

March 21, 2021 – Lent 5

Welcome and Announcements

Good morning and welcome to worship with McClure United Church this morning. Today is the 5th Sunday in this Lenten wilderness journey. I hope that this journey has been one of deepening faith - of letting go... of leaning into God's love.

And it is out of our desire to share God's love... for everyone, that we remember at the beginning of each service our commitment as an Affirming Ministry of The United Church to do our very best to not only welcome but also to celebrate the beautiful diversity of God's people. No matter your age, class, ability, race, gender, gender identity and sexual orientation we are grateful you have joined us for worship today.

And we are worshipping here in Saskatoon on Treaty 6 territory and homeland of the Metis Nation and we take a moment to acknowledge and pay our respect to the ancestors and keepers of the land.

I would once again like to thank Reverend Jordan Cantwell for sharing her reflection with us today... I'm grateful to St. Martin's United Church for sharing her with us during Debra's sabbatical.

I have a few announcements to share with you today and I'd just like to note that all of the information I'll share with you now can be found in the weekly email, on the website and the facebook page – so go there if you need contact info or more information on how to register and attend.

I'll begin with the newer announcements:

Some of you have been asking about Holy Week services.

Palm Sunday service will be at the usual time. We will be receiving palm branches for you to have for this service. If you would like a palm branch, please pick it up at the church on Saturday, March 27. I will put them just outside the church doors at noon and you can pick them up anytime after that. Grab yourself a palm branch so you can join us in the palm parade from your own home.

There will be a Maundy Thursday communion service on Zoom on Thursday, April 1 at 7pm. The Zoom link for that service was included in today's email and can also be found on the FB page and website. Please note that you need to pre-register for this service. Pre-registration helps to secure the gathering. Once you've registered, you will receive the Zoom link. Something will be posted for Good Friday as well and I'll share more details once I know what they are.

Easter morning... Living Skies Regional Council will be offering a live Easter Sunrise service at 6:20am. You will find the info for that in the email as well. United Church folks from across Saskatchewan will be celebrating the risen Christ together as the sunrises across the land.

And then at 9am our own Easter service will be online – you really don't want to miss this. WE are offering an Easter pageant including many of the families from both McClure and ST. Martin's United Churches.

And a reminder that today is the deadline for newsletter submissions. If you have something to submit, please send it to newsletter@mclureunitedchurch.org.

I think you are all familiar with the weekly events and gatherings but if you need a reminder you will find it in all those places I mentioned earlier.

And now, let's breathe deeply of God's love and prepare our hearts for this time of worship...

Sung Opening

Opening Prayer

We have been in the wilderness—
Discerning and working, seeking and dreaming,
grieving and wondering, praying and hoping.
longing and running, creating and waiting.
We have been in the wilderness, but we have not been alone;
for God walks with us, every step of the way.
So let us worship the God of our darkest nights and our brightest days.
And this is a reminder of the light that continues to shine in the wilderness.

Let us pray...

Gracious God,
You invite us to plant a garden of love and harmony, but we grow weeds of prejudice and hatred. You invite us to sow joy and gratitude, but we scatter seeds of greed and envy. You call us to tend the soil of fear and denial, but instead we close our eyes and let the earth suffer.
Forgive us.
You invited us to plant a garden, and we lost ourselves in the wilderness.
Clear our hearts.
Breathe life into these weary bones and grant us a fresh start.
Gratefully we pray, amen.

Hymn

Scripture: John 11:1-45

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, 'Lord, he whom you love is ill.' But when Jesus heard it, he said, 'This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that

the Son of God may be glorified through it.' Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

Then after this he said to the disciples, 'Let us go to Judea again.' The disciples said to him, 'Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?' Jesus answered, 'Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.' After saying this, he told them, 'Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.' The disciples said to him, 'Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.' Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, 'Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.' Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow-disciples, 'Let us also go, that we may die with him.'

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.' Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.' Martha said to him, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.' Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?' She said to him, 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.'

When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, 'The Teacher is here and is calling for you.' And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.' Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!' But some of them said, 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?'

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, 'Take away the stone.' Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, 'Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days.' Jesus said to her, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?' So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upwards and said, 'Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may

believe that you sent me.' When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, and let him go.'

Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

Reflection

Friends, we are one year into a global pandemic... time to pause... to pay attention to how you are feeling

We are all carrying a great burden of grief

Individually and collectively we have experienced profound loss... some of us have lost loved ones... businesses... income... relationships... some have experienced a loss of health

We have all experienced a loss of connection with others... and we are all living with more anxiety, worry and uncertainty

Death has become our constant companion... the fear of it... the threat of it... the reality of it

The story of Lazarus is our story... a story of waiting... longing for a cure... shock as the death toll rises... disappointment in our leaders... grief and anger... tenacious faith in the promise of life beyond this crisis... fear about where this will all lead

So let us glean wisdom from this story to sustain and guide us.

