

Straight from the "Hart"

Worship Service from February 13, 2022



Opening Prayer

O God, we have gathered because you strengthen all who put their trust in you. Accept our offerings and songs and prayers as our worshipful intent to receive your Word and to live well in your name, by the power of your grace that constantly flows to us, sustaining our trust and faithful obedience to you. We pray this in the name Jesus. Amen. Please remain standing for the Call to Worship.

Call to Worship

Lay Reader: Come, experience the God of new beginnings, who gives us hearts to embrace his creation, who equips us with the Spirit's gifts to serve, and who wipes away tears by calling us to care for one another. All of this and more can happen when we come together in worship to express our belief in the name of Jesus. (Adapted © 2002 Consultation on Common Texts, admin. by Augsburg Fortress Publishers in UM Worship & Song Leader's Edition.)

Let's sing our belief.

Music This I Believe (The Creed)

We heard last week that the people found it incredible and doubtful that God's grace and salvation would be offered to people other than themselves, people such as ourselves. For them at the time, it led to doubts. For us, hopefully, it is not the incredible that leads to doubts, but the incredible that leads to a deep appreciation and amazement for what he has done for us. Let's sing And Can it Be

Music And Can it Be

Theme

A little over 50 years ago, an annual, uniquely American festival is celebrated around this time of the year -- and this year it happens to be today. Do you want to guess what this festival is? [Super-bowl] Two teams are going to try and win the last game of the football season.

Teams have star players, and they really count on them to help win the game. (And sometimes they wear black and white stripes 😊). But usually, they are a

particularly good defensive lineman, or cornerback or safety, or the quarterback, or running back, or receiver. But how good and important do you think that star lineman would be if all the other linemen were so bad they could double or triple team that star lineman? How good would a great receiver be if there were not any other good receivers and was the only target the quarterback could throw to and they could double and triple team him? How good would the quarterback be if the offensive line didn't protect the quarterback - or a running back if he got no blocking? They wouldn't get very far down the field, would they, much less score or win the game. This year on the Detroit stations there has been a big debate about how good our former quarterback used to be – whether it was everybody else or him or both – and I'm not going to get into that debate. 😊 Even the sports announcers on the station I listen to are on opposite poles on that question.



But the question is, how good is a defense if they don't *all* work together to stop the other team? And how good is an offense if they don't *all* work together to move the ball down the field?

Sometimes, there are players get to thinking they don't need anyone else to win, and there are others who don't think they are important enough to even be on the team. But that isn't how it is with Jesus. Everyone is important to him. The prophets said wonderful things about what the star Jesus was going to do. Yet he still chose not to do it alone but to surround himself with a team to advance the news of God's salvation forward into the world. And now he has chosen us too. He thinks each one of us is an important part of his kingdom team.

In 1 Corinthians 12:27, Paul describes this team as a body and says, "Now you are the body of Christ and each one of you is a part of it." You can't opt out – you can't be a Christian and not be a part of the body.

It doesn't mean we can't do anything on our own, but when we rely on each other and work together we become an important part of his team and as you know -- the popular phrase is that there is "No 'I' in team", right? Did you know that TEAM [can] mean: "TOGETHER EVERYONE ACHIEVES MORE?"

We can be thankful, then that we have been given each other, and that together we make up a mighty team where all things are possible as each of us participates in his kingdom family to the best of our current and growing abilities.

As important as is our connection with each other, even more important is our connection with God. As the song we just said, he is the living head – the head of the body, the head of the church, the head of the team. Teams need to be the best they can be, but they still need the head to show the way. What would it be like if the coach called a play, and the quarterback went into the huddle and called a play, but everyone said to themselves, “I like this play better” and each player played one of 11 different plays at the same time... do you think that play would go anywhere? No, you need that coordination and cooperation that comes by following the coach, by following Christ, or it won't work out very well.

The prophet Jeremiah described the imagery we find in Psalm 1, which introduces the essence of all the Psalms and the general rule of faith -- that disconnecting from God (the coach, the team leader) is dangerous, while remaining connected to him lies at the core of living well. Later we will hear that we maintain that connection through Jesus -- but for now let's focus on the Old Testament image we have from Psalm 1 and Jeremiah 17.

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

L: This is what the Lord says, “Bad things will happen to those who turn their hearts away from trusting in the Lord to relying on mere human strength.

C: They will be like shrubs in a dry, desolate area.

L: They are unaware and unaffected by the good relief that God can give because they live in a hot, sunbaked, salty-soiled, uninhabitable desert.

