

**Worship Service – First Congregational UCC, Eagle River, WI
March 21, 2021**

L. Gail Irwin, Interim Pastor; Paula Hendrickson, Scripture Reader

Prelude: “Hear Our Prayer (George Whelpton) CCLI#60609
*Hear our prayer, O Lord. Hear our prayer, O Lord.
Incline Thine ear to us, And grant us Thy peace. Amen*

Announcements: Hello and welcome to worship at First Congregational UCC in Eagle River. This is the service for Sunday, March 21st, the Fifth Sunday of Lent.

Today, Sunday at 10 AM those who wish can gather for a **Zoom Coffee Hour**. See your Friday email for a link to join us and check in with church friends. We will talk about signs of spring, so pay attention out there and let us know a sign of spring you have seen or are looking forward to.

On Tuesday we will have our last Lenten adult study for the season. *Metanoia* is our theme. You will find the Zoom link to the class in your Friday email. The students meet informally at 6:30, and then class starts at 7 PM.

Here’s the Holy Week Schedule:

Next Sunday is Palm Sunday - worship will be pre-recorded on line. However, we will also be **gathering in person at 10 AM**, for a drive -up Communion in your car; and a Drive By Palm Parade, also in our cars. Please park your car on either side of Division street in front of the church between 10 and 10:30 and stay in your car. We will have sanitized Communion cups to share through your car window, and palm branches. At about 10:30, we will do a short car parade around the neighborhood with our palms, to let the world know we are followers of Jesus above all other powers!

Maundy Thursday is April 1st: We will have **two worship services in the building with limited seating by reservation at 10 AM and 6 PM**. We will allow for 25 people maximum at each service. This is a one-time experiment, worshipping with a smaller group, masked and distanced. It will be a little different than worship you’re used to because of hygiene protocols, but it will be great to be together. If you want to come, please call the church office in advance to reserve a spot, tell us how many are coming from your family and leave a phone number where you can be reached.

We would like to include especially those people who have been unable to worship with us by computer, so if you know someone like that, please invite them.

Good Friday will be an on-line event with Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, featuring artist Paul Oman. Watch for a link to that service during Holy Week.

On Easter Sunday, April 4th, we will have an on-line service, featuring our virtual choir. If the weather permits, we will also hold a **9 AM outdoor sunrise service** at the home of Lori Hunter. You should be receiving a special email on all these service details; check your Spam mail just in case! We hope to see you at one of these formats for worship!

The Council is working on protocols for how we can return to worship in the building more frequently when it is safe to do so.

Prayer of Confession:

O Loving Creator, you made everything new and good and beautiful.
You grew everything from your divine seed.
Even we were shaped in your womb of love.
So why are we so broken?
And why is the world in such disarray?
Why have you torn down what you built up, and unearthed what you planted?
Or was it we who have destroyed your good garden?
Have mercy on us, O God,
Forgive our betrayals, our denial, our abuse, our arrogance, our ignorance;
Help us clean up the debris of our sin, and begin the healing that comes with true repentance.
Hear now our confessions in silence...Amen.

Words of Assurance: God wants to write a new law on your heart. Accept God's grace and be changed by it. Let the people say AMEN .

A Sermon for All Ages:

- I'm here visiting our hickory trees with my husband Charles;
- he loves hickory nuts so we decided to plant 10 hickory trees about 10 years ago;
- they were 2 feet tall saplings when they arrived; now the tallest is way over his head!
- The shortest one is still struggling; it gets eaten down by deer and bunnies; so now it's wrapped in a cage to protect it
- We surround the area with an electric fence that is wired by a solar panel
- The first couple years we had to carry water ½ mile from home to water the trees, but now they're growing on their own.
- After we planted them, we learned it may take 40 years before we have a good harvest of nuts, but after that, our trees may bear nuts for up to 300 years!
- So someday, when Charles and I are in our 90's, we'll be able to crack and enjoy hickory nuts; but hopefully, many generations after that will enjoy those trees!
- If you want to do anything good in the world, be patient; the change may take awhile!
- We'll be hearing a story today of how Jesus knew his life would be short, and that he would die soon. He was sad about that.
- But he said, "Unless a grain of wheat falls in the ground and dies, it cannot bear fruit."
- He meant that our lives may be short, but the seeds of love and truth we plant, the saplings we plant, will grow for future generations, and we can't imagine how much good they may do later.
- I wonder if Jesus knew the difference his life would make in the world, long after he died.
- What acts of love and kindness are you planting around you to make the world a better place? Don't worry about just being a little seed, or how long it will take to make a difference. God does the growing. You just keep doing the planting!

Dear God, let us all be like seedlings, planting love and kindness that will grow and build a better world! Amen.

