

Straight from the "Hart"

Worship Service from January 16, 2022



Opening Prayer

Almighty God, we have come because you call us to gather in the name of your Son, the light of the world: Grant that we may be enlightened and inspired by your Spirit, that we may shine with your radiance. You gift us with life and possessions. You remind us that we are your gift to others. In the name of your Son, we joyfully and faithfully offer ourselves back to you in Jesus' name. Amen.

Apostle's Creed

Epiphany season celebrates the arrival and revelation of Jesus as the saving Light of the world and the spread of his creating, restoring light as his ministry on earth expands...

Music Morning Has Broken

Music (vv 1,2) Shine, Jesus, Shine

Call to Worship (L: Lay Reader, **C: Congregation**)

L: God's mercy is as great as all the heavens!

C: His faithfulness reaches beyond the clouds.

L: His justice is as solid as the mountains.

C: His decisions are wise and as deep as the oceans.

L: He cares for and preserves his creation. How precious is his constant lovingkindness.

C: All humanity seeks refuge under his wings.

L: Come, feast on the abundant blessings of his house, and drink from his rivers of delight.

C: For he is the fountain of life, and by his light, we are filled with light.

L: He will pour out his unfailing love on those who know him.

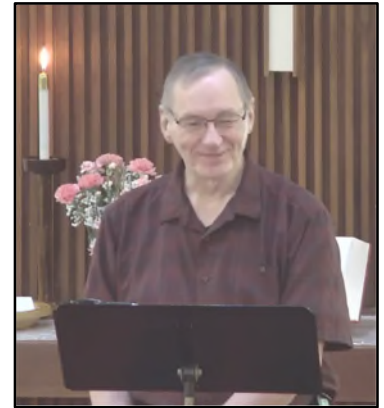
C: He will continue to bless those who long to do his will.

Theme

God's wise and merciful care for his creation and unfailing covenant love with his human family is a repeated theme throughout the Bible. William Bennett describes

the following story as one that comes in many different versions of African folklore that speak to the essence of home as one soul reaching for another...

Once upon a time there was a man who thought he was the happiest man alive because he had a loving wife and 4 healthy sons. The oldest was named Keen-Eyes because no one was better at following tracks through field and jungle. The second was named Sharp-Ears because he knew best the call of every creature in the wilderness. The third was named Strong-Arms because he could win any strength contest. The youngest was only a baby, but his father was sure he would also grow up to be as skilled and as devoted.



One morning the family woke to discover the father missing. When there was still no sign of him the next day, they wondered where he might have gone. One suggested he went to visit his uncle, another guessed he went to the festival in the next village, or maybe he went into the hills to enjoy the cool mountain breezes. Mother simply uncertainly shook her head.

As the days passed, the children wondered occasionally, but stopped talking about it because they feared the worst. Then one day the youngest son, too young to understand such dark fears, climbed onto his mother's lap and spoke his first words: "Where is father? I want to see my father."

The older children gazed at him for a moment and then decided they should go look for him, because he might be hurt and needing their help. Keen-Eyes picked up his trail and they followed it over hills and through valleys, farther and farther from home. Eventually the trail faded so that even Keen-Eyes could not find it again. But that is when Sharp-Ears said, "I hear someone crying out." He took the lead, and they went they went even deeper into the wilderness. At last, they came to a river and beside it lay their father, using a spear to hold off a growling leopard. Strong-Arms took the lead and the beast soon ran off to avoid the boy's powerful grip.

Father said, "I came into the jungle to hunt, but I hurt my leg and couldn't get back home, I've only been able to move around enough to get a bit of food to survive -- but I was getting pretty weak, so weak that that leopard decided I was time to attack -- and that is when you showed up - just in time!" They dressed the wounded leg, shared food to give father strength, made a stretcher to carried him back to the

village. Everyone listened to the story about how his three sons saved their father and they praised the boys' skill and devotion.