C: They are like grain husks that are driven away by the wind.

L: They will not stand with those who are right with God when the time of judgment comes. They will be declared guilty, for they have lost their way and are doomed.

C: But those who trust in the Lord will be blessed.

L: How happy are those who reject evil advice, who don't live like sinners, and who don't join [in with] those who scoff at God.

C: Instead, they delight in the Lord's teachings and meditate on them day and night.

L: The Lord watches over his people and shows them how to live. They securely know that the Lord will do what he says.

C: They will grow strong like a tree that is planted near water.

L: They send and spread out their roots by the river. They have nothing to fear. They are unaware and unaffected when the days get hot. Their leaves never wither, their foliage is always luxuriant.

C: Even in a year of drought they are not anxious -- but keep on producing fruit in its season. Everything they do will work out well for them.

(Inspired from Psalm 1, Jeremiah 17:5-8 CJB, ERV)

We recognize that our life and renewed strength come from God as we wait on him, as we hope in him, trust him, and expect he will act on the basis of his tireless compassion for us. Let's sing.

Music **Everlasting God** (primary lyrics)

Strength will rise and we wait upon the Lord,
we will wait upon the Lord, we will wait upon the Lord

(Repeat)

Our God, you reign forever. Our hope, our strong Deliverer.

You are the everlasting God, the everlasting God,

You do not faint, you won't grow weary.

You're the defender of the weak, you comfort those in need.

You lift us up on wings like eagles.

CCLI # 2561297

One way of poetically expressing "waiting on the Lord" is diligently seeking to breathe in his presence, (a common biblical expression for the Holy Spirit). Let's prepare our hearts for prayer by singing Breathe.

Music **Breathe** (primary lyrics)

This is the air I breathe, this is the air I breathe;
your holy presence living in me.

This is my daily bread, this is my daily bread;
your very Word spoken to me.

And I---, I'm desperate for you,

And I ---, I'm lost without you.

(Repeat)

CCLI # 2561297

Prayers

Our heavenly Father, we are desperate for your presence with us and within us because you root us by streams of healing water if we trust in you. Even when circumstances seem dry and barren, you nourish us with the breath of your presence, with your sustaining love and your grace.

You listen when we call. May we too, listen when you call. Search our hearts, teach us to give up what is wrong and do what is right and to trust in you. May your face light up with joy over us. Fill us with the joy of your abundance. Allow us to let go of the stresses of each day and find the safety of your peace each night.

Praises and Petitions We pray especially * for the family and friends of Larry Crook School who died recently, * for the family and friends of Lone Bennett, who died a few days ago. * We are thankful that Karen's sister Rita is home and recovering, * we pray for our armed forces and world leaders - for peace in the world. * for the Dunn family as they decide end of life measures for Doris Dunn, and we continue to pray for Jim Mallot's health. There are also some we have not named for a while or are known only to ourselves. We ask you release them from the bonds of disease, free them from the power of evil, and turn them from falsehood and illusion, whatever their needs may be, whatever comfort they may desire, whatever guidance they might seek, answer their prayers, answer our prayers that we may find the blessing of new life in you through the power of Christ who taught us to pray. **Lord's Prayer**

Last week we learned that Jeremiah's call was very similar to the call of Moses. As Moses began to run out of excuses (as Jeremiah did), he ended by asking the Lord, "And when I go to confront the Egyptians, who shall I say sent me?" And God answered, "Say "I AM" sent me. A phrase that simply means "God is" and the implication is "I will be with you, I will be there for you, and I will be whatever you need me to be, I will do whatever has to be done for me to successfully accomplish my purposes through you -- no force can stop me -- stay close to me and I will stay close to you and we'll get through this together. That is who is sending you." (paraphrased and expanded) Therefore, before the reading and sermon, let's sing...

Music

Great I Am (primary lyrics)

I want to be close, close to your side, so heaven is real, and death is a lie.

I want to hear voices of angels above, singing as one:

Hallelujah, holy, holy, God Almighty, the great I AM;

Who is worthy, none beside thee, God Almighty, the great I AM.

I want to be near, near to your heart, loving the world and hating the dark.

I want to see dry bones living again, singing as one:

Hallelujah, holy, holy, God Almighty, the great I AM;

Who is worthy, none beside thee, God Almighty, the great I AM.

The mountains shake before you, the demons run and flee
at the mention of the name, "King of Majesty"

There is no power in hell or any who can stand
before the power of the great I AM...

