



Camrose United Church
Sunday March 14, 2021
Community of Faith: God, me, we
Rev. Helen Reed, Diaconal Minister

Candle Lighting

We light the Christ Candle, aware of God around, among, & within us. In a moment of silence, we prepare ourselves to celebrate God's presence in our community.

Call of Faith

(from A Song of Faith, The United Church of Canada, 2006).

“Jesus announced the coming of God’s reign –
a commonwealth not of domination
but of peace, justice, and reconciliation.
He healed the sick and fed the hungry
He forgave sins and freed those held captive
by all manner of demonic powers.
He crossed barriers of race, class, culture, and gender.
He preached and practiced unconditional love ---
love of God, love of neighbour,
love of friend, love of enemy—
and he commanded his followers to love one another
as he had loved them.”

☞Hymn: ♪ VU234 Let Us with a Gladsome Mind

Leaning into Lent:

As we continue this Lenten journey, our Song of Faith reminds us that as followers of Jesus, we are to live our faith by healing, feeding, forgiving, accepting. We are to practice what we preach as we love God’s world. Our Song of Faith reminds us that God can and will make us stronger and that we stop and see, stop and be, the gifts and blessings that surround us in our life.

Numbers 21:4-9 The Message (MSG)

The Snake of Fiery Copper

⁴⁻⁵ They set out from Mount Hor along the Red Sea Road, a detour around the land of Edom. The people became irritable and cross as they traveled. They spoke out against God and Moses: “Why did you drag us out of Egypt to die in this godforsaken country? No decent food; no water—we can’t stomach this stuff any longer.”

⁶⁻⁷ So God sent poisonous snakes among the people; they bit them and many in Israel died. The people came to Moses and said, “We sinned when we spoke out against God and you. Pray to God; ask him to take these snakes from us.”

Moses prayed for the people.

⁸ God said to Moses, “Make a snake and put it on a flagpole: Whoever is bitten and looks at it will live.”

⁹ So Moses made a snake of fiery copper and put it on top of a flagpole. Anyone bitten by a snake who then looked at the copper snake lived.

Focus on Faith...

What jolting words. Why would God send snakes?

I wonder if it was to get the attention of a people who were irritable and cross and whiney and complaining?

I see the line about people dying by the snakes, and remind myself that dying is being gathered by God.

When the people came back to God, and remembered to trust God to lead them through hard, harsh times, God offered them a symbol where everyone could see it and choosing healing, choose faith, over fear. God invited them back into relationship again.

What symbol is God placing before us now to remind us to choose faith?

♪MV99 Stand, O Stand Firm

Prayer for Grace:

(Based on words by Richard Bott, St. Andrew's (Haney) maple ridge, B.C. Gathering, Lent/Easter/Pentecost 2009 page 29. Used with permission)

Covenant. **Promises made.**

Covenant. **Promises between people.**

Promises between people and God.

Sometimes...

Covenant is broken.

Promises are forgotten.

Plans are changed.

Life moves us into the unknown.

And we grieve. And God knows our sorrow.

Then something amazing happens...

even when we are fearful,

even when we forget our role

to protect, to hold, to love...

even when we are unbalanced by the unexpected,

God invites us back.

God invites us back.

God invites us into the covenant again.

So with God's love and guidance

Invitation and support

we gather...

To remember our connections

To remember our faith and God's faith

To renew our promises with each other and with God.

♪ **MV#65 When we are tested. Vs. 4**

When we have struggled

and searched through the night,

sorting and sifting the wrong from the right,

Saviour, surround us with circles of care,

angels of healing, of hope, and of prayer.

Words of Assurance

In our faith stories we hear that
God renews covenant with us all the time.
God offers us guidance to help our choices.
God's love is all around us.
God has promised us to always be there for us.
Let us trust God's promise,
Let us open our hearts to feel the love of God
around us, within us, among us.

Amen.

