



Seacliff Uniting Church
Online Worship & Electronic Resources
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Pentecost 2

CALL TO WORSHIP

We come to worship God
who is always with us.

*In thanksgiving for all God has done,
we come to offer ourselves to God again.*

We come and proclaim aloud
the goodness of God,

*and rededicate ourselves
to being followers of Jesus.*

We come to worship God
who is always with us.

HYMN: TELL OUT MY SOUL (TIS 161)

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord!
Unnumbered blessings, give my spirit voice;
tender to me the promise of his word;
in God my Saviour shall my heart rejoice.

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his name!
Make known his might, the deeds his arm has done;
his mercy sure, from age to age the same;
his holy name - the Lord, the Mighty One.

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his might!
Powers and dominions lay their glory by.
Proud hearts and stubborn wills are put to flight,
the hungry fed, the humble lifted high.

Tell out, my soul, the glories of his word!
Firm is his promise, and his mercy sure.
Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord
to children's children and for evermore!

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PRAYER

Our living and loving God,
great lover of humanity,
we come to you gratefully,
for you have not left us
like orphans in a cold universe,
but you have come to us through Jesus Christ.
You call us to be his brothers and sisters,
and joint heirs in the kingdom of your love.
You, who have blessed us so remarkably,
please bless us again now as we worship you.

May our worship
clarify our blurred vision,
liberate our dry spirits and
lift our hearts in joyful praise.

O God of all life;
you are always moving adventurously into the future
extending the boundaries of life and love.
Gracious God,
we come to you with our grieving
for lost opportunities and timid faith.

We know there are many times
when we choose to stay with the familiar,
in known places, with known people,
convincing ourselves this is where you want us to be
and closing our ears to your calling voice.

Please forgive our sins and remove our shame,
heal our dis-eases, correct our distortions,
reinforce our faith, enlarge our love.
Let all that is true, beautiful and compassionate
find a new lease of life in our character.

For your name's sake.
Amen

Hear this Good News:
Jesus died to show us God's unending love for us
even though we were sinners.
So be assured that as followers of Jesus,
our sins are forgiven.
As forgiven children of God, go and proclaim the Good News.
Thanks be to God!

BIBLE READINGS

Matthew 9:35-38, 10:1&5a

Genesis 18:1-15

PRAYER

We listen to your word Lord,
not to confirm in us our own prejudices
or to keep us from pain,
but to know the truth
without which we are never free.
Amen

MESSAGE: GOD OF THE IMPOSSIBLE

Hans Babblinger of Ulm in Germany wanted to fly. He used to sit and watch the birds soar on currents of Bavarian Alps where he lived. And he longed to join them; to break the grip of gravity fly. But there was a problem. Hans lived in the 16th Century. There were no planes, no helicopters, not even gliders. However, Hans was a dreamer, a visionary; a man born before his time. What he wanted was deemed impossible.

Still, Hans made a career out of helping people do the impossible. He made artificial limbs for people in a time when amputation was a common cure, so he was kept very busy. He did things like help people with no legs walk again. He helped people to do the impossible.

He longed to do that for himself; to overcome the impossible. So with time and using his skills he constructed a set of wings. Then the day came to test the wings in the foothills of Bavarian Alps. That was a good choice; a lucky choice. At that spot up currents are common so he glided gracefully to the ground.

Pretty soon Hans was a celebrity and a bit of a tourist attraction to his region. One day it was learned that the King was coming to visit Ulm. The bishop of the cathedral wanted to impress the King so he arranged for Hans to put on an exhibition of flying. But he wanted one change. Large crowds were expected and so Hans was asked to do his demonstration in the lowlands. He chose the bluffs near the Danube where he expected to jump off and glide down to water. That was a poor choice. In the lowlands there were no updrafts and Hans fell unceremoniously into river. The King was horrified. The Bishop was mortified.

The next Sunday the Bishop preached from the Cathedral. The topic of his sermon was; "Man was not meant to fly". And never again did Hans try. He died not long after, his dream unfulfilled and buried in the grip of the impossible.

Throughout the pages of the Bible I find that time after time that our view of what is possible is challenged. This notion is what lies behind the story of Abraham and Sarah.

Early in his life God had promised Abraham he would have a son and heir and from him would come a great nation. But when there was no child and nothing happened for long time this promise seemed impossible. When we meet them in this story they are both old, Abraham 100, Sarah 90. They're looking forward to retirement and Wednesday afternoon bowls. At this stage of life they're not really wanting to start a family. Sarah may have arthritis; how is she going to put on a nappy!

But then three strangers come in to camp and Abraham immediately sets about offering the customary middle-eastern hospitality. In the first part of the story Abraham is very busy. The story moves rapidly with a succession of active verbs. Abraham sees, runs, bows down, speaks, hastens, runs some more, takes, gives, and stands as the strangers enjoy the meal.