Special Music: “Lord, Let My Heart Be Good Soil” (by Handt Hanson) CCLI #806698

Lord, let my heart be good soil, open to the seed of your Word.

Lord, let my heart be good soil, where love can grow and peace is understood.

When my heart is hard, break the stone away.

When my heart is cold, warm it with the day.

When my heart is lost, lead me on your way.

Lord, let my heart, Lord, let my heart, Lord, let my heart be good soil.

Hebrew Scripture Reading: Jeremiah 31:27-28, 31-33

²⁷ The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of humans and the seed of animals. ²⁸ And just as I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy, and bring evil, so I will watch over them to build and to plant, says the LORD.

...³¹ The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ³² It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. ³³ But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

Gospel Reading: John 12:20-36

²⁰ Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. ²¹ They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” ²² Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. ²³ Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴ Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. ²⁵ Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶ Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

²⁷ “Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. ²⁸ Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” ²⁹ The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, “An angel has spoken to him.” ³⁰ Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. ³¹ Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. ³² And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” ³³ He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die. ³⁴ The crowd answered him, “We have heard from the law that the Messiah remains forever. How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man?” ³⁵ Jesus said to them, “The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you. If you walk in the darkness, you do not know where you are going. ³⁶ While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light.”

Sermon

- I. Here near Mountain, WI, a tornado came through in July, 2019;
 - a. It created a swath of destruction through the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest;
 - b. The area destroyed was as large an area as the city of Milwaukee;
 - c. 1000 trees were lost

- II. I remember that night for another reason:
 - a. My husband and I were driving across the state from the Minneapolis airport, after returning from my sister's funeral in California;
 - b. Charles drove through torrential rain and wind;
 - c. I was sick with an unexplainable fever I'd had for a couple weeks;
 - d. I was watching the radar on my phone to follow the storm;
 - e. we should have stopped, but we were anxious to get home and finally, we did arrive safely.
 - f. In the morning, we learned the tornados had touched down about 30 miles north of our home;
 - g. But I was distracted by my unexplained fever, and grief for my sister; I went to the doctor, who ran tests and couldn't find anything wrong with me. I finally told the doctor: "My sister died; I think maybe I'm just sick with grief."

- III. It wasn't until the last few months, driving back and forth to Eagle River, that I've seen the destruction from those tornadoes as it looks now; a lot of work has been done to clear trees. But there are huge barren patches everywhere in that area. And there are still trees leaning over that may never stand straight again.
 - a. I think of how God can destroy things, just like God can make things grow;
 - i. Our damage is nothing like New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina
 - ii. Or fires destroying entire town of Paradise, CA
 - iii. Or water and mud encompassing the town of Sendai, Japan in a tsunami
 - b. But we see or experience these events with massive loss of life, grief, and people left with no possessions to their names; everything familiar wiped away;
 - c. And yet, so often, even after a disaster, after months in FEMA trailers or re-location to other places, people come back and re-build (even when they shouldn't); we long to repair and rebuild
 - i. Sometimes to go back to an earlier time
 - ii. Sometimes to build a new vision for the future

- IV. Jeremiah lived through the total destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians
 - a. He warned his kings and people this was coming
 - b. His words made people angry; he was beaten, thrown in prison, thrown into a cistern and left for dead; then rescued and taken to another city as an exile;
 - c. But his prophecies came true!
 - d. After the destruction, he stood over the ruins of his city like a forest blown over by a tornado;
 - e. But Jeremiah never gave up his inexplicable hope:

- i. This is the prophet who said to people, “*You have a future and a hope*”
 - ii. Who purchased a piece of real estate in the middle of Jerusalem, in the middle of a war zone, to demonstrate his hope with an investment in the city’s future; he made a bet with his money that they would be able to rebuild someday;
 - iii. The prophet who promised the joyful return of his people to rebuild (read earlier in Jeremiah 31 if you need a lift today)
 - iv. And eventually it happened; he probably didn’t see it! But the people did come back and rebuild their city 70 years later.
 - f. Where did Jeremiah get this unlikely hope in terrible times?
 - i. Was he a born optimist? (not if you read his darker prophecies)
 - ii. Was it his age: had he seen so much history by the time this happened, he knew hard times would evolve into better times by experience?
 - iii. Maybe he cultivated a deep faith in God; that whatever is happening now, God makes change possible. He believed that change is real and the world can change for the better!
 - iv. We don’t all believe that change for the better can happen. Jeremiah did.
- V. Jesus in John’s gospel visits Jerusalem for the last time in Chapter 12
- a. Our reading comes after a series of climactic events:
 - i. He has raised Lazarus from the dead; that has caused a swell of curiosity and popularity, but also suspicion; Lazarus is now a local celebrity AND he’s being watched and targeted by the authorities
 - ii. A Palm parade has brought followers out of the woodwork
 - iii. Jesus has turned over tables in the Temple causing havoc.
 - iv. Mary of Bethany has anointed his feet with embalming oil as a prophetic act; she seems to know his death is imminent.
 - b. Now, as some Greeks approach him to hear his message, he predicts his impending death and expresses his sorrow, heaviness about it;
 - i. He wants to avoid it, but knows he can’t
 - ii. He sees himself like a grain of wheat, one small person who will die, but not in vain;
 - iii. He sees his own death as a necessary step in the transformation of God’s people
 - iv. He foresees a coming darkness in the world and in his own soul; and warns people to walk in the light while they still can
 - v. He believes the Prince of the World (Satan?) will be ultimately driven out.
 - vi. That God will unleash the power of a greater movement
 - vii. He believes that God has the power to change the world,
 - c. He speaks in verse 32 of being “*lifted up from the earth...* and drawing all people to himself” scholars interpret this to mean three times Jesus is “lifted up”
 - i. Once on the cross, physically, to die a physical death
 - ii. Once rising up from the tomb, to be resurrected
 - iii. And finally, in the ascension, to rise up to heaven and leave his disciples with the power of the Holy Spirit;