One of the most startling and poignant moments in this passage is when Jesus begins to weep. Right from the beginning, Jesus has been assuring everyone that death will not get the final word for Lazarus.

But that knowledge does not erase the very real sense of loss and grief that Jesus experiences when confronted by the death of his friend.

The promise of life beyond death does not take away our grief... it doesn't allow us to by-pass the hard, harsh realities of life... it doesn't deny the terrible suffering and loss that we sustain... but that promise accompanies us through our grief and suffering... giving us assurance that although this death is real and devastating, it is not the end of the story... our shattered selves and our shattered world will live again.

When I think about all that has been shattered over the last year, one thing in particular stands out today – on this International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination... we have experienced a profound shattering of the illusion that we live in a racially just and equal world.

Among other crucial truths that have been revealed by this pandemic, the truth of deeply ingrained systemic racism and White supremacy has been laid bare, in stark and disturbing ways.

For Black, Indigenous, and other people of colour in our community, this is not news ... but it is no less shattering for being a familiar reality.

What, if anything, does the story of Lazarus have to say to us as we grieve the lives lost and the injustice perpetrated against racialized people... as we recognize our complicity in structural racism... as we realize the magnitude of the problem and accept the need for deep, foundational change?

I think about the moment in the passage when Jesus tells the people to remove the stone from the front of the tomb.... Martha is horrified – “No, don’t do that!” She cries. “It’s going to stink like crazy.”

But Jesus looks her in the eye and asks – do you or don’t you believe that new life is possible?

The first step towards healing and transforming our systems and structures, as well as our own hearts, is to face the truth of what is rotten head on... allow ourselves to gag on the stench of White supremacy and racism... not deny it... not shut it away... let it out into the light of day

For new life comes not simply by believing in or hoping for the possibility of resurrection... but by confronting the reality of the death-dealing forces at work in our world... calling them out into the light... and working together to dismantle them

By facing and acknowledging what is rotten, what needs to be shed, we lay the groundwork for new life.... We unbind hands and feet to be freed for the working of justice

But notice – this is the work of community... “Unbind him and let him go” Jesus says to the gathered crowd... liberation is a collective effort

And as the hands and feet, the faces and voices of those who have been silenced, incarcerated, or left to die are unbound, their gifts, voices and stories are called forth – and we are all freed from the cramped and putrefying confines of racial injustice.

May we, with Martha, Mary and all who stood with Jesus that day, trust in the promise of life – abundant life – on the other side of this death, this reckoning ... and face with courage the work that is ours to do to unbind and release racial justice into our world.

A prayer from Moderator, the Right Reverend Richard Bott:

While we give thanks for the diversity of people —
of cultures and ethnicities, of histories and life-stories,
of skin colour and language and hearts that love the world;

the best way to give thanks is to disassemble the systems,
the stories, the myths, that privilege one colour over another—
is to root out (and un-root) the insidious beliefs of those of us with privilege
(sometimes hidden quietly within, sometimes disguised,
sometimes trumpeted as manifesto)
that “me and mine” are better than “you and yours.”
To root out quiet racism—
to root out White Fragility, and White Supremacy—
so that it withers and dies.
It is time. It is well past time.
On this International Day to End Racial Discrimination.
God of all creation,
bless us all with what we need, to take on this work, and live it.
Today... Every day... Always.
Until this International Day is a thing of memory.
In Jesus’ name.
May it be.

Prayers

Our gracious, eternal God, we pause and acknowledge your presence now and always in our lives. We acknowledge our deep needs to learn how much you love us and to learn how to receive your love. We confess that it is easier to think that you are against us when we sin and do wrong.

It is easy for us to fall into behaviours which are self-condemning and set up barriers which keep us from being bathed and healed by the power of your love for us.

Remind us that you love us so dearly. Remind us that your covenant with us has always been to embrace us rather than to punish us.

Penetrate our barriers and our false pride whenever we become overcome by self-condemnation.

Take us by the hand, lead us in your ways.

Put your law within us and write it on our hearts.

Help us to know the truth of the words you spoke through Jeremiah that you “will remember our sin no more.”

We pray also for our human family. We so often do not have the vision to include everyone in it. We witness so much brokenness and violence.

We pray for peace in all corners of the earth.

We pray for less bitterness among groups, factions, tribes, and nations.

We pray for those whose lives are lived in poverty.

We pray for those for whom the doors of opportunity are closed.

Remedy the wrongs of this world. Give us the vision of a world in which we demonstrate our

covenant with you by also demonstrating your love toward our neighbours. Give us the will to work for the day when all peoples of the earth have food, education, and opportunity to fulfill themselves. Help us to provide healing for the brokenness of all your children. Amen

Sung Closing

Blessing

We continue our journey into the wilderness

Be comforted and encouraged by the truth that we do not journey alone...

We are held in the tender and abundant love of God,

Christ is with us, strengthening us for the times of struggle,

and the Spirit is guiding us every step of the way.

Amen.

Sung Blessing