

Home Worship Service August 2nd, 2020



Journeying Through Impossible Places

Invitation to Worship

Come, visit a place apart - a place of searching, a place of mystery, a place of meeting the Stranger, a place of spiritual deepening. And in this place you are not alone – but surrounded by others also on a journey, also hungry in heart and soul, also longing to taste and see Goodness. And so we sing:

Gathering Music:

All Who Hunger Gather Gladly [Sylvia Dunstan] sung by Advocate Virtual Choir
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c7iNRyI17PM>

Prayer

Holy Mystery, Blessed Stranger, Wandering Spirit, we seek you in our changing times, in our struggles, in our questions, in our longings, in our hopes. And so, even if we do not travel in body, we travel in heart and soul, seeking that peace, that strength that will carry us through all things to come. Our journey takes us into solitary spaces, water's edge, places of crossing-over, places beyond time. May we each be open to the journey our spirit would travel, in courage and in hope. Amen.

Readings from Our Ancient Faith Story

reader: Ann Marie McAleenan

Genesis 32:22-31

Jacob struggling with the Unknown

The same night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had.

Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.

When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him.

Then the stranger said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob."

32:28 Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed."

32:29 Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him.

32:30 So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." 32:31 The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.

Matthew 14:13-21

Jesus has an impossible impromptu picnic

Jesus withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns.

When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick.

When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves."

Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." And he said, "Bring them here to me."

Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds.

14:20 And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Contemporary Reading from Blossoms by Li-Young Lee

From blossoms comes

This paper bag of peaches

We bought from the boy

At the bend in the road where we turned toward

Signs painted Peaches.

From laden boughs, from hands,

From sweet fellowship in the bins,

Comes nectar at the roadside, succulent,

Peaches we devour, dusty skin and all,

Comes the familiar dust of summer, dust we eat.

O, to take what we love inside,

To carry within us an orchard, to eat

Not only the skin, but the shade,

Not only the sugar, but the days, to hold

The fruit in our hands, adore it, then bite into

The round jubilation of peach.

There are days we live

As if death were nowhere

In the background, from joy

To joy to joy, from wing to wing,

From blossom to blossom to

Impossible blossom, to sweet impossible blossom.

Reflection by Jane:

“Living in Impossible Times”

Those were the days, my friends

Today, we would not gather in our 1000s,

Huddling next to each other on the grass, crowding in to hear anyone, even Jesus,

Much less sharing food in potluck style.

I've heard that Wesley might be planning a picnic soon- maybe St James will be too, I don't know. But planning will be the operative word- as it is every time we leave home- remember your lawn chair, remember your mask, remember your hand sanitizer, remember to bring your own food and drink- And when you get there, remember to keep your distance.

Even as we learn new ways to gather, we miss what we've lost - the after-church lunches where we could have fed the 5000 with all the tasty morsels we brought to share, And the spontaneity with which we could just plunk ourselves down next to whomever we wanted and wander about as we liked.

We cannot recreate the spontaneity of this impromptu impossible gathering- Today we must plan everything, step by step.

Being alone - in ancient and modern times

Jacob's story might be a better fit for us:

Apart from the bit about the 2 wives and the 11 children- I won't go into that just now.

Point is- Jacob is all by himself-

That was not good in ancient times-

Privacy was a privation.

If you wanted to punish someone, you didn't have to kill them-

You could run them out of town, or send them into exile, depriving them of the company of their friends.

When you were a child, did you get sent to your room?

I did - and I did not mind.

I enjoyed the peace and quiet- and since they never thought of confiscating all my books, I could still read!

But - as we've found out these last few months-

Being alone is one thing if you choose it-

It's another thing if it's forced.

I'm an only child and like many only children, I can entertain myself for hours and days.

But even for me,

Not being able to socialize normally,

Not even being able to get into a car with anyone,

Not having anyone able to sit on my balcony with me, because we would not be far enough apart,

Not to mention never a handshake or a hug-

And having to calculate risk level whenever one leaves home- all this has taken away from the goodness of life.

