



Seacliff Uniting Church
Online Worship & Electronic Resources
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Celebration of Worship
Easter 7

CALL TO WORSHIP

Bless, O God, our worship this day,
that it may fill our hearts with the gladness and holiness of the Sabbath.
Let us receive from it increased strength and guidance for our life and work.
So shall the spirit of this day spread blessing over all our days.

(Traditional Jewish Blessing)

HYMN: "SING PRAISE AND THANKSGIVING" (TiS 107)

Sing praise and thanksgiving, let all creatures living
now worship their maker with gladness and song;
all glory and honour we come to him bringing:
O praise to the Almighty, sing praise to our God!

Our lives of his making he brings to their waking;
in darkness he held us in his gracious care,
now into the light we are called from our sleeping:
O praise to the Almighty, sing praise to our God!

Lord, frame our desiring to do your requiring,
that unto your glory be all that we do;
and where we have faltered, give strength and give healing:
O praise to the Almighty, sing praise to our God!

Paul Gerhardt Tr Margaret Barclay Adapted by Colin Alexander Gibson
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PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING

Living, Loving God

Living God,
Loving God,
we thank you
and we praise you
for your presence deep in our hearts,
for your presence here in our midst,
for this opportunity to be together
to affirm our identity
and to celebrate our common vision.

We thank you for all the blessings you have given,
for calling us to be your people
for forgiving us our shortcomings
for the gift of life that we possess
for the promise of eternal life.

Blessing, honour and glory are yours
O God of love
Alleluia! Amen

(adapted from a prayer by Ken de Lisle, Canada, in *A World of Blessing*)

BIBLE READINGS

Acts 1:6-11 & John 17:1-5

PRAYER

Faithful God,
enlighten us with your wisdom,
teach us to look beyond our limited ways, and
help us to follow in the path of Jesus.
Amen

MESSAGE: "FINDING REAL LIFE"

I have a theory. Life is lived backwards! See how you think this may work. We die first and get the hard bit out of the way. Then, when we're young enough, we enter a retirement home until too young they kick you out. You're given a gold watch and sent to work for 45 years until you're young enough to really enjoy your retirement. You then go to Uni for 3-4 years where life is just one big party. Then you graduate to high school and eventually primary school where you have no responsibilities and play all the time. Eventually become a little baby where all your needs are taken care of until you go back in the womb and spend the last 9 months of your life floating. Finally become a gleam in somebody's eye!

One of the problems I think we have in life is that we feel we're not a gleam in anybody's eye, even our own. For some people, life is a negative experience. Perhaps they agree with Hemingway who said, "*Life is just a dirty trick, a short journey from nothingness to nothingness.*" Others don't feel so despondent and negative about life, but neither do they feel particularly positive about. We can hear it expressed in phrases like, "There must be something more than this."

Today's Gospel is from John, and John's Gospel is a book of life. Life is one of John's main themes, starting right from the beginning of his Gospel. In the opening few sentences of the Gospel John launches into the theme of life: "*All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life.*" John concludes his Gospel by telling us why he wrote it; "... so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life..." In between we have perhaps the most succinct statement about Jesus' intent: "*I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly*" And that word "abundantly" means; 'over and above', 'more than necessary', 'superadded', 'supreme'. And in today's text Jesus reminds the disciples and us that he came to give eternal life.

This is what John wants us to know; that God is all about life; that God's desire is that we experience the fullness of life that God intended us to have.

But I think we have a bit of a problem, at least in the English language, when we use that word 'life'. In English we have one word for it, one word to describe all the dimensions and wonder of life. However, the ancients knew better and the Greeks had at least three words for life. They knew that life in all its dimensions, in all its fullness could not be expressed in one word.

The first word they use for life is Bios.

It is from this word that we derive our English word biology and it describes the part of life that deals with mechanics of living; eating, resting, reproducing.