But it went to their heads. At home they started arguing with each other about who was the most instrumental in saving their father. Keen -Eyes reminded them that if he hadn't seen the trail as far as he did, while Sharp-Ears said if he hadn't heard his father's voice in the distance, while Strong-Arms reminded them that would all have come to naught if he hadn't run off the leopard. They took their arguments to their father who listened for a while and then finally waved them silent. Then he spoke, "I owe all three of you my life for your part in my rescue, but if you ask which did the most to bring me home, I must tell you it is him," and he picked up his youngest son. Then they all remembered that it was the boy's first words asking for his father that had spurred them all into action. It was the little boy's loving heart that brought his father home.

Reverse the situation and we have Father God's loving heart that reaches out, seeking, listening, defending his precious, beloved children so that he can bring them back home, back to himself.

Last week we heard how God, in his love, used the Persian Empire to free his people from the Babylonian Empire as they expanded toward Egypt. But for a couple years, political intrigue created some internal division with the Persian Empire -- leading to battles that were fought right in Palestine. During this time of destabilization, Jerusalem was politically and economically vulnerable. Anxiety was high as many issues were debated and left unresolved, amplifying uncertainty and panic over their future. This is the backdrop of today's urgent call to constant vigilance and prayer for God's city and God's people, which as written, is expanded to include us all as well in our uncertain times... (There are some issues with that, but we will get to that in the sermon)

(Abridged from "A Father's Return" in *The Moral Compass: Stories for a Life's Journey*, ed. with commentary by William J. Bennett).

Responsive Reading (L: Lay Reader, **C: Congregation**)

L: We will not keep our peace until a right relationship with God shines out like the dawn.

C: We will not be silent until our salvation blazes like a burning torch.

L: Then all the nations and their leaders will see our radiant goodness, and God himself will call us by a new name.

C: We will be a beautiful crown of splendor held in God's hand.

L: We will no longer be spoken of as abandoned, desolate, deserted, or forsaken.

C: We will be called "My Delight" and "married".

L: For as a young groom rejoices over his bride, so God will rejoice over us. Therefore, people have been posted all around us to pray constantly for God to remember and fulfill his promises to his people.

C: All of us who call on the Lord should never rest, giving God no rest until he restores us and makes his bride the praise of the earth.

The passage begins and ends by saying we can't stop talking about and praying for the salvation that God, brings to his people. For them back then, it centered around the restoration of Jerusalem and his people who lived there, against oppressive Empires... For us it is about his salvation against the oppressive powers of sin and living in his kingdom on earth now and heaven in the future... Let's sing about how we love to tell our story...

Music (vv 1,2,4) I Love to Tell the Story

Prayers

It is not only our speaking about and to God, it is also about God speaking to us. A familiar Children's tune (Are you sleeping or frere-jacques?) was used to remind us to listen as we prepare our hearts for prayer...

Prayer Music God is Speaking (to tune of Frère Jacques? (Are you Sleeping?))

God is speaking, God is speaking.
Do you hear? Do you hear?
Trust and you will hear him, Trust and you will hear him,
God is love, God is love.

God is speaking, always speaking.
using needs, using joys,
speaking in his wisdom, speaking in his mercy,
calling hearts, changing lives.

God is speaking, God is speaking.
Do you hear? Hear his heart?
Trust and you will hear him, if you want to hear him.
God is love, always love.

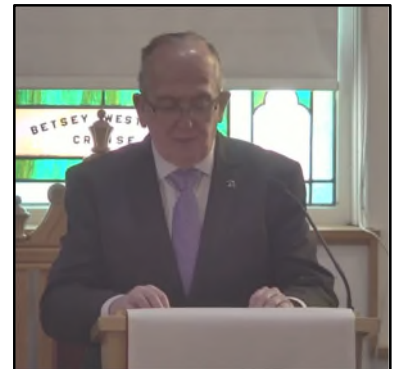
Pastor's God of all creation, we come with grateful hearts, trusting that your love speaks all around us. David sung that the heavens and skies have no words, yet they pour forth speech by day and by night, declaring your glory. During this Epiphany season, we remember your perfect light shining through the life of your Son, Jesus. You revealed yourself through his life and words, bringing love and hope and peace, and we pray that through your Spirit you will continue to fill creation with your Word again, allowing us to sense the greatness of your name and the power of your love; constantly reminding us that as we gather under your Light, we are not only your creation, but your covenant people. **Praises and Petitions** And that is why we lift our hearts to you in faith with our praises and concerns, knowing that you listen to our prayers and hold close all those who are in need. Specifically, we continue to pray for * lone Bennett, who has moved to a care facility, * for Reba Alred with tests, * and for her grown children Sabrina and Michael, both with covid, * and for Terri Priess's neighbor Nancy Kelley, whose neighbor Jack Kelly passed away last week * for all those suffering from the impact of covid in any way, * and from those things and people on our hearts and minds that have not been spoken for a while or have never been spoken. * Continue to bring healing to all wounds, make whole those who feel broken; guide those who feel confused, transform our hearts and lives as you see fit. May we live in the delight of your grace and share our varied gifts and graces of love in the name of the one who taught us to pray **Lord's Prayer**

