

February 21, 2021 – Lent 2

Welcome and Announcements

Good morning and welcome to worship with McClure United Church this morning. Today we continue our journey into the wilderness of Lent. It was in the wilderness that Jesus was shaped and formed for his ministry and through this wilderness time we are invited to journey with Jesus as he lives out his ministry. We journey with Jesus, we journey with each other... knowing that God's love is with us every step of the way.

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 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'm very excited to be working with a wonderful woman from Ontario to offer an Interfaith Ecumenical Gathering on Zoom today from 1-3pm. This will be an international panel comprised of speakers from Scotland, Poland, Canada, US and Sweden... there'll be someone from the Eastern Orthodox, Baptist, Jewish, Muslim traditions and more. I'm super excited to be part of this gathering.
- I also want to share with you important information about an upcoming webinar series called Practically Prophetic. Ruth Mireau will lead us through two evenings together with valuable information about Basic facts of grief, depression and anxiety and self-help strategies for ourselves and to support others. These are happening on Monday March 8 and March 15 at 7pm.
- Lenten book study Thursdays at 7pm.
- Weekly Bible Study Wed at 1pm.
- Friday morning connection at 10am

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

Sung Opening

Opening Prayer

All are welcome here—

The young and old, those who have visions and those who dream dreams.

The sinner and saint, those who seek forgiveness and those who long for peace.
The hurt and the doubting, those who know the wilderness and those who feel lost.
All are welcome here; for you are loved by God.
And we light this candle as a reminder of all this.

Let us pray...

God, we give you our hearts.
Hearts that are full of gratitude for this journey and for your presence with us.
Our hearts, at times, are also saturated with fear... but we give them to you anyway.
You promise to love us as we are.
You promise to walk with us to the ends of the earth, so in this moment, we promise to tell the truth.
God, you ask us to be brave and bold, but we cower in fear.
You ask us to love our neighbors as ourselves, but we hold tight to privilege and the status quo.
And you ask us to risk it all to follow you, but we are content with the injustices at hand.
May we be grounded in your presence, inspired by your wisdom and open to the truth of your forgiveness of our sins as we settle our hearts on you. Gratefully we pray, amen.

Hymn

Scripture: John 3:1-17

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.' Jesus answered him, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.' Nicodemus said to him, 'How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?' Jesus answered, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be born from above." The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.' Nicodemus said to him, 'How can these things be?' Jesus answered him, 'Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? 'Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. 'Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Reflection

I'm a planner... a list maker. My favourite iPhone app is my task manager. I used to have a desk covered with sticky notes and lists now they are all kept together... here.. so not only am I organized... it's also tidy. This makes me feel... oddly safe and secure.

Now I'm not saying I'll necessarily complete the list – I've perfected the art of procrastination. In fact, I was an hour late when I started to write this reflection because I got busy posting photos of my cats on Facebook. So what I'm saying is I thrive in structure... I need to know where I am and what I need to do – or where I'm going... but my structure is pretty flexible and there's lots of room for movement.

Unless I'm over stressed, over tired... anxious. That's when my need for a firm, inflexible structure takes over and I try hard to control my environment and often those in my environment too.

So... ya... living in a pandemic is an interesting experience. I've had to resist my urge to do long term planning because... what's going to happen in the long term is anyone's guess. Do I renew my Zoom subscription for another year or should I switch to monthly? Do I start planning for in person worship for Easter? For fall? For January 2022? I haven't even created a permanent home office space – just decorated this little corner of my house with paper and wilderness so it looks good in front of the camera.

Years and years ago... 1993 to be exact... I joined a 12 step group and learned that the #1 strategy for living a life free from constant fear and anxiety was living life one day at a time. The phrase "just for today" was my constant companion. I can handle almost anything for a day. If I'm allowing myself to be fully present in today I'm not wasting time fretting about a tomorrow that may never even happen anyway. Makes sense. And... today... is where God lives. Right now, in this moment. God is here. And that's where I want to be too.

This brings me a lot of comfort – it allows me to live within a structure that is bendy and flexible and perhaps a structure that is even willing to be torn down and rebuilt... if it makes sense to do so. Now, let me tell you that I didn't get to this place of comfort quickly, or easily and by no means to I stay here all of the time. I can move right into a structure that is made of concrete and steel in a flash and often I don't even know I've done it.

I returned to church around the same time I started going to the 12 step program. It wasn't the United Church... it was another denomination. I was invited by a friend. I met with the pastor and poured my heart out to him and he prayed with me and told me that I could be reborn into new life with Christ. I had no idea what that meant or what would be required of me but I was a bit desperate so said yes and signed this little booklet and was told that the date (it was January 23, 1993) was my new birth date.

I honestly believed that from that point on I was leaving behind all the things I disliked about myself. I wasn't going to be angry or jealous or anxious or struggling with addiction anymore. He told me that my prayers had been answered and that I was now a new creation in Christ. Oh I needed to hear that. I felt so pure...