So, yes, I can relate to being alone and finding it a burden,

And I see even other introverts admitting a sense of isolation-

Especially perhaps on a Sunday, and those writing in the Cooperator lately have named what you are missing about our common life.

Going deeper into Jacob's solitary struggle

Jacob wasn't alone by choice.

He sent his enormous household away

Because he was en route to meet his estranged brother,

Estranged for good reason, as Jacob had deceived him.

And Jacob had reason to believe he was in for trouble

As brother Esau was capable of getting violent if he wanted to.

Like many of us who are dreading say a medical appointment or an unpleasant encounter,

Jacob had a very disturbed night's sleep,

And somehow- we can't explain how-

He found he wasn't alone after all-

But had, it seemed, a very powerful adversary.

It is as if Jacob was fighting demons,

Real or imaginary.

Psychologists might say- this was his own inner shadow, his own struggle against himself.

We never hear the name of just who or what he was fighting-

Later on, he's told he's fought and prevailed against God -

Interesting that he would be in a struggle with God-

Even more interesting. God let him win.

But not unscathed-

in those days there were no hip replacement -

Jacob would remember he was a survivor every time he walked, every time he lay down, every time he got up.

That's a pretty strange God, one we would fight with.

But I'd say though most of us have fought inner battles, inner struggles-

Be they with our past,

Be they with our fears,

Be they with something we project onto someone else.

We've survived them if we are still here-

We remember our own strength when we look back at what we've survived up to now.

And we each bear the scars of our surviving.

I'm not saying God inflicts these scars on us anymore than on Jacob- but if we live long enough, our bodies and souls feel what we've been through.

And today, we all have an adversary- this virus which isn't going away any time soon-

We are on a very long trek through unknown land, and we are not sure when or if we will find our way to something that feels like home. When or even if.

Many of us have slept less well.

Many of us are feeling COVID fatigue.

And - well I don't believe God gave us COVID- but I wouldn't blame you or me if we sat up nights and argued with God.

Jacob had reason to argue with God.

He'd passed that way, in the other direction, 20 years ago, escaping his angry brother.

He's had the famous vision of Jacob's ladder, and he'd heard God promising always to be with him-

But now he was trying to get home again and wondering if he'd make it.

Where was God?

Somehow, the more he struggled with God, the more God let him win,

Discovering his own strength.

No magic solutions, no quick fixes- but a reminder-

"It's impossible until it's not".

And just one more thing:

Jacob gets a new name- Israel-

The name of a whole people.

No longer a lone figure.

Suddenly, this is not the struggle and survival of just one lone person, an impossible struggle, one lone figure against the world.

It's the struggle of a whole community,

Together even when apart.

"it's impossible until it's not".

Surviving- even amid the impossible

So- maybe the 5000 plus gathered- and the solitary wanderer - are not as far apart as we think.

It is the nature of God's people to be in community with one another- even when it doesn't seem that way. Monastic hermits can vouch for that - The deeper they go with the Divine- as they pray night and day- the deeper their communion with all beings, all that is, all who are.

Whether you are staying home, or gathering gingerly under COVID restrictions,
You belong to God's beloved community.

Whether you are eating alone, or sharing a meal with your bubble, or carefully eating each out of your own brown bag six feet from each other,
You are tasting and seeing the goodness of God
Like the poet eating a peach, you are connecting with the whole wondrous creative world, the dust , and the impossible blossom.

When you are battling your own fears and worries, you can discover, any time, that God is right in there with you-
Reminding you, yes, you are a survivor,
And surviving, by times, is no mean accomplishment.
And it's not just you who is doing the surviving - it's all of us-
And it's our whole beloved community-
As we continue to be beloved community in a world that needs all the love it can get.
As we hold in prayer black lives, and indigenous lives, and the lives of children, and the lives of so many survivors,
And trust that the impossible dream may not be impossible after all,
If like the late lamented John Lewis, we keep dreaming it and putting it into practice,
So that our survival is good news for all.

