

April 28, 2024

Theme: Fifth Sunday of Easter

Scripture: Psalm 22:25-31 (done as a liturgy in both services)

ONE: All of you who revere the Lord—praise him! All of you who are Jacob’s descendants—honor him! All of you who are all Israel’s offspring— stand in awe of him!

ALL: Because he didn’t despise or detest the suffering of the one who suffered—he didn’t hide his face from me. No, he listened when I cried out to him for help.

ONE: I offer praise in the great congregation because of you; I will fulfill my promises in the presence of those who honor God.

ALL: Let all those who are suffering eat and be full! Let all who seek the Lord praise him! I pray your hearts live forever!

ONE: Every part of the earth will remember and come back to the Lord; every family among all the nations will worship you.

ALL: Because the right to rule belongs to the Lord, he rules all nations. Indeed, all the earth’s powerful will worship him; all who are descending to the dust will kneel before him; my being also lives for him.

ONE: Future descendants will serve him; generations to come will be told about my Lord.

ALL: They will proclaim God’s righteousness to those not yet born, telling them what God has done.

ONE: Here ends the reading!

ALL: Thanks be to God!

Sermon Title: Safe & Hospitable

Sermon in a Sentence: When we feel as if God has turned away (the opening of Psalm 22), it is often difficult believe we have a place in God’s community—yet there is nothing further from the truth. Community is where we are reminded that God was always there.

Call To Worship - Traditional

ONE: My God! My God, why have you left me all alone?

ALL: Why does God feel so far from where we are?

ONE: Does God hear our anguished groans?

ALL: We cry out during the day, but it feels as if God has no answer;

ONE: Even at nighttime, we don’t stop crying out.

ALL: Yet our faith tell us that God is not far away.

ONE: The Lord our God is our source of strength!

ALL: And we cry out with the words, “Come quick and help me!”

ONE: These are words from an ancient poet.

ALL: These are words that continue to be spoken by those who feel abandoned and afraid.

ONE: In faith, we claim a God who hears the cries of every person, no matter who they are.

ALL: We give thanks for the faithfulness and graciousness of God.

ONE: Let us worship...

Call To Worship - Contemporary - Contemporary:

A few weeks ago, our attention was on the cross in the days before Easter. As the Gospel of Mark tells the story, Jesus cried out from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” When Jesus was at his weakest moment, feeling abandoned and afraid, he echoed some very painful words

from an ancient poet, words we find in Psalm 22. When everything appears to be lost and death is imminent, we can feel as if even God has left us. It doesn't even need to be a true death, as in the end of life, but an important part of life coming to an end. The future appears hopeless, and the only answer we can imagine is that God has turned away. The Christian story tells us otherwise, but sometimes we need some help believing it. It is there that we begin worship.

Opening Prayer: Our hearts gather to joyfully praise you, O Amazing God. Our voices are seeking to join those in other times and places to offer gratitude for your love, which does not cease in this life or in the life to come. We prayerfully request your help, Lord God, in making this worship space a safe space for every person, no matter what concern or uncertainty they carry with them. We seek to make this worship experience a place where all are able to be renewed in your amazing grace and captured in the belief that you are forever present to us. This is our joyful claim that we seek to bring to life this day, doing so in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Traditional Prayer for the People:

ONE: You are loved by God!

ALL: This is our joyous claim as we enter into this time of prayer.

ONE: The Lord God is forever with you!

ALL: And also with you.

ONE: Let us pray...

Holy and Eternal God, we so often place limitations on you that represent our own insecurities and doubts. We too often allow ourselves to believe that we have done something that has caused you to walk away and leave us alone. Sadly, there are many who are quick to argue that it is easy to fall beyond your reach and that there is nothing that can be done. When those voices seem so loud, allow for the collective voice of this community of praise to offer a very different declaration. Through Christ Jesus, you have shown your love for all creation, a love that is not limited or restricted by anything we might do. Jesus opened the doors that had been closed to so many. It was Jesus who erased lines that left so many feeling outside your circle of grace. May our worship this day create an experience where those who have been shut out and left out are reintroduced to your unconditional and limitless love.

O Generous God, we pray for those within the human family who remain outside a community of grace, questioning whether you will ever embrace them. For those who feel so estranged and lost, we pray for the power of this worship experience to stretch outside these walls. Give strength to every person who has been a part of this service, so that we can better embody the Good News of your everlasting kindness and welcome. By the power of your Spirit, we pray that questions and doubts be pushed aside so that all humanity can more clearly see your loving presence in every moment of every day.

Now continue to bind us together as a faith community. We are far from perfect, but we request the inspiration of the living Christ as we continue to expand our own understanding of your love, O God. It is in the name of Jesus that we offer our prayer. Amen.

Call to Communion: What would it mean for us, at this point in the service, to suddenly add a handful of restrictions in regard to who can participate in communion? Jesus gave us this meal as a model for how we are to live in the world. If we are to reflect the nature of God's love, then it would be counterproductive if we represented an understanding of love that was not of God. For that reason, let me be as clear as possible: All of you are loved beyond measure. And whatever might leave you questioning whether or not you are worthy of this meal, I offer you the words of the Apostle Paul, who shared in Romans 8:

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? None of these things will, for I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Paul gave us a list as comprehensive as he could create, and in the end, he shared how not one of these things had the capacity to separate us from the love of God. This is the joyous news at the center of our worship.

Sermon Background: In this Psalm, the congregation functions powerfully as an agent of deliverance, providing a safe and hospitable space that represents God's far-reaching grace. So often, we convince ourselves (sometimes others convince us) that we are beyond the concern and redemptive power of God. The Psalm begins with those painful words, "My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?" In such a moment of utter lostness, we need community, yet the feeling of estrangement can convince us that we are unwelcome everywhere (including the faith community). The language of the Psalm counters this idea as it offers an ever-expanding praise of gratitude, celebrating a God who welcomes every nation, every corner of the earth, and every future generation. Worship, which echos and honors the unimaginable expansiveness of God's love, invites in and creates a safe place for a person to find healing, peace, and reconnection with God. And even when we are not fully convinced of God's everlasting presence, it is good to have those around us who are singing and sharing this affirming news into which we can grow.

Key Words/Phrases: Community, worship, praise, celebration
Safe space, hospitable gathering,

Making space where we can all believe

A responsibility to one another

Music: Songs of praise that do NOT imply exclusion or unworthiness

Opening Song: *Open Up The Heavens*

Where the Spirit of the Lord is (Tomlin)

You're Welcome In This Place (Maverick City) - slow, so maybe the one right before sermon

O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing #5 (all) - David Crowder has a version

Prayer Response: *Praise God from Whom All Blessings Flow*