

TAMWORTH CITY UNITING CHURCH

PENTECOST 13 - AUGUST 30th, 2020

Mr Peter Battle



CALL TO WORSHIP *(based on Psalm 105:1-2)*

We come with thankful hearts

to make God's deeds known among all peoples.

Let our songs of praise

proclaim all God's wonderful works.

Praise God who is the same yesterday, today and forever.

Let us pray: O Spirit of God, Spirit of Christ,
be found beside us like a burning bush
so that we pause in awe before your presence.
Come, Holy Spirit, come. **Amen.**

HYMN TIS 83 (Let us with a gladsome mind)

1. Let us with a gladsome mind
praise the Lord, for he is kind:
for his mercies shall endure,
ever faithful, ever sure.

2. Let us blaze his name abroad,
for of gods he is the God:
for his mercies shall endure,
ever faithful, ever sure.

3. He, with all-commanding might,
filled the new-made world with light:
for his mercies shall endure,
ever faithful, ever sure.
4. All things living he doth feed,
his full hand supplies their need:
for his mercies shall endure,
ever faithful, ever sure.
5. He his chosen race did bless,
In the wasteful wilderness:
for his mercies shall endure,
ever faithful, ever sure.
6. Let us then with a gladsome mind
praise the Lord, for he is kind:
for his mercies shall endure,
ever faithful, ever sure.

John Milton 1608-74 alt.

PRAYER OF PRAISE AND ADORATION

Awesome and great God, whose holiness is beyond our capacity even to imagine - we worship you. God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, we glorify you as our God also. Your care for your people of old is evident through the stories of your involvement and constant covenant with them. Your care for us is evident through your grace and mercy which we experience in Jesus Christ and through the power of the Holy Spirit. You love us so lavishly, and empower us so mightily, that we come to see the world as a place charged with blessing - your blessing, a holy place. We realise that we stand on holy ground whenever we are in your presence, O God, which is always and forever when we praise you as we ought. We offer our praise and adoration and this time of worship as our response to your extravagant initiative of entering our lives in the person of Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. **Amen.**

WELCOME - INTRODUCTION

Greetings from Tamworth City Uniting Church. Wherever you are, may this time be, for you a "holy" time when you feel the presence of God near to you, and when you feel the fellowship of others, even though they are not physically near.

According to the Church calendar, this Sunday is Pentecost 13, about half way through "Ordinary Time", the period between Pentecost and Advent.

I see the three Bible readings all speaking of God's call to us in our ordinary, daily lives. At this time, may you, like Moses, hear God's voice promising, "I will be with you."

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Merciful God, through the apostle Paul, you call us to live out our faith in everyday actions beginning with loving one another with a love that is completely sincere - love with no thought of gain for self but love totally at the service of others. We are to hate evil and to hold fast to what is good, yet the grasping for financial gain by whatever means has led to a diminished understanding of what is evil and what is good; we are to care for and honour one another, yet sadly, divisions exist in churches and faith communities, when conflict arises over rights and privileges, prestige and power. Our faith is to be visible through our joy and our hope - our patience - even in suffering, and through our persevering in prayer, and we are to share what we have with those in need, and to extend hospitality not just to those we know and like - but to strangers. We know we fall short of living out our faith in these ways, so we pray that we will be renewed, strengthened and empowered with the Holy Spirit to follow Jesus, living, loving and caring as he did. This we pray in Jesus' name. **Amen.**

ASSURANCE OF FORGIVENESS

Loving Lord, in your forgiveness you offer again your invitation to know your love,
to be loved,
and to respond to your call.
In hearing your voice,
may we know that our sins are forgiven
and may we find our place within your creation. **Amen.**

HYMN TIS 619 (Have faith in God, my heart)

1. Have faith in God, my heart,
trust and be unafraid;
God will fulfil in every part
each promise he has made.
2. Have faith in God, my mind,
though off your light burns low;
God's mercy holds a wiser plan
than you can fully know.
3. Have faith in God, my soul,
his cross for ever stands:
and neither life nor death can pluck
his children from his hands.
4. Lord Jesus, make me whole;
grant me no resting place
until I rest, heart, mind and soul,
the captive of your grace.

*Bryn Austin Rees 1911-83 alt.
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BIBLE READINGS

OLD TESTAMENT Exodus 3:1-15

Moses at the Burning Bush

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

Then the Lord said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" He said, "I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain."

The Divine Name Revealed

But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I am who I am." He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I am has sent me to you.'" God also said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you':

This is my name forever,
and this my title for all generations.