May we yet taste and see goodness, and live from joy to joy,
And may we trust, with Carrie Newcomer:
"It's impossible till it's not"

Song of Reflection: It's Impossible till It's Not [Carrie Newcomer]
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uAl9xT4ZRbU>

Minute for Mission Growing a Green Legacy

Our gifts for Mission & Service fully support the Embracing the Spirit grant program for communities of faith with innovative ideas.

Westmount Park United Church in Montreal, Quebec, has been able to grow its initial grant into a Faith in Nature vision of the church—a belief that nature connects us all. As well as monthly Climate Cafés and a cooperative garden on its front lawn, Westmount Park advocates for the environment in its local community.

Ginkgo biloba trees have become symbols of hope for Hiroshima survivors because the trees grew leaves again after the atomic bombing of 1945. In partnership with Green Legacy Hiroshima, a Japanese organization that shares seeds across the world for a nuclear-free planet, Westmount Park was one of three faith organizations that received ginkgo seeds that are growing into strong trees.

The physical existence and history of those seeds tell a powerful story, and their very presence provides a living link between the people of Hiroshima and Montreal— and Westmount Park United Church.

If Mission & Service giving is already a regular part of your life, thank you so much! If you have not given, please join me in making Mission & Service giving a regular part of your life of faith. Loving our neighbour is at the heart of our Mission & Service.

Offering

As we journey deeply in Spirit, as we receive the Wisdom each of us needs, as we bear the wounds that come to us through the years, we know our need for each other, for friends, for community. And so we offer what we can, so that this community may continue, and so that others receive the nourishment and consolation they need to make their journey through this world. May our giving feed us and feed many in heart and soul. Amen.

Prayers

Challenging One, Surprising Spirit, Perplexing Mystery,
We wrestle with you at times,
Just as we wrestle with our own selves,
Our own inner struggles,
Our fears, our worries.
Somehow your Spirit invites us to hold fast,
To deepen our spirit,
To expand our hearts-
And somehow we know- we are not alone,
Somehow we know, even when we despair of ourselves,
Even when we are bewildered by a person or a conversation or a happening or by COVID-19, you are there in the midst of the struggles and confusion,
And we can make our way through our midnight fears and worries.

We struggle, we wrestle with the troubles of our world,
Troubles we do not know how to fix-
As we near the 75th anniversary of Hiroshima, we remember those still living with the effects of that bombing,
And we continue to long for a world where no one must pay such costs in wars of any kind, and in acts of violence closer to home.
WE pray for peaceful ways to prevail in all our world, and we know that prayer, that longing takes much persistence.

May we choose to be among those who listen, those who seek to make lives better, those who desire the best for others-
And may your Spirit guide us in the paths of caring, justice-seeking and reconciliation.

Closer to home, we hold in our hearts those who are ill, those who have received diagnoses, those receiving treatment, those with poor prognosis-
Those who are caregivers of young or old,
Those who are grieving losses of any kind-
Including losses of livelihood in this pandemic season-
And all who feel the loss of life as we knew it just a few months ago.
So many of us need courage and persistence for changes and challenges yet to come.
In a moment of silence, we hold in Love and Light those for whom we would pray.
These and all the prayers of our hearts we gather into the community prayer said by those across the ages and around the world: Our Father/Mother/Creator, .. etc.

Announcements, Joys and Concerns

Music for Continuing the Journey

MV 150

Spirit God be our Song

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7POkB4mb_rk

by Bruce Harding, sung by Laura Beth Smith [St Luke's United Tantalton]

Blessing

May the blessing of the One without Name, the Great I-Am, the Dark and Inexplicable one, be with you and all you love- as you bless each other with loving kindness and as together you continue this strange journey of life in faith and courage. As we go, we go not alone, but accompanied by the spirits of pilgrims past and present, and nourished by the Bread of Life we need, with open hands to share Bread and Joy and Love wherever we may wander. May it be so!

Music for Going Forth: MV 223 We Shall Walk with God South African/Swaziland
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YKybxg99fUc>

All prayers today are by Jane Doull