- iv. He submits to a painful bodily and existential change, as a necessary part of the transformation the world is aching for and that God wills.

- VI. We've all stood on some barren ground of loss and scanned the debris of some chaos, whether interior or outside around us; our worlds fall apart; a path of devastation lays bare our vulnerability and our dependence on God;
 - a. maybe this needs to happen to all of us; it's the way we discover our humanity!
 - b. Like Ezekiel in the valley of dry bones; or Elijah listening to the still, small voice from the cleft of a rock;
 - c. Maybe you have lost a sister; lived through a natural disaster; a disability; job loss or a marriage...
 - d. Do you believe in the power of God to bring real, meaningful change to your life, your world in spite of and because of these losses?
 - e. These life tornados are watershed moments for us: how will we respond?
 - i. With anger, bitterness, suspicion of the world, fear, depression, turning to conspiracy theories about why the world is against us?
 - ii. Or will we let our hearts be cracked open by grief: to talk to God, listen to God; look for God's presence in the absence of all that is good?
 - 1. Might we even have the courage to lay down an investment in the future like Jeremiah bought the property?
 - 2. Maybe just to plant some seeds or sapling trees, in hopes of a future growth we may never see?
 - 3. To let some new law be carved on our hearts even though the carving might hurt
 - 4. Do we have the vision to see beyond our loss to something new that hasn't even existed yet?
- VII. God has the desire to take the broken pieces of our world and re-shape us; *Metanoia*: God's power to transform the world.
 - a. to bury the seeds of this present time and make them grow into something beautiful.
 - b. But it requires
 - i. our faith in God's power to make change;
 - ii. our cooperation with that change;
 - iii. to envision what we can't see; to watch for and expect it;
 - iv. to embrace it when it comes, without denial or fear;
- VIII. They say it will take at least 10 years to restore the loss to this piece of forest;
 - a. it will mean planting a lot of saplings, I'm guessing;
 - b. but the National Park service and a lot of volunteers are working on it;
 - c. Maybe you could help!

Pastoral Prayer:

God of Love and Peace,
We pray for trees, broken or burned in storms and fires;
You made them. You let them be destroyed. Why, Lord?
And for all the people you made so beautifully,
Who get sick for no reason, or have accidents and die.
You made them. You let them die. Why, Lord?
We pray for all who live in the path of storms or fires;
in war zones and droughts, who must fight or flee,
and wonder why you chose them to lose so much.
When we don't understand, Lord, listen to our questions.
When we get angry at you, love us anyway.
When we long for a change, or resist change, be the change inside us,
Open us to the future and hope you desire for us,
and let our anxious questions stop.
So that through your power to heal and transform,
the world may be reconciled again to you in love.
Hear now our prayers for the sick...
For those grieving or lonely...
For those who are hungry and thirsty...
For those yearning for justice..
For those dear to us who we name in silence...

All these things we pray in the name of the Christ, who we follow, even to the cross, As we say the words he taught us ...**The Lord's Prayer**

Mission Moment:

Thank you for all your gifts to One Great Hour of Sharing, which are being shared around the world in places of natural disaster, among refugees and in places that need access to water and other basic needs. If you haven't had a chance to give it's not too late! Send your gifts through the church office or to www.ucc.org/oghs on line.

Benediction: Go into the world ready to be transformed by God's enduring love for you, as you work to transform the world with that love. Amen.

To learn more about how to support our local National Forests, go to:
<https://www.fs.usda.gov/main/cnnf/workingtogether/volunteering>