EPISTLE Romans 12: 9-21

Marks of the True Christian

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

SERMON - THE BURNING BUSH

The image of the burning bush would be familiar to many. It has been the symbol of the Presbyterian Church ever since the 17th century. You may have noticed it engraved on the front of the Communion Table in our City Church (It came from the Tamworth Presbyterian Church in Marius Street at the time of Union). The words that accompany the symbol "nec tamen consumebatur" mean "and yet it was not consumed". Actually, different meanings have been ascribed to the symbol. In Reformation times, it referred to the church's being persecuted but still continuing. In later times, it has come to mean the continuing flame of God's energy and presence, His revelation of Himself, His call to service.

We recognize the image from the incident described in our Lectionary reading, Exodus chapter 3, 1-15, an event in the life of Moses, that giant figure of the Old Testament, revered for leading the enslaved Israelites out of Egypt through the desert to the Promised Land. Earlier, Moses had to flee from Egypt. He had settled in the land of Midian, where he married the daughter of Jethro and he lived there for some time, tending to his father-in-law's sheep. It was while out "beyond the wilderness" that Moses suddenly saw a bush ablaze with fire and yet not being consumed. His attention was caught: "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up."

From the bush, Moses heard God's voice telling him he was on "holy" ground. We most likely think of "holy ground" as being within a church building. But, you know, we stand on "holy ground" whenever we are in the presence of God, which can be anywhere, at any time. Moses had not been searching for God at that moment when suddenly his ordinary life was transformed by the presence of the divine. In your life as a Christian, there will come times when you will suddenly feel the presence of God very close to you. Such times are not reserved for a few special "saints" or even for special "sacred" occasions. We need to live with the expectation of God's presence near, and we should be prepared to learn from that experience. Perhaps this time of Corona Virus, when we have been unable to worship in a church, may heighten this awareness for you and increase your readiness to turn to Him in your "isolation", in your own home!

Moses was told by God to take off his shoes because he was on "holy ground". Removing footwear before entering a church is the custom in some religions.

What is being said symbolically is that our lives can become so cluttered with worldly issues that we lose sensitivity to relationships and events that could have in them the voice of God speaking to us. The poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins (also a priest), in one of his poems, likens our loss of that sensitivity to our feet being separated from the earth because of our wearing shoes:

"Why do men then now not reckon His rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod."

We all need to, figuratively, 'take off our footwear' (that is, clear away the press of worldly things) so that we can hear God's voice speaking to us in a multitude of ways – maybe not as clearly enunciated as to Moses at the burning bush – but there all the same, perhaps in a rainbow, a piece of music, sunrise, a person's smile, a friend's greeting, all manner of happy moments (or, indeed, sad ones too!).

After Moses answered God's voice, saying "Here I am.", God told him what He required of him: "I have observed the misery of my people; I know their sufferings. I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." These words showed that God was not a distant Being, but rather One who saw and heard the cries of the enslaved people and who was speaking of deliverance for them through Moses. Of course, God could have acted independently, but the Scriptures and history tell us that He often reaches out to the needy of this world through human beings. To Moses He said, "I will send you." It is still how the Lord works today. As we hear God's voice, we will be pointed to serve Him in some way. You see, to know the special holiness of God's presence is not just meant to be a personal experience which we hug to ourselves. We are commanded to take off that which insulates us from being vulnerable, from taking risks, from stepping outside our comfort zone - anything that isolates us from other people, from God, from creation, even from our truest selves. Each generation of worshippers is directed by God to unbind the straps of apathy and fear, of self-importance and arrogance, and to set aside any worn-out concepts that would prevent hearing and responding to His words.

Well, Moses wasn't at all eager to take up God's command to return to Egypt, and he made several excuses for not doing so: "What if the people question my credentials or what if they do not believe me?" You know, it is possible for people (and for us) to question the existence of God in this present pandemic, and yet, even at this time, it can be our privilege to hear the voice of God speaking to us and directing us to witness in various ways that God is with us and we can know His presence and trust Him, as we are finally led out of this trying situation. Moses asked God for signs to give to the people to prove that God was speaking to them. We can see signs of God's Spirit alive and at work about us even at this time - for instance, in all the ways the Church has adapted to communicate the Gospel and to reach out to people - new ways for God's voice to be heard!.