Bible Intro

In the responsive reading, we already heard Isaiah call a troubled people to persistent prayer for a realization of God's promises. In Luke, after Jesus finished praying, one of his disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray. Jesus teaches them what we call the Lord's prayer, and he also taught them to keep on asking, keep on seeking and knocking, and you will receive, find, and doors will be opened. After all, if human fathers know how to give to their children what they need when they ask for it, then certainly the heavenly Father will give the Holy Spirit to those who ask. And in the middle of these lessons

and Reading Luke 11:5b-8

... he used this illustration: "Suppose you went to a friend's house at midnight, wanting to borrow three loaves of bread. You would shout up to him, 'A friend of



mine has just arrived for a visit and I've nothing to give him to eat.' He would call down from his bedroom, 'Please don't ask me to get up. The door is locked for the night and we are all in bed. I just can't help you this time.' "But I'll tell you this—though he won't do it as a friend, if you keep knocking long enough, he will get up and give you everything you want—just because of your persistence. (TLB)

Music (vv 1,2) Sweet Hour of Prayer

Sermon We Will be Called God's Delight

We have before us today a national destabilization crisis, and a parable about a personal household crisis of hospitality -- a serious social failing in that culture. The national event is in the context of a people who feel God is silent (meaning, not answering or acting) about their anxious situation. The parable is meant to simply teach consistency in prayer, but on the surface, some may infer that God isn't particularly responsive unless, like the national call, we wear God out with constant prayers. But if God doesn't answer in a timing or in a way that we expect doesn't mean he isn't acting or that he doesn't care or that he isn't powerful.

It brings up the question, then, What is the purpose of prayer? Only to get what we want? when we want it, how we want it? Or, to learn to trust and get to know and align ourselves with and wanting more of what God wants for this world and for us? Those two things are not always in conflict. But prayer and its answers are not dictated by on the one extreme – some sort of magical formula -- say the right words in the right way with the right rituals and then God is compelled to answer your request the way you want it – it doesn't work that way. We don't believe in magic, we believe in a relationship with God. On the other extreme, prayer is also not like the rules of logic, math, or hard science: "If Force A (prayer) reaches Force B (God), then result C must always must then therefore happen every time. It doesn't work that way either, because it is the communication of a loving relationship designed to move people into a closer relationship with each other, not just about getting a certain type of result that we want from the other.

The more you get to know the characteristics, the likes and dislikes of the other person in the relationship, the more our asking will align with the heart of the other person, right?

I'll give a simple illustration. Let's say your friend or spouse hates to cook and avoids it with a passion. You ask them to prepare a dinner party for a small group you have coming over. You can expect what kind of answer you are going to get!

Unless, there are mitigating circumstances, such as how important this is to you and they are your only answer and they might want to do it because they like you, as a friend or a spouse, and they will go that extra mile for you, or there may be some other motivation that will not violate either of your principles. So it may happen even if you expect a “No.”