Then, after the meal, the second part of the story slows down as we arrive at the main part. When the meal has concluded one of the guests drops a bombshell. After thanking Abraham for the meal he says, "By the way, when I come back this way Sarah will have had a baby." Sarah is not there but she heard and laughed

at impossibility. She knows maternal time clock has run down. I know some people these days leave having children into their 30's or 40's. But 90! Who wants to be first time mum at 90?!

It becomes a bit awkward when people start noticing Sarah's weight gain. "What's happened to you?" they ask. Sarah replies, "I'm not really sure. All I know is that I'm the only woman who pays her obstetrician out of the old age pension." But one of guests says, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Can I really have a child when I am so old?' **Is anything too hard for the Lord?**"

This story is the beginning of a theological tradition of redefining what is possible: Is anything too hard for the Lord? What the story is saying is that if this birth is possible, then anything God promises is possible. And so Isaac is born. God has not only changed their family structure, but has also changed the way we define what is possible. With this birth the bounds of possibility are shattered. This story asserts that God makes possible what our culture regards as impossible.

You see God wrote the book on making the impossible possible. Let's look at the book. If God's reality were limited to what we deem possible Isaac would not be born. An 80 year old shepherd by the name of Moses would not have taken on the might of Egypt and liberated the Hebrews from slavery. A teenage shepherd, considered the runt of the litter in his family, would not have fought a giant and saved the nation. But don't tell David. A group of shepherds on the night shift wouldn't normally hear choirs of angels and see God in a stable. But don't tell the Bethlehem bunch.

What these stories are saying is that what is possible is what God says is possible. What is possible is not what we think is possible or what our culture defines as possible. Our domesticated reason tends to embrace what is real in terms of what our culture tells us is possible. But what stories like that of Abraham and Sarah would have us understand is that God is not confined to our limits: "*Is anything too hard for the Lord?*"

If we answer "Yes" to that question then God is not yet confessed as God. We have not conceded radical freedom to God and have concluded that God may only work within the realm of what we have decreed possible. We have determined to live in a closed world where things are limited to what we see as possible.

If however we have the courage to answer "No, nothing is impossible for the Lord", then our normal way of understanding life is broken open. We then concede there are possibilities beyond our definition of reality, that this world is not fixed, settled, stable or hopeless. There are other possibilities in and for this world.

If the reality is limited to what we think is possible then we would have had no Mother Theresa. When she had the dream of a place where people could die cared for and with dignity instead of on the streets of Calcutta she went to her superiors with the idea. They asked her how much money she had, to which she replied, "I have three pennies." "Surely sister," they said, "you know you cannot do anything with three pennies." "Yes" she said, "but with God and three pennies I can do anything." Those words, 'with God', make all the difference in the world.

If we forget that we too easily become discouraged and frustrated. We give up hope for our future and settle for despair. We live in a closed universe confined to the limits of our imagination, our dreaming, our understanding. And this can become a world which is altogether too small. Is anything too hard for the Lord? Is God limited to our expectations? Is God restricted to our definitions of what is possible? Forgetting past impossibilities is to settle for what we declare possible, to give up hope and to define the world in terms of our understanding.

That's why we're invited to remember stories of past 'impossibilities'. As we recall these stories we are reminding ourselves that what was 'impossible' in fact became 'possible', became reality and we recall that we don't have to embrace our world's view of what is real and possible. Because 100 year olds become parents and because (reflecting on our Gospel reading) Jesus called an improbable bunch of followers who

nonetheless did the impossible and went about changing the world, we believe that what is possible is different from what our culture says or we expect.

We don't have to be limited to what we think is possible. However, if we are going to open ourselves to God's possibilities, it will mean letting go of many of our old securities. If we want to enter the world of God's possibilities we can't stay comfortably where we are. It will mean change; risk; stepping out of our comfort zone to embrace the incredible world of God's possibility.

In Miguel Cervantes' work, Don Quixote, which became the musical Man of La Mancha, the lead character says, "Am I crazy because I see the world as it can become; or are others crazy because they can only see it as it is?"

As people of faith we dare to dream crazy dreams about how the world and life can be. Can we dream of a new world with food for all? Can we dream of a world of peace? Can we dream of communities living in harmony? Can we dream of the values of compassion and justice governing our relationships? Can we dream of world where all people are valued? Can we dream of our lives filled with meaning, purpose and fullness?

Too often such dreams die the death of incredulity; we can't just believe they're possible. We're told, or we convince ourselves, that such things are not realistic, not practical and not possible. But Abraham and Sarah's story reminds us that what is possible is what God says is possible. And so we dare to dream again, to hope again, to believe again.

Now, a message such as this leaves itself open to ridiculous interpretation. It can be misinterpreted as God offering us a blank cheque to us having health, wealth, security, power, healing or whatever we desire. This is a path eagerly grasped by religious exploiters who would tell us that if we have enough faith we can have whatever we want. These stories tell us that what is possible is what is promised by God, and we need to remember that not everything is promised. What is promised is what corresponds to God's character and good purposes, not to our every whim and desire.

