaneity and acting on impulse and the rareness of moments when choices become clear. Dr. Robert Schuller, whom I greatly admired, knew at the age of four that he would become a preacher. We have instances when something unexpected happens and we are offered the rare opportunity to stand up and make the right choice. The defining moment arrives and we have to decide between a selfless or selfish response. To repent and begin a new life which challenges the status quo

requires both faith and also courage. Jesus' mission was to call people to repentance, towards a total reorientation of their lives so that they would be in a position to accept God's sovereign rule. It was a mission that was to be met with a great deal of resistance and it eventually led to his death. And he could not do it alone. These four were to learn the difference between discipleship as a task and discipleship as an identity. They were about to begin a whole new life.

I ask you to think about what it is that draws you into the mission of Christianity and how does your response match either that of Jonah, the Ninevites, or the first of the four chosen disciples? Your initial decisions are revisited again and again as you continue to walk in the way of Jesus. Amen.

INVITATION TO OFFERING

One: We joyfully present our offerings so that our gifts may be used to bring joy to our community and to the world.

Melrose appreciates your ongoing dedication to enable our spiritual work in the discipleship of Jesus Christ. There are many who are in need during this time of extended closure. One way Melrose seeks to assist is by providing Food Vouchers to help people from going hungry. Our Benevolent Fund is growing low and we are making an appeal to ask for donations to allow us to continue this worthwhile ministry.

*OFFERING HYMN - *Grant Us, God, the Grace*
Grant us, God, the grace of giving,
with a spirit large and free,
that ourselves and all our living
we may offer faithfully

VU 540

Story About How God is at Work in the World

A young woman tells her story. After hiking to an out of the way waterfall for a few hours during a weekend of backpacking vacation, she and her companion returned to their car to find that it had been broken into and all their belongings gone. Fortunately, they had carried on them their plane tickets, ID and the keys to their car. However, all their cash, clothes and wallets were gone. They drove to the nearest town and asked if there was a police station to report the theft. The officer on duty was a native Hawaiian woman who was very sympathetic. She took their information and then invited them to have dinner with her. At the end of her shift, she took them to her home where they were welcomed as precious guests of the family. They insisted that the couple stay the night. The next morning their angel police officer took them to the office of a local lawyer who managed an emergency fund for locals fallen on hard times. He suggested they borrow some money from the fund to get them home and pay it back when they could. After filling out some forms, the lawyer invited them to lunch. She said this experience could have been a disaster for them but it ended up being the highlight of the trip and they would never forget the kindness and generosity of that small community.

In the moments when we have been treated to human kindness, or we ourselves have offered it to another, we exemplify the very best attributes of God. We become God's messengers, and co-creators of providing a better world. We are changed both by being the recipient and by being the giver, and we have no idea of the impact or ripple effect that our small gesture can start.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

All: When we recognize your friendship at work in the world, O God, we understand how great changes have small beginnings.

One: New understanding comes to our support of refugees when we hear of women without any protection in refugee camps. A renewed urgency to provide low-cost housing comes when we hear of lives lost through fires in sub-standard homes.

A sense of what it is to be unemployed arises from hearing the troubling account of a person who can't find work. The will to help the hungry comes from the encounter with one desperately needy person.

All: As friends of Jesus, we will respond practically, appropriately, and compassionately.

When we recognize your friendship at work among the suffering, O God, we understand how the health professional and the visitor have a part to play.

One: Tender touch enables patients in hospitals to feel that their needs matter to staff members.

Your intently listening ear enables the deepest feelings of those going through hard times to be heard.

A quiet presence – steady, reassuring, never failing, is simply there for those who suffer.

Strong support comforts those who are going through the valley of the shadow.

All: As friends of Jesus, we will respond practically, appropriately, and compassionately.

When we recognize your friendship at work within the church, O God, we understand how strength and growth may come.

One: Eyes open to the stranger or newcomer, making them welcome, and inviting them in.

Your Creative Spirit working in new ways, singing a new song, challenging old practices.

All: As friends of Jesus, we will respond practically, appropriately, and compassionately.

When we recognize your friendship at work within each one of us, we understand how far your love goes.

One: Steering us gently in directions that are helpful, fulfilling, and selfless.

Challenging us relentlessly to wake up to the attitudes, prejudices, and practices that we know are wrong.

Nurturing our offers of companionship and service to others when it is easier to go it alone.

Understanding your never-failing acceptance of each of us no matter how far we stray from you.

All: We are deeply grateful to be counted as present-day friends of Jesus. As friends, we will respond practically, appropriately, and compassionately.

One: We pray for our community of Melrose, for Loretta, for Vic, and all our shut ins, for Michelle and Aric and family in the passing of Michelle's grandfather, Maynard, for the Purvis family, in the passing of Rob (complications of heart and Covid - nephew to Vince/Carolyn), for those who are still grieving loss of their loved ones, for those whose incomes have been reduced through the pandemic, for those who are afraid or unable to go out, for those who are feeling the isolation of separation from family and friends.

We pray for those in our circle who are recovering from illnesses, who are struggling with imperfect relationships, who are filled with anxiety and despair. for those that we are not even aware that there is a concern, and for all those

that we hold in our hearts we raise up to you for their safekeeping. Lord, we ask that you be with them in the ways that each one needs.

(Quiet reflection) followed by The Lord's Prayer (said together)

**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 that
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,
For ever and ever. Amen.**

CLOSING HYMN – *Through the Heart of Every City*

VU 584

*1 Through the heart of every city,
runs the flow of human need.
Mid this glass and steel are pulsing,
smold'ring wick and damaged reed.
Has our church a word to offer,
some hope shining from our creed.
Walking thru the concrete furrows
Jesus sows the Word as seed.*

*2 Through the passing generations,
in their spirit, flesh, and bone.
Jesus Christ becomes incarnate:
holy hearts are living stone.
Building here a house of refuge,
as a temple, as a home.*

*So within the city's shadow,
Jesus planted Word has grown.*

*3 Through our witness and our worship,
Jesus, grant that we may still
hear the heart-beat of compassion,
calling us to do Your will.
You, our vine, and we, your branches,
dead-ended not by any chill,
working for the final city,
when the harvest is fulfilled.*

COMMISSIONING

One: Go forth today bathed in the warmth of the love of God and aware of the relationship God wants to have with you. In the days ahead, may you know that you are blessed with worship, joy, and connection. Find time each day to rest at the feet of Jesus. Amen.

BENEDICTION

One: May God keep us in our going out and our coming in,
In our lying down and our rising up,
In our work and in our leisure,
In our laughter and in our tears,
Until we meet again. Amen.

POSTLUDE