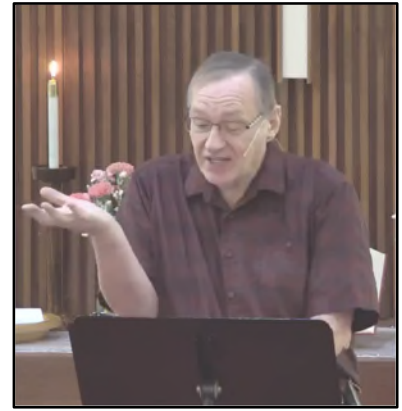
On the other hand, let's say your spouse or friend sees cooking and catering dinners as something they *love* to do, it is in their wheelhouse, even one of their central callings. Approaching them about your dinner party will almost assuredly get a yes. But even then, there may be unexpected circumstances. They may have a time conflict, or not think it in your best interest, or something else unexpectedly gets in the way. It doesn't mean your spouse or friend doesn't love you or that what you asked for was wrong to ask for; it only means that there is more to the picture than you can see, and we don't always get an explanation.

You've already heard some of the background behind the text in Isaiah. Persia freed Jerusalem from Babylon on their way to conquering Egypt. Egypt led a revolt against Persia, which was put down by powerful General Megabyzus, who was then appointed to watch over that area. Last week we heard Isaiah tell them that God loved them so much he was going to move heaven and earth, nations and empires, to restore his people to their land, and it would be done through Persia. But now, the Persian General Megabyzus was insulted and rebuffed back in the central government, and the general led his own rebellion against Persia -- fighting and winning two battles probably right in Palestine. Well, that didn't help create peace from Persia, it was making things even worse! The local leaders could only see a desperately unstable time with no clue as to when it might end.

It led to this frantic text we summarized in the responsive reading, a text that some scholars do not believe came from God or Isaiah, but was proclaimed by these local leaders...to whom God responds later on, for it seemed to them that God's promise and prediction given through Isaiah was not coming to pass that way they expected.

The opening lines imply that for the sake of the city, even though God was silent – he wasn't acting, he wasn't doing what he was supposed to be do – he was not bringing the promised peace, we ourselves will not be until he is silent, we will keep busy until we see the city -- so long torn apart by the various empires that its reputation (and literally) was its ruins -- we would return it to such power and status and prosperity that all the kings and nations would see, and even God would have

to lift it up in his hand, and admire it, and show off its greatness to everybody -- and then God will *have* to give it a new name to recognize its change of status -- that it would once again proudly wear its covenant ring and bear her married name and be the center of God's earthly rule like it was in the days of David. The focus of that Bible passage was on the city's greatness, walled off and exclusive of all other nations -- except for the outsider admiration of the city's greatness, (an attitude that often leads to suspicion, jealousy, and competition, resulting in a perpetual threat and potential conflict against which there must be constant preparation and protection which is urged as the text closes out. (Some believe it was this philosophy, this movement; this attitude that birthed Samaritan-Jew hostilities that we experience in Jesus' day.) It is only parenthetically (a side topic) for them that God falls in love with the city because of its own self-made accomplishments.



And to be clear, God does indeed cherish his people – we heard that last week from Isaiah himself – and we hear about it again this week – the text is right about this part – that God cherishes people with a deep love that refuses to be beaten down, and he does indeed delight in us, and he often does see it as a marriage between God and his people – and we should take great comfort and feel great blessing in the status of our relationship with God. But it is not because of what we have made of ourselves, but what God has made of us. For us who live on this side of Easter, all this is made possible, we are made possible, by his love and grace through Jesus Christ.

Let's see if I can explain this difference between Isaiah's viewpoint and the point of view of the local leaders. There is a difference between loving a parent and wanting to please them, and trying to earn the love of a parent by trying to please them. Do you see the difference? Some of you are nodding and some look puzzled... Ben and Sara (two of pastor's children) love me and I love them. Hopefully, they like to please me because of that love that is already there. Now if I did not love them, and then they did all these kinds of things to earn it so that I'd say, "Oh yes, I guess you are good kids, I will love you now." That is a whole different kind of dynamic in the relationship. Do you see the difference? I think it becomes more clear when you put it that way. Isaiah said God already accepts and loves his people and is acting on their behalf out of that love, while the local

leaders were saying God was silent (he didn't love them, wasn't moved to act for them) but they would make the city and themselves so powerful and admired in the world that God would have to recognize how great they were and would begin to accept and love them as his people (again)...