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Bible Intro God calls individuals, prophets, and communities to live for him and fulfill his purpose. The assurance God gives is the powerful presence of his very being. It is critical then, that if we are to remain motivated to keep successfully adding, deleting, adjusting, adapting, changing, growing, and moving forward to face new circumstances and new challenges, that we remain connected and in tune with God.

As we've already heard in the Responsive Reading, the Old Testament commonly visualized this connection through the imagery of the tree and shrub and its connection or lack of connection with life-giving water. Jesus adapts and weaves together similar imagery to talk about the importance of the connection between God and himself and the people. Today, his words are arranged by aligning together similar concepts within the teaching.

Bible Reading **John 15:1-8** (arranged topically)

¹ "I am the true Vine. My Father is the One Who cares for the Vine... ^{5b} and you are the branches. ^{2a} He takes away any branch in Me that does not give fruit. ^{4bc} No branch can give fruit by itself [apart from the vine]. You are able to give fruit only when you have life from Me {and} stay joined to me. ^{5c} You can do nothing separated from me. ⁶ "If anyone does not get his life from Me, he is cut off like a branch and dries up. All the dead branches like that are gathered up, thrown into the fire and burned.



^{2b} He also prunes every branch that produces fruit to prepare it to produce even more fruit. ³ Right now, because of the word which I have spoken to you, you are made clean and are pruned. ^{4ad} You must stay joined to me and I will live in you [just as a branch] must get its life from the vine. ^{2b} so it will give more fruit. ^{5b} Those who stay united with me, and I with them, are the ones who bear much fruit.

⁷ If you get your life from Me and My Words live in you, ask whatever you want. It will be done for you. ⁸ When you produce much fruit, my Father is glorified, and this is how show yourselves to be my disciples. (ERV, CJB, NLV)

Sermon Called to Connection

“Do you know what did the tree say to the flower?” “I am *rooting* for you!” ☺ Our series began by making it clear that God is indeed rooting for us and cheering for us and wants his best for us. When we blossom as God’s people, it is because God is our source of nourishment and strength for faithful living. The Psalmist, prophet, and Jesus’ imageries of the tree, shrub, vine, branch and fruit applies to all who are in this covenant relationship with God.

Note that while it poetically says that we are ultimately unaffected by seasons of drought -- it does not say we will not experience times of drought, only that God is with us and if we stay connected with him, we will survive and even thrive despite those dry circumstances.

All three (Psalmist, Jeremiah, and Jesus) warn what happens if God’s people reject his

Consequences of Disconnection

authority and relationship and choose to try and be a branch on their own, and rely on human strength instead. They are not talking

about the proper use of human energy, but a reliance on human ability that should be reserved

Circumstances Can Cause Confusion and Doubt

only for God’s empowering energy. And when this happens, God’s people suffer the consequences of their choices -- they become like lonely shrubs in a parched, sunbaked, rocky, salt-soiled desert. Such shrubs don’t even notice when good refreshing rain comes because they are so dry and dead to start with. When Jeremiah wrote this, he may well have been reflecting on his own experience earlier in his ministry when he felt abandoned, his spirit dried out, brittle and bitter. I think most of us have experienced that at some point in our lives. Jeremiah had written a very different tree poem to God when in the middle of those difficult days.

In his unending pain, incurable grief, and insatiable thirst, Jeremiah eventually *accuses* God of being a refreshing, healing stream -- but only for those who do not live right. They were the ones who seem to be successfully prospering, and while they gave lip service to God, they didn’t really care about him. For the faithful like himself God has become a disappointment -- like a stream that promises refreshment but has dried up in the summer heat and there is no water there. (Jeremiah 12:1b-2,15:18) Jeremiah was going through a difficult day.

And yet it is good to throw those things on the prayer table with God because it allows God to work with us. It allowed God to reassure Jeremiah that he is indeed not forsaken, that he only felt that way because he chose to give in to peer pressure

and give in to the *apparent* strength of his opponents rather than continuing to trust and lean on God. God calls him to turn from his fearful despair and continue his role as prophet -- acknowledging that there would still be battles to fight, but also promises that he would not be defeated for God would be with him and protect him through it all. (Jeremiah 15:19-21) Eventually, Jeremiah does get to that point when his trust in God's strength is revived and he renews his ministry and he compares it in today's reading as a strong tree that spreads out or sends out its roots toward the water... and the verb is an aggressive verb, aggressively, actively, and forcibly *pushing* out our roots in an intense and vigorous action toward the stream.