Then Moses tried to excuse himself by saying that he had no special talents to be able to carry out God's commands: "O my Lord, please send someone else." We too may well want to leave the Church's work to the few appointed leaders and committees or to those who have computer and other technical skills, but there are ways of communicating with others which will allow us all to express the care and concern of God. Christians are finding varied ways of serving others - doing shopping for another, transporting someone, remembering others in prayer, donations of cooking, a telephone call or a letter or card, a thoughtful word or cheery greeting, caring for each other at home, attendance at a meeting (zoom or otherwise). These things need not be beyond us and they can be the means of answering God's call to show his concern and His love, and to witness that, while the times can engender fear, anxiety, helplessness, God has not deserted us and, indeed, He can be found in all that is happening.

The Lectionary reading of Romans 12: 9-21 reinforces the importance of such witness. We are pointed to practical acts in good relationship to others, and these may seem to be just a list of ethical instructions that should apply to all members of the community. But these recommended actions should be viewed in the light of what Paul says in the first two verses of chapter 12. Our primary aim is to offer our lives to God, what Paul calls our "spiritual worship", thereby allowing God's Spirit to "renew" our lives, so that our service of others arises from a love that is the result of God's love to us. It has been put this way: "God has done great things; therefore, we will love, be ardent in spirit, rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, contribute to the needs of others, and so on". God's call is not firstly to a task or an office, but to a joyful relationship with Him. As Moses was called, so are we, for God calls each of us. Paul says in 2nd Timothy 1:9: "God has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not in virtue of our works, but in virtue of His own purpose and the grace which he gave us in Christ Jesus".

One of the Lutheran Reformation's greatest contributions to the Christian church was its teaching about "vocation". In those days it was a word referring to monks, nuns, and priests, while ordinary Christians were left to feel that they did not have divine vocations or callings. Even today, the temptation is to take the Time magazine approach and see "Religion" as but one segment, which should be kept in its place, separate from the other aspects of our lives. But according to Luther, we are all priests for one another. Our Christian calling relates directly to who we are, what gifts we have been given, and our entire life's activities and experiences. Every Christian's calling or vocation ultimately stems from a recurring sense that life is not for nothing, that who and where we are, may be exactly as God needs and wants us to be. Paul Wilkes writes, "our labours, humble or vaunted, are potentially an unending source of holiness, purification, and grace."

When we feel fearful or inadequate, let's remember that the people used by God in the Scriptures were themselves far from perfect - Jacob, David, Moses Peter, Paul himself! But a person who puts his or her life to the service of

God is given the faith to bring fear and anxiety under control, yes even in such times as we are experiencing now, because that person has found something stronger than fear, something that will subdue anxiety. When we find our purpose in God's purpose, then the Almighty stands behind us, He is with us, He is within us, His strength supplements our strength, His love expands our love, and the warmth of His grace nurtures our lives. Our God is a great God, and in His will and strength, we find (like Moses and the others) ourselves able to face difficult days and to overcome our fears and doubts. We will be enabled to venture out into the unknown land, to do all we can, on any given day, and having done all, to stand our ground.

What does God's call mean for us? This is the question at the heart of this week's Lectionary. Moses answered God's call to go back and save his people, in spite of his fears, uncertainties and struggles. In the Lectionary Gospel, Matthew 16: 24, Jesus spoke of His impending death and He called His disciples to take up their cross and follow Him in service. Both the Gospel reading and the Moses story are supported by Paul's words to the Romans, as he urges them to live in love, giving themselves for the well-being of others in practical ways. So, what God may be wanting us to hear this week is that we are all called to follow Christ, to be the liberators of others, serving and loving all people and, even in the midst of these trying times, to see a light of hope in God's promise that, in this self-giving love, we will find our 'souls' (our true, God-given selves) and we will discover real, abundant life in Him.

Moses "the excuse-maker" became Moses "the liberator", at God's call and with His support. Our "liberator" today is Jesus Christ who frees and supports us so that we may become exactly what God intends us to be. Another old motto for the burning bush symbol was "Ardens sed virens" -" burning but flourishing"! May you find that true for you!

Amen.

HYMN TIS 589 (Jesus calls us)

1. Jesus calls us! O'er the tumult
of our life's wild restless sea,
day by day his voice is sounding,
saying, 'Christian, follow me'.
2. as, of old, Saint Andrew heard it
by the Galilean lake,
turned from home and toil and kindred,
leaving all for his dear sake.
3. Jesus calls us from the worship
of the vain world's golden store,
from each idol that would keep us, saying,
'Christian, love me more,'

4. In our joys and in our sorrows,
days of toil and hours of ease,
still he calls, in cares and pleasures,
'Christian, love me more than these.'

5. Jesus calls us! By your mercies,
Saviour, may we hear your call,
give our hearts to your obedience,
serve and love you best of all.