However, is it possible that God's incredible possibilities can be resisted and frustrated by our limited thinking and believing? Can we hold tenaciously to our small dreams and visions and stifle God's reality? The story of Abraham and Sarah and the birth of Isaac invite us into another world; a world where what is possible is what God says is possible; where God's possibilities, against all our probabilities, make life utterly new. Isaac's birth reminds us that the God who can make possible this new life can make possible new life in all circumstances. *Is anything too hard for the Lord?*

O and by the way, what happened to the Cathedral at Ulm. Well, it is mostly deserted now with the only visitors being tourists. And most of them fly to get there!

OFFERING PRAYER

God of peace and love,
we offer these gifts in response
to the many wonderful gifts
we have received from you.
May our lives reflect our gratitude
through our willingness
to go out into the world as disciples of Jesus,
proclaiming the good news in word and deed.
This we pray in Jesus' name.
Amen

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

O God,
like this parched land waiting for refreshing rains,
the whole world waits for your love to emerge.
It holds its breath in hope for justice and kindness to be seen.
It longs and dreams of a time of peace for all people.
Empowering God,
give us the gifts we need
to be part of your movement throughout the world.
Open us in fresh ways to your vision
for the changes that must come,
and bring us to that place where we can see clearly
who we could be in your name.

(Silence)

Lord Jesus,
go deeply into our lives
that we may be more open to hear the cries
of those who linger in despair:
for those whose days are filled with disease and sickness,
for those who wander helplessly and aimlessly through each day,
for those who are easily overlooked and cry out for compassion,
for those whose lives are full and yet feel it isn't enough,
for those who feel timid in the face of your call to follow.

And Lord, may your Spirit work in us,
that we may go from this place in your strength and wisdom,
humbly walking into the world as those
who have been touched by your kindness
and have experienced your love.

We ask this in the name of Jesus who taught us to pray:

*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

HYMN: BEAUTY FOR BROKENNESS (TIS 690)

Beauty for brokenness,
hope for despair,
Lord, in the suffering,
this is our prayer.

Bread for the children,
Justice, joy, peace,
sunrise to sunset
your kingdom increase.

Shelter for fragile lives,
cures for their ills,
work for the craftsmen,
trade for their skills;
land for the dispossessed,
rights for the weak;
voices to plead the cause
of those who can't speak.

*God of the poor,
friend of the weak,
give us compassion we pray;
melt our cold hearts,
let tears fall like rain.
Come change our love
from a spark to a flame.*

Refuge from cruel wars,
havens from fear,
cities for sanctuary,
freedoms to share,
peace to the killing-fields,
scorched earth to green;
Christ for the bitterness,
his cross for the pain.

Rest for the ravaged earth,
oceans and streams,
plundered and poisoned,
our future, our dreams.
Lord, end our madness,
carelessness, greed;
make us content with
the things that we need.

*God of the poor,
friend of the weak,
give us compassion we pray;
melt our cold hearts,
let tears fall like rain.
Come change our love
from a spark to a flame.*

Lighten our darkness,
breathe on this flame
until your justice burns
brightly again;
until the nations

learn of your ways,
seek your salvation
and bring you their praise.

*God of the poor,
friend of the weak,
give us compassion we pray;
melt our cold hearts,
let tears fall like rain.
Come change our love
from a spark to a flame.*

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BLESSING

As you go into this week,
travel in the name of Christ.

Travel lightly
so that you will not be weighed down
by the burdens and cares of this world.

Travel boldly,
for you are apostles of Christ
who has overcome the world.

Travel humbly
for as friends of Jesus no service is too menial
no person unworthy of help.

Travel joyfully
for when the road is rough and the night dark
we shall never travel alone.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God and
the fellowship of the Holy Spirit
be with us all.

SUNG BLESSING

May the feet of God walk with you,
and his hand hold you tight.
May the eye of God rest on you,
and his ear hear your cry.
May the smile of God be for you,
and his breath give you life.
May the Child of God grow in you,
and his love bring you home.

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FOR REFLECTION

- Was there anything that stood out for you in the readings, message or service today?
- Do you have any particular response to the theme for today? (God redefines what is possible.)
- Hospitality was a big deal in the ancient near eastern culture. The Hebrew Talmud, which outlined the teachings of Jewish rabbis, states that "*Hospitality to strangers is greater than welcoming the Divine Presence*" (Shabbat 127a).
In what ways does Abraham demonstrate remarkable hospitality to the three men who appear before him?
To whom are we called to offer hospitality?
- Sarah denied she had laughed at the news of the impending pregnancy and birth because she was afraid (v 15).
Has there been a time when fear has dictated your actions?

SOME QUOTES TO PONDER

George Mendenhall, C20th

"Politics is the art of the possible. The role of religion is to help decide what is possible."

Walter Brueggemann. "The Faith Tradition of Abraham and Sarah"

"Thus the character of God contains for Israel the undeniable basis for hope against every closed system... which keeps Israel's life from becoming reduced to what can be known, handled, managed and defined."