When we put our confidence in God, then no matter what pressures and circumstances may come, we need not cower or worry but will eagerly do what God wants. Our spirits will flourish and we'll have nothing to fear.

Even when opponents turn up the heat, even when our surroundings and circumstances are dry and barren, Jeremiah says the disobedient shrub and faithful tree remain unaffected -- The disobedient shrub because it is already dead, and the trusting tree because it doesn't need to worry because God will nourish in season and out. Jesus made that point too -- about not worrying if our priorities are in proper place -- in the sermon on the mount. He said, "Don't be anxious about anything, but seek first his kingdom and his righteousness." (See Matthew 6:25 ff).

Let's turn our attention to Jesus' teaching on the vine. Although the imagery is different, the point of the teaching is not unlike Paul's imagery of the church as we mentioned in the Theme time. Paul stresses the variety of the many members who form one body that find its source in the one Father, Lord, and Spirit (See 1 Corinthians 12) (and elsewhere he states Jesus is the [unifying] head of that body); Jesus emphasizes the connection between the many branches that form one plant and find their source of life in himself as the vine, and the vine and branches cared for heavenly Father as the Gardener.

This divine gardener care demonstrates the kind of quality of life we can have if we are connected with Jesus.

Being in Connection

That connection is made by believing what God has done for you in Jesus, asking for and receiving his forgiveness, and following his example and instruction of how to turn away from the sinful lifestyle and to live a new lifestyle that strives to know and follow God's will in all things at all times, trusting that as the strength of that

union deepens, we will become more fruitful, we are made more and more human as humanity is meant to be.

Part of that process involves cutting away. In the Middle East, February and March is the time they go through the fields and begin to cut back all non-fruit bearing branches. They cut them back so much that they just look like a bunch of stalks sticking up out of the ground. I think I told you a story a long time ago about a Treasurer in a former church and a visiting pastor from the Middle East was there and he asked if he could prune back their flowers and plants around the house and he cut them back so far that they were sure he had killed them all. But when they grew back, they came back so full because of the nutrients went directly where it needed to be.

includes cutting away

You also have to understand that John writes in black and white dualism. He writes in the tone that you can't be a little bit pregnant, you are, or you aren't. You are in love with and living in the heavenly kingdom and its values, or you are in love with and living in the world and its God-opposing values. There is nothing in-between. You live in love, or you live in hate. You walk in light, or you stumble along blindly in darkness. You are a productive, fruit bearing branch, or you are dead; and if you are dead, you are removed so that there is room and energy for branches that will live and produce fruit. That is a pretty grim thought. For John, it is one or the other. And I'm sure that all of us, at some point in our life, have experienced that disconnected, empty feeling.

The good news is that Jesus (or the Psalmist or Jeremiah for that matter), does not emphasize that part but the stress is on the flourishing that can happen when we do not rely on human strength (or are not afraid of human pressures), but will trust in Jesus. For apart from him, nothing came into existence (John 1:3), and apart from him we can do nothing, or as Paul said it -- we are not sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God who makes us that way. (2 Corinthians 3:5-6a).

Another part of the process involves trimming and pruning. I just told you one story about that. By August those fields that were cut back so deeply and drastically in the Middle East are now showing a lot of leaves. The gardeners then walk along those stalks and they pinch off all the little side sprouts so that the primary fruit-bearing branches will get all of the



nourishment, and it won't be diverted onto all these side tracks that will add nothing but some more leaves to the plant. Also, sometimes branches grow so low to the ground that they get covered in mud. If they have the potential of being good branches, the gardener will lift them up out of that mud and wash them off so that they can grow and produce properly. Jesus said, you are clean, you are pruned already, because you are my disciples.

This cleansing and trimming are not one-time things nor an end in itself. Jesus continues to not only prune sin out of our life, but *anything* that gets in the way of



bearing even more fruit. As Hebrews says, he sets aside the sin that so easily entangles and everything that hinders so that we can run more easily the race of faith. (See also Hebrews 12:1). You know the old saying, "We are doing so much good, we can't seem to get around to doing what is best". Maybe you don't know that old saying – it probably isn't an old saying 😊

(That's not quite the saying, but it conveys the meaning). Sometimes we get distracted with a lot of things that aren't necessarily wrong in themselves, but they keep us from getting to what we should really be about. One person described this ever-increasing growth as growing in the love of God which binds the Christian to Jesus and then it spreads life to everyone around. This is accomplished not by what we do for God, but by what Jesus (and his word) does within and through us.