This is a big part of life and an important part. As Jesus in the Sermon on Mount, when he talks about our worrying over what to eat or drink or wear, reminds us that the *"Father knows you need all these things."* The 'bios' part of life is important. Christianity is not an anti-material religion in that it sees creation as a good gift from God; something to be enjoyed.

But if we satisfy our biological needs have we found full life? Is that all there is to life or what is most important about life? Yes say the butcher, baker and Levi jeans maker! Those who hold power in our consumer society have a vested interest in persuading us that we have many needs and are incomplete, a situation that can best be rectified by our purchasing whatever is needed to fill up the gap.

So we're encouraged to live purely on this biological level, to focus on making a living instead of making a life. Is that what life is all about?

Well the ancients didn't think so; they knew there was a deeper dimension to life, so they had a second word for life:

Psyche

It is from this we derive words like 'psychology' and it reflects on that part of life that deals with workings of the mind and the emotions, what we might call the inner life.

We hear a lot, especially in these days of Covid-19 about the importance of maintaining good mental health. So we have workshops, seminars and conferences on personal development and growth. And this is good. Like bios, the psyche element is an important part of our lives.

The Biblical writers have always been aware of this importance. It was 3000 years ago an ancient writer foreshadowed part of psychology when he wrote: *"Be careful how you think. Your life is shaped by your thoughts."* The apostle Paul knew if our lives were to change we would need to reset our minds: *"be transformed by the renewing of your minds."* You see, what occupies our minds shapes our lives, so we need to attend to our mental and emotional well-being.

But if we enjoy good mental health have we made it? Have we found the full life? Well, no said the ancients, because they said if we leave it there we're missing the depths of life. They had another word for life to describe that deeper dimension: 'zoe'.

Zoe

Perhaps better known as a nice girls name it is the word for life that is found on the lips of Jesus when he talks about the abundant life or eternal life.

Almost instinctively when we hear about eternal life, we tend to think of the quantity of life, of living forever. But eternal life is less about the quantity of life than the quality of life. And you don't have to wait until you're dead to experience it. Eternal life is about the Divine life living in and through us. It's about

living the divine life-charged quality of every moment. It's what we might call the spiritual life or the life of the soul.

As life will not be complete without the bios or psyche aspects, neither will it be complete without attention being given to the well-being of the soul. The Latin poet Juvenal said: *"The human person was made with a God shaped vacuum which only God can fill."*

If we ignore the soul dimension of life we will always feel incomplete. *Thomas Moore, the psychotherapist not the saint of old wrote in his book "Care of the Soul", that he considered loss of soul the great sickness of the C20th. He argues when the soul is neglected it doesn't just go away but it appears in our obsessions, addictions, violence and loss of meaning. This inattention to the soul is evident in those who complain of emptiness, vague depression, or disillusionment. He goes on to say that we endeavour to fill the void with entertainment, possessions, sex, drugs, power and a glut of information.*

So, invites John in his Gospel; open yourself to the deeper dimensions of life, allow the very life of God to come alive in you, for therein is the fullness of life. We may discover what one of the very early Christian thinkers, St. Augustine did, *"You have made us for yourself and our souls are restless until they rest in You."*

The invitation for us is to explore ways which enhance the well-being of the soul. As we have exercises and practices for our physical and mental well-being, so too there are exercises and practices to enhance our spiritual well-being. What is it that is healthy for our souls?

We will all have our own ways of attending to our soul's well-being. For some it will happen in the company of others: worship, study or prayer groups, or fellowships. For others it will perhaps be more personal and inner: meditation, prayer and reflection. Others will find that more external practices help nurture them: ministries of service, justice or pastoral practice.

The important thing is to discern what it is that nourishes our soul and give attention to it in our lives.

The words of theologian and poet John Taylor resonate with me on this point: *"It has long been my conviction that God is not hugely concerned as to whether we are religious or not. What matters to God ... is whether we are alive or not."*

Various cultures around the world have expressed in their legends how important it is to attend to the soul. One, which comes from Norway, says that before a soul was put into the body, that soul is kissed by God. The soul retains the memory of that kiss and relates everything to it. In other words, to know the fullness of life, as we need to attend to the body and the mind, we also need to attend to the soul.