John 3:14-21 The Message (MSG)

¹³⁻¹⁵ “No one has ever gone up into the presence of God except the One who came down from that Presence, the Son of Man. In the same way that Moses lifted the serpent in the desert so people could have something to see and then believe, it is necessary for the Son of Man to be lifted up—and everyone who looks up to him, trusting and expectant, will gain a real life, eternal life.

¹⁶⁻¹⁸ “This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life. God didn't go to all the trouble of sending his Son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. He came to help, to put the world right again. Anyone who trusts in him is acquitted; anyone who refuses to trust him has long since been under the death sentence without knowing it. And why? Because of that person's failure to believe in the one-of-a-kind Son of God when introduced to him.

¹⁹⁻²¹ “This is the crisis we're in: God-light streamed into the world, but men and women everywhere ran for the darkness. They went for the darkness because they were not really interested in pleasing God. Everyone who makes a practice of doing evil, addicted to denial and

illusion, hates God-light and won't come near it, fearing a painful exposure. But anyone working and living in truth and reality welcomes God-light so the work can be seen for the God-work it is."

Scripture Reading(s):

Scripture is our song for the journey, the living word passed on from generation to generation to guide and inspire.

God calls us to be doers of the word and not hearers only.

Message/Reflections

We are half way through our 2021 Lenten journey. A journey of reflecting, learning how to move faithfully forward with God. A year ago, this Sunday was the last in-person worship held at Camrose United Church and at the churches of the Pioneer Pastoral Charge – who we share our worship with each week now.

When we stopped our in-person worship we did so for the health and safety of our church family and our community. Like the people following Moses across the desert we set off on this journey not knowing where we were going and we couldn't see what was ahead so we were not prepared when the road disappeared and we had to find a new one. All of our plans, our structures were taken away and we couldn't see new ones coming in. We weren't allowed out of our homes or in to our church.

We found ourselves in the middle of the desert, realizing that we couldn't do anything we wanted to. There were complaints. People were irritable and cross and really uncomfortable with unknowing. The reality of our situation hurt, it bit, it still does.

There have been those of us who have retreated for their own safety and the safety of others - still part of the community but travelling a little distant from the others. There have been those of us so uncomfortable with new boundaries that they were not willing to do anything new, clinging to their memory of community that was, lamenting, and reluctant to join in a new journey.

When we, as church, realized change was needed to stay alive, we began to work to seek solutions, to focus ourselves on what needed to be done to keep God weaving through our community.

The people of Israel did the same thing. They grumbled and complained... and yes, some of them died doing it. Then they realized that they needed to focus themselves on what they were really there for: what God was asking them to do.

When the journey gets rough. Talk to God. When we don't understand how we got into a bumpy, dry place. Talk to God. If we are journeying together with a bunch of people, then we need to work together to do what is necessary, to learn new ways of living together. How do we do that? Talk to God! Then get to work to do what is needed.

God had Moses put a snake in front of the people to remind them that life changes and sometimes it hurts. In putting that reminder in front of them, God helped them be aware of the dangers of not trusting each other, of not working together. Even if they stumbled a little bit, if they were injured, one look at that snake on a stick would be enough to remind them that there were better choices to be made and that trusting in God would help them and heal them.

I wonder what our snake would look like? Would it be an empty pulpit? Would it be a rock... something to remind

us that we stumbled because we weren't looking ahead? Does it have to be the death of a neighbour, a friend, a treasured family member?

In John's gospel we heard Jesus say that the snake on a stick was to remind people that God can be trusted, God will lead us through this desert path, that we need to trust that God will do this.

We also heard Jesus say that God didn't send him so that people could be accused of making wrong decisions, but so that they could be helped to make right decisions.

Anyone who trusts in him will have life. We often struggle to trust God, to follow Jesus to live our faith.

We heard that the people were comfortable in their darkness and reluctant to follow God's light into something new, but we are told that God will show us the way and if we trust in God to guide us, we will know what we are to do next.

What if, this moment of our journey is to teach us to talk to God, to follow the guidance of Jesus, to Trust God and Love our Neighbour?