And God can only accomplish this greater fruit-bearing purpose if we are willing to respond to his work in us by remaining in him and he in us. We remain in Jesus by trusting, obedient faith, and Jesus remains in us through love and fruitfulness. He is the one who produces the fruit. A branch doesn't produce the fruit. It "comes up from the roots and the vine and the gardener's care for that" and out of that natural flow, fruit bursts forth. It is his job to bear the fruit. It is our job to stay connected so that he can do that through us.

We are told simply, to cling to the vine, (or in Jeremiah and the Psalm, to [aggressively] "cling to (reach out for) the water"); to remain in harmonious relationship with Jesus and his teachings.

Being Fruitful

It is *only within this context* that we can ask *anything* we want, and it will be done. Sometimes, teachers take that one phrase and pull it out of its context and say we can ask for ***anything*** we want, and we will get it. But that is not what the context

Remaining

is. In the context of growing the faith and being fruitful and productive in Jesus, in that context – we can ask for anything we want.... and we'll receive it. It is wanting to want what God wants and asking according to his will and by his authorization – it has to be what he wants to happen, and that is always and only what we would want to ask for in the first place. Granted, we may get it wrong sometimes, just like Jeremiah did, but that's okay, he'll correct us.

In this text, the nature of the requests involves growth in the Christian life for the purpose of bearing fruit and bringing glory to God by the kind of lives we lead as his people. We do not bear fruit *in order to become* a disciple. We become disciples when we are connected to the vine (by believing in him) through faith in his grace. It is after that, then, that the fruit comes naturally out of that relationship as Jesus nourishes us and changes our lives. The fruit simply bears – it reveals – what kind of a branch we are, whether we are connected or not. Hopefully, we are a branch that is connected -- striving to stay in relationship with Jesus, becoming more like him, and by continuing his mission in the world.

Therefore, through a series of questions, let's apply to our life what the Psalmist, Jeremiah, and Jesus are teaching us so that we may thrive in this life.

1) Do we trust in our own ability to be fruitful, or do we trust in and cooperate with the Lord to work through us to become fruitful? Are we trusting ourselves or trusting God?

2) Do we aggressively reach for God's water or to cling to the vine? (to remain in him) The Psalmist talks about meditating day and night on God and his will. How often is he in the forefront of our thoughts, how often do we reach for him in study and prayer? How often do we seek his instruction before deciding something?

3) How do I improve my relationship with Jesus and help it become stronger? How do we get closer to him? You who have been around the church a long time know the answer to this question, you know about worship and Sunday School and Bible Studies and prayer and hymns and devotional books, and we could be here all day naming the wide variety of ways that can help us get closer to God. Work at it like you would work at work, work at it like you work at your recreation, work at it like you work at whatever else is an important priority in your life.

4) What in our life must be cut off or pruned or trimmed back to make our lives more productive? Often, it is not so much that we are doing things that are wrong as we are doing things that are acceptable, but they are side shoots that keep us from the time and energy we need to spend on the best things. What do we need

to pinch off, what do we need to get out of our way so that we can pursue God more passionately?

5) And lastly, Are my requests of God sound? Don't overthink this. As I said, Jeremiah got off base, But God got him back on track. Jeremiah had accused God of prospering the dishonest and disappointing the faithful. It is never wrong to tell God how we feel or how we think we see things – that allows him to correct us and guide us to a new attitude, or a new direction, a new vision of what it means to be successful and prosperous and fruitful.

Is our connection “grounded”? He is rooting for you ... you know to flourish ... in the faith.

Prayer Let's pray. Lord, it is easy for us who are sensitive to feel guilt and fear from a text like this -- to feel we are never doing enough and fearing we are about to be cut off from your grace and love. Remind us that this fear is based in human strength and often measured by human cultural standards of success rather than on faithfully clinging to you and daily responding to you and allowing you to grow the kind of fruit through us that *you* choose rather than what we imagine, or what we think others are putting on us. Help us to find the peace that comes from resting on the foundation of Jesus Christ, and our heavenly Father who, through him, lifts us from the mud and cleans us as we cling to him. In the name of Jesus we pray, Amen.

Let's stand if you are comfortable and sing about this solid connection we want to have with Jesus, and Jesus offers to us.

Music The Solid Rock

Blessing Now as you go, may you be strengthened, comforted, and inspired to live lives worthy of God, who calls you to cling to him and covenants with you to make you fruitful as you participate in his kingdom and family. Amen.