And that lasted about a minute until some regular ordinary life thing happened and I got annoyed and my old angry feelings bubbled up and "dang it" the prayer didn't work. I was still the same. So I decided that I needed to learn more about the Bible... that if I studied hard and did everything I thought I was supposed to do... then I could be really reborn.

But then I actually started reading the Bible... the pastor told me to start at the beginning and read for an hour a day. The creation story was nice... I liked that... Adam and Eve had a couple

of sons... that was fun. But wait... where did their wives come from? I briefly pushed that out of my head and then of course right after creation comes Noah and the great flood... a story I remembered from Sunday school as being a sweet story about God saving a bunch of animals and making a rainbow. My goodness... have you ever read that story?

Well I started a list of questions.. and after about a week I called the pastor with my list of questions and was told that I needed to just “trust in God” and “pray about it”.

The rest is a long story of me searching for answers that never seemed available and feeling frustrated and somewhat desperate as I tried to figure out how I was supposed to know what to believe when no one was giving me any clear answers.

I felt for Nicodemus in the scripture reading for today. He came to Jesus for answers. “Hey Jesus... I know you’re a teacher from God, otherwise you couldn’t do all these things. Who are you?” And Jesus, as usual, didn’t answer the question... instead he started talking about being “born again” or “born from above” and Nicodemus was like, “what do you mean “born again?” and asked if he’s supposed to re-enter his mother’s womb so she can give birth again.

Jesus said “that’s not what I mean: and explained about being “born of the Spirit” and how we have to have a spiritual rebirth, one that changes us. Nicodemus didn’t know this at the time, but he was the midst of a second birth and was having birth pangs brought about by a curiosity that he couldn’t ignore any longer. He was being changed.

You know the saying “Curiosity killed the cat.”? I have one cat who is especially curious and I pray for him every day. But... curiosity, while generally bad for cats, is actually a really good thing for us, especially in our spiritual lives. Asking questions is a sign of deep faith. We get curious, and when we do we sometimes have these encounters with God’s love and grace. We wrestle. We grapple. We try to work out who we think Jesus is, and what that means for our lives. And that work doesn’t always go quickly or end in a neat and tidy fashion.

But... I discovered that over time.. it does become more comfortable... well.. maybe not comfortable so much as... not so scary.... and not just that but necessary for spiritual growth. I’ve discovered that spiritual contentment does not come from having the answers – it comes from being ok with all the questions. Its becoming more comfortable in the wilderness of unknowing and mystery.

I understand being “born again” very different from how I understood it in 1993. Its not a one time event when the old is suddenly gone and the new has magically appeared. It’s a gradual, yet continuous birthing. We are living lives of change, and if we are going to do more than survive the wilderness... if we are wanting to thrive... to live abundantly in this time and space... we must allow ourselves to be curious.... to ask more questions.

While I’m grateful that my physical home is solid and unmoveable... I’m equally as grateful that my internal home has become more flexible – it has walls that can be moved or even torn down... temporarily or permanently.

My challenge... and I don’t think I’m the only one with this challenge... is to maintain the internal flexibility necessary to live a life of faith... even in the wilderness times... even in the pandemic times, the sick times, the grieving times, the lonely times, the chaotic times.

And yet... to also trust that if we suddenly find ourselves surrounded once again by concrete and steel... its ok. Its our structure... and we have the power to transform it. And we don’t need to do it all at once... one day at a time, one step at a time, one breath at a time...

And it helps... it really really helps... to remember that we do not do it alone.

We never need to do it alone.
Thanks be to God.

Hymn

Prayers

Your word is a lamp to my feet
and a light for my path. (Psalm 119:105)

God, your word which called this world into existence, brought order out of chaos and beauty out of the formless, has infused the very air we breathe with the precious scent of your love. This word is the light by which our journey is illuminated, the light by which we see the beauty of this world, and the light we pass to those who would join us travelling in the joy of your company.

God, your love extends to the boundaries of the universe yet is focused on humankind; weak, sinful, helpless, blown this-way-and-that-way individuals who you count as your children, wanting nothing more than to welcome them into your arms.

God, your love extends to the boundaries of humankind, to rich and poor, have and have-nots, oppressor and oppressed, thief and victim, for we are all less than perfect and all in need of your forgiveness. We pray for all your children wherever they might be, in their joy and sorrow, fear and loathing, pain and suffering; that your word might comfort, your love heal and restore.

God, your love breaks through, demands to be noticed, exposes that which has been hidden, reveals the truth that has been concealed within the heart. We pray for those who exploit the poor, those whose business is slavery or persecution and those who hold power over life or death. We pray that your word, your love might bring change, and bring light into hearts darkened by sin.

God, your love has influence wherever it is shown; a shoulder to lean on, a willing ear to listen, a task performed, a gift given, a selfless act. We pray for politicians and leaders, all those in positions of authority who also walk with in your company. May they show your love and share your word through their actions and service, and may they and those they serve be blessed.

May your word, O God, be a lamp to our feet and a light for our paths.

All of this we pray in the name of Jesus who taught us to pray this way...

Sung Prayer Response

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