We have learned that we need to do some different connecting in our community. Phoning Trees were created: beginning with weekly contacts and now morphed into monthly, these phone calls have been a tangible voice of caring for many people who have been feeling isolated or lost. We have been more deliberate in connecting through Newsletters, our worship now connects us electronically or with bulletins we can read with God. Part of our learning has revolved around what it means to be in this new reality, how hard it is to change our behaviour for the sake of others. Committees can't meet in the same way, we struggle with jealousy and frustration when some folk are in our building but it's not time for full worship yet.

This desert journey is hard and is taking forever!
We need to trust that, if we work together with God as our guide, we will be invited into something amazing and life giving, offering faith and hope in new ways to the world? Jesus said: “anyone working and living in truth and reality welcomes God-light so the work can be seen for the God-work it is”

This Lenten journey is teaching us: that our faith is important to us; that we need to strengthen community connections showing love and care in ways that we haven't done before.

May we look up and see God offering us healing. May we see the winding road ahead and know God is asking us to trust in the love.

This is our truth. This is our reality.

This is our learning time. We can do this.

Come, Lent with me.

☞Hymn: ♪MV79 Spirit, open my heart

Responding to God's call...

There are many hurting people in the world,
God knows each one of them.

Even if our life is not what we planned,
we are blessed to live with choices,
with friends and neighbours.

God challenges us to be a friend to someone in need.
God challenges us offer healing hope to a hurting world.
May we never forget that every little bit we offer, has the potential to offer hope, to change a life.

May all that we have, and all that we offer be pleasing in God's sight. **Amen.**

♪No greater Love. (O'Brien)

Pastoral Prayers of God's people for God's people

This has been a year when we have found ourselves in uncharted territory, when we have complained, when we have, at times, lost our way.

Let us join our hearts together and share in these words of remembering, of faithfulness of know that God is with each one of us in our struggle, in our journey, holding us with love.

Written by Rev. Richard Bott, Moderator UCC 2021.02.27

Holy One, it's been a year.

A **year** since the pandemic hit this part of the world, and we realized that -

for the safety of each other

and all of our neighbours -

we needed to be a congregation that wouldn't congregate.

Well, not in-person, at least.

We've found other ways:

old technologies like paper mail and phone calls;

new technologies like

Zoom, email and, yes, Facebook.

We've found ways of being together, with each other, and with you.

It's not the same -

and there are parts of it that we're missing -

the hellos, the hugs, the coffee time after worship,

the singing, the ringing of bells and laughter -

but...

we've found ways to

live the ministry you have given us,

to be Jesus's disciples, to share your love,

with each other and with the whole world.

We remember those who have died from the virus.

We remember those who are ill.

We remember the healthcare workers, the researchers,
the grocery clerks, the delivery drivers - all who must work
for the care of the world in their own way.

We remember all those who are grieving,
all those who are afraid. all those who wait.

And we pray.

So, on this anniversary, we ask
that you would help us to
recognize each other
and to *know* that, **in all of this,
you have been, are, and always will be
with every part of your creation.**

**Give us strength to keep on.
Give us grace in our frustrations.
Give us hope for tomorrow.
Give us life, and life abundant,
that we might be people
who live it in the world.**

Physically distanced, but socially together;
faces masked, but hearts open;
hands washed,
but ready to get to the work you have for us -
we pray.

In Jesus' name,
carried by the wings of the Holy Spirit
enmeshed in the Creator's love, we pray. **Amen.**

∞Blessing

May ours hearts be full of gratitude
for God who loves us
and invites us again and again
into Covenant moments.

May we know that we are filled and surrounded by
our faithful God
who heals us, forgives us, loves us
all ways and always. Amen.

Changing the Christ Candle:

The light of Christ, shining into all the corners of the earth,
showing us where we are and where we are meant to be.

The Spirit of God. Breathe it in...and know that God is with
us wherever we go.

✠ Sending Song:

♪ VU579 The Church Is Wherever God's People

Acknowledgements

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