Cecil Frances Alexander 1818-95 alt.

PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION (*Edna Sheppeard*)

Dear Father in heaven, we thank you for moving our hearts so that we may know we are Your children. Even in the midst of turmoil and evil, fear and pain You bring us happiness; Let Your Spirit be at work everywhere. Give us patience when time is the only answer to the problems that are in our own hearts and minds and in the hearts and minds of all people. Continue to strengthen us so that even the heaviest burden does not crush us and we may exult in hope because You are in control and in Your time You will make right every wrong, to the glory of Your name.

Loving & compassionate God, just like You spoke to Moses instructing him to follow You and lead your people out of Egypt to a promised land, so today You call us to serve You and show love and compassion to all those around us. Help us to respond by giving of ourselves to You so that others may know You and be happy and find peace through Your love for them. Give us a vision of Your glory that we may worship You in Spirit and in truth as we offer ourselves in service to You. Sometimes it is in the most unusual places and the most inopportune times that You speak to us, but may our ears and eyes always be open to listen for Your voice as You show us the way forward. Give us hearts that are open to Your word as we feel Your presence in our lives challenging us in ways that only through the gift of Your Holy Spirit it is possible for us to follow.

Loving and compassionate God, You call us to love our neighbours and to be bearers of Your hope and grace in our world. Expand our hearts and vision to respond with compassion to those around us who are struggling in this time of anxiety, grief and suffering. Give wisdom and strength to our health workers, and government officials, as they provide leadership in bringing our country through this crisis where COVID 19 is still active and spreading. We bring before You and into our own hearts and minds those whose work and income is uncertain, those who feel isolated, those who are fearful of an unknown future, those who live in situations of domestic violence and whose isolation increases the control of their violent partners. We think of all those who are involved with aged-care – our age-care leaders, the staff and the residents and also all those who have a loved one in an aged care facility and who are concerned about their wellbeing. We pray too Lord for the school teachers and students, in particular we think of all students who are in year 12 and who are facing their final exams not knowing what sort of future will be ahead for them.

Give wisdom and care to our Church leaders. Here at Tamworth City we uphold and pray for Rev Betty as she ministers and cares for this congregation during this difficult period. Inspire and direct our Church Council as we seek to creatively live out our worship, witness and service in ways that offer Christ's life giving love, presence and peace during a time when we cannot meet and worship together. Strengthen and sustain us to be Your people – shaped by Your abundant grace, bearers of Your generosity and overwhelming love. May we daily be mindful not only of other's needs but those of ourselves, taking time to be still, rest from our busy lives and in Your embrace breathe in Your peace.

God of wholeness we bring these prayers in Jesus name... AMEN.

THE LORD'S PRAYER

As our Saviour Christ has taught us, we are confident to say:

Our Father in heaven,

hallowed be your Name,

your kingdom come,

your will be done

on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins

as we forgive those

who sin against us.

Save us in the time of trial

and deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power

and the glory are yours

now and for ever. Amen.

HYMN TIS 658 (I, the Lord of sea and sky)

1. I, the Lord of sea and sky, I have heard my people cry.

All who dwell in dark and sin my hand will save.

I who made the stars of night, I will make their darkness bright

Who will bear my light to them? Whom shall I send?

Here I am, Lord; is it I, Lord?

I have heard you calling in the night;

I will go, Lord, if you lead me.

I will hold your people in my heart.

2. I, the Lord of snow and rain, I have borne my people's pain;

I have wept for love of them. They turn away.

I will break their hearts of stone, give them hearts for love alone.

I will speak my word to them. Whom shall I send?

Here I am, Lord; is it I, Lord?

I have heard you calling in the night;

I will go, Lord, if you lead me.

I will hold your people in my heart.

3. I, the Lord of wind and flame, I will tend the poor and lame,
I will set a feast for them. My hand will save.
Finest bread I will provide till their hearts are satisfied.
I will give my life to them. Whom shall I send?
*Here I am, Lord; is it I, Lord?
I have heard you calling in the night;
I will go, Lord, if you lead me.
I will hold your people in my heart.*

*Daniel L. Schutte 1947 – (suggested by Isaiah 6)
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SENDING FORTH

God promised to be with Moses, and we are here to witness to the fulfilment of that promise. From generation to generation, the God of Israel is also your God, the God of your Church and the God of all His people everywhere. The God of the burning bush is waiting even now to encounter you, and change you. In all you do, be sustained and surprised by the love of God.

BENEDICTION

And may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, rest, remain, and abide with you, now and forever more. **Amen.**