For that is real life- awakening to the kiss of God.

OFFERING

God of immeasurable resources,
we offer our gifts as signs of our willingness
to explore more fully the depths of your being,
by opening more fully the depth of our being to you.
Help us to discover that which we never knew we had,
and show us how such discoveries can be used
in the discipleship of Christ.
Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

You go before us

You go before us, God of the prophets,
in the green places and in the hard places.

You go before us
with a vision which unsettles us,
with words that transform us.

You look into the heart of life
and turn us away from the shallow
towards the truth.

You go before us.

You bring us the promise of your kingdom-
with food for the hungry,
healing of the sick,
with freedom from harm,
and peace.

You go before us.

Sometimes we see you.

Sometimes we just miss you.

We want to follow you but we are afraid.

We are afraid of the cost to ourselves.

We hurt you and one another
and we pray for forgiveness.

But then, deep within us,
your word comes to us.

We hear your voice:

"Follow me".

For where we are, you are.

When we are lost, you are there.

When we are in pieces, you make us whole.

Lord's Prayer...

*Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.*

Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins

as we forgive those who sin against us.

*Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.*

*For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours
now and forever.*

Amen

(Susan Miller, New Prayers for the Iona Community)

SONG: "MY PEACE I GIVE" (ATE 240)

My peace I give, my peace I leave you;
though I am gone, you will know my peace.
When the raging war thunders round you,
you'll be safe with me in my care.

*This is my gift to you,
this is my gift to you.*

My peace I give, unexpected treasure.
It can't be bought, it can't be earned;
open hands are all that is needed,
open hands that wait to receive.

My peace I give to the lost and broken-
I bring you home I heal your wounds.
Every scrap of broken creation,
stretching out my arms, I embrace.

My peace I give, as the angels promised;
You'll know my heart, you'll know my mind
as you share my death and my rising.
Share my peace wherever you go.

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BLESSING - THE SHALOM OF GOD

The blessing of God,
The eternal goodwill of God
The shalom of God
The wildness and the warmth God,
be among us and between us
now and always

(St Hilda Community, England)

FOR REFLECTION

- Is there anything that stands out to you in the readings, the message or the service?
- How would you describe 'eternal life'?
- "It has long been my conviction that God is not hugely concerned as to whether we are religious or not. What matters to God ... is whether we are alive or not." Do you have any response to this Taylor quote?
- Where or when have you or do you feel close to God? Are there practices which nurture your connection with God?
- The Gospel text (John 17:1-5) refers a lot to 'glory' or 'glorify'. What does 'glory' mean to you? How do we 'glorify' God?
- An early theologian, St Irenaeus, said, "The glory of God is the human person fully alive." What does this say to you?

SOME QUOTES

- "The author of John's Gospel wrote, 'This is eternal life, to know God.' According to the verse eternal life is a present reality, not simply a future one, and the content of that life is the experience of knowing God in the present."
-Marcus Borg, *The God We Never Knew*
- "The conversion to our authentic identities opens up a surprising new experience of time which the Gospels call 'eternal life'. In our true selves, we live no longer bound by a life of mere chronology, but actually share in God's eternity."
-Henri Nouwen, *Beauty of the Beloved*
- "The fundamental human appetite- the Gospel of John calls it hunger and thirst- is to know God, for to know God is eternal life."
-Fred B Craddock, *Preaching*
- "... what we feel is a yearning for the fullness of life and an end to the limitations, compromises and struggles that characterize our present existence. Eternity has been defined as the complete and simultaneous possession of life, whereas our hold on life in this present mode of existence is fragmentary and impermanent... We want to do more than survive: we want to have life abundantly."
-Michael Casey, *Fully Human, Fully Divine*