Self-made success and prosperity (even only predicted in the case of this passage) can breed a temptation to become full of ourselves in an attempt to earn the love of God or others. Last week, we talked about John the Baptist. His ministry was so powerful that people wondered if he himself was the Messiah. How easy it would have been for him to get caught up in all of his accomplishments as if they were his own, and for us to get caught up in our privilege as God's people and forget that that privilege is not exclusive, nor earned by our own successes, but it is given by God's graciousness to us. Luckily, John knew his place, and he pointed people to Jesus.

Isaiah knew his place and the place of Jerusalem too. Isaiah had already declared new names for the city – Isaiah said it would be called the “City of God” or “Zion of the Holy One of Israel”; and her walls would be named “Salvation” and her gates “Praise” (See Isaiah 60:14,18). Everything about the city and these new names pointed that city and its inhabitants to God's universal power and grace and covenant love, a city open and inclusive of all the nations who were used to do God's bidding on behalf of his people and will someday be invited, and will indeed come as one, to worship God as well... it would be open to the world – that is what Isaiah envisioned, a spiritual place, a house of prayer where there would be perpetual peace and safety and good will among all the people of all the nations (the lion lays down with the lamb)... training for war would become irrelevant because war would only be a thing of the past... It is only parenthetically (a side topic) that the city is restored.

So what happened with God's promise spoken through Isaiah of deliverance through Persia. It was within two years that Persia had their their hands full with an ambitious Greece that was expanding with its powerful navy, causing the Persian emperor to settle matters with General Megabyzus, who then helped Persia push back Greece -- leading to a treaty that allowed Greece to experience its golden age, while Palestine and Egypt had a time of peace and stability. It was just a little blip of two years before things went back to normal, and even better than if the blip had not happened.

And what does God say about these who gave this call to say and do and pray until Jerusalem restores itself? I'll just summarize what he said 3 chapters later: God says to these people who said God was silent, "I made myself accessible, yet you didn't ask for or seek me. I called, "Here I am!" reaching out to you, but you follow your own inclinations, and then he warns them, *I will not be silent* -- until I you have been repaid in full." (See Isaiah 65:1-6)

God was listening to them all along, and he does to us as well. He listens to our hearts. It is a challenge to take a specific story with a specific application for a specific historic situation and translate that it into a completely different time and situation and culture. God's plan for the Hartland area and America for 2022 may be quite different than a Persian occupied Jerusalem centuries ago. We may all draw principles and come to different conclusions for our life, our



nation, and our world. But I think both passages, from Isaiah and from Jesus' parable, rightly teach that we build our relationship with God through prayer, and he listens not just to our words, but he listens to our hearts. So if our words get it wrong, our hearts will get it right, and if our hearts are wrong, he'll help us get those right too.

So, I'll just leave us with this basic question that has been building throughout this short message. What is the goal of prayer? Is it about what I can do by myself to impress God for me and my glory, and how I can get him in on my activity and what I want to accomplish? Or, is it about trusting God and his glory, and aligning ourselves with what he wants and getting in on his activity?

Prayer

Let's pray... Lord, we come to you not always knowing for what to pray or how to intercede for others, ourselves, or our nation. You read the hearts and respond to the hearts of people back then, and you still do so today. We find comfort in the words of Paul who reminds us that your Spirit knows our hearts and pleads on our behalf in ways that go beyond the words we say or don't say, so we can relax in your grace and in our relationship with you, and simply pray persistently and allow you to lead us to where we need to be. We seek your will to be done on earth and we want to participate in how you are making it come to pass, knowing that strength will rise as we wait on you. So grant us the ability to better understand your vision

for your world and your mission for us in that world, that as you bless us, we in turn may be a blessing for others, and people will see the good works of your people and bring glory to your name through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

Music (vv 1,2) Take Time to be Holy

Blessing

Now as you go, be strengthened, comforted, and inspired to live lives worthy of God, who calls you a people in whom he delights, and covenants with you to participate in his kingdom and family. Amen.