**Service for the Third Sunday in Lent, March 20, 2022**

**Gathering**

**Territorial Acknowledgement:**

<https://united-church.ca/sites/default/files/acknowledging-the-territory.pdf>

**Call to Worship:**

God invites us to journey in the way of faithfulness,

**to walk the Lenten road with Christ.**

We journey with confidence, for Christ is with us.

**Thanks be to God, for God’s steadfast love. (CGP** 5F003)

**Opening Prayer**

Beginner of all things,

begin in us again:

take these tired limbs

and rouse them to dance your joy

from sunbreak to sundown.

Help us,

O Blessed One,

to shake off our weariness

that we may know new life in you (CGP 17T004)

**Hymn:** “Be Still and Know” (More Voices #77)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kiC87pnAGmQ>

**Words of Confession**

God, you have called us to be pilgrims.

Forgive us when we weary of the journey

and seek security

rather than the open road.

Forgive us when we feel

the risk of the journey is too great.

Grant us pilgrim spirits in this Lenten season

and lead us to the new life of Easter.  (CGP 5I002)

*…silence*

**Words of Assurance**

God is merciful and gracious,

slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

God has compassion for our fears and failures;

God stays with us on our Lenten journey.

We are a forgiven people.

Thanks be to God! (CGP 5K001)

**The Word**

**Prayer for Illumination**

God of call, God of transformation,

God of the Lenten journey;

help us to discern your still, small voice.

Open us to change and growth

that we may walk with Christ.  In Jesus’ name.  Amen. (CGP 5M002)

**Reading:** Isaiah 55:1-9

*A reading from Isaiah… (scripture passage is read)*

*At the end of the reading:*

Holy Word, holy wisdom.

**Thanks be to God.**

**Hymn:** “There is a Balm in Gilead” (Voices United #612) Traditional, verse 2 by Cindy Dymond

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O5h4vn3cagQ>

*Refrain:* There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole.

There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin sick soul.

1. Sometimes I feel discouraged and think my work’s in vain,

But then the Holy Spirit revives my soul again. *Refrain*

1. I know both bliss and sorrow but when I’m feeling sad,

The love and joy of friendship is my balm in Gilead. *Refrain*

**Reading:** Luke 13:1-9

*A reading from Luke*

*At the end of the reading:*

Holy Word, holy wisdom.

**Thanks be to God.**

**Reflection: Hope in the Wilderness**

[**https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N4yOU5Fdack**](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N4yOU5Fdack)

Today is the third Sunday of Lent. What is Lent anyway? It is the season that marks the forty days that lead up to Easter. The word is related to the Old English and Germanic for springtime and the lengthening of the days. Lent is a time for reflection. It is a journey time. A time to make space to meditate on the meaning of our Christian faith. It is also a time of repentance when we confess the wrongs we have done to each other and the brokenness of our humanity. We draw ourselves closer to God through prayer, reading scripture, and worship.

On the first Sunday in Lent, two weeks ago, we heard the story in Luke’s gospel about how Jesus went into the wilderness for forty days where he was tempted by the devil. In the dessert he also confronted an unforgiving, harsh climate. Lent is time when we remember Jesus’ wilderness journey.

What does Lent mean for us today? What is our wilderness?

Let’s take a moment to have hard look at the groaning of creation and the suffering of our lives.

Our own wilderness journey is not easy. It is sometimes hard to keep our confidence, to stay joyful, to know which way to turn.

We continue to live with the reality of the pandemic. Things may be easing, but we’re all tired. And we’re divided too. We don’t all agree about the best ways to protect each other. And that’s hard. Sometimes we forget to love each other, especially when the stakes are high.

Then, there’s the climate crisis. We don’t necessarily agree about what to do. And none of us really knows what the future holds. One thing for sure is that many in Canada suffer because of fire or flood, cold or drought. When we worry about the future, whether it is because of crops, jobs, health, or the safety of our children and elders, we sometimes forget to love each other, especially when the stakes are high.

And now there is war in Ukraine. Let us remember that there is also have war in other parts of the world: in Syria, Ethiopia, Colombia, and Myanmar, among other places. Our hearts ache as the daily news reminds us of the violence and brokenness of our humanity. And when our hearts ache, we sometimes forget to love each other.

And life is tough in our cities, our towns, and our villages. Drug abuse is at an all-time high. More people are suffering from mental illness than in recent memory.

And we all have your own stories of suffering and trouble. Maybe someone is sick in your family, or lost their job, or struggles with mental health, or has a hard time at school, in a workplace, or in a relationship. Maybe someone you loved died recently and the world just doesn’t seem to make sense.

Hearts ache. We worry. We disagree.

And when our hearts ache, when we worry, when we disagree, we sometimes look for someone to blame. And we forget to love each other.

This is a pretty gloomy picture. So where does hope fit into this wilderness story, our wilderness

story?

Well, first of all, we remember that Jesus suffered too. For forty days in the dessert. When he tended people who were sick. When he lived under the Roman Empire and suffered persecution as a marginalized person. And when he was crucified. And yet, Jesus had confidence in God.

He showed us that our God is not a God who shies away from tough times. How do we know? Because God sent Jesus to accompany us in our struggles. And in Lent, and then on Good Friday, we remember how tough it was for Jesus. We recall his own wilderness journey and his journey to the cross.

And yet he persevered. How? Perhaps Jesus recited the words we heard from the prophet Isaiah to give him comfort: “All who are thirsty come and drink.” Imagine how amazing those words would have been in the dryness of the dessert wilderness!

Indeed the prophet Isaiah, who was also writing in a wilderness time—the time of the Babylonian Exile—reminds us of God’s promise for abundant life. Isaiah tells us of a banquet where everyone who thirsts will have something to drink. Everyone who is hungry, something to eat. And you don’t have to pay for it. We are invited to this feast. To “eat what is good, and delight…in rich food.”

As to those who lose their way, who behave wickedly, who forget to love each other, Isaiah reminds us that God is forgiving. How is this forgiving possible? Isaiah tells us the ways and thoughts of God are beyond as, just as the “heavens are higher than the earth.” Isaiah reminds us we don’t need to understand. We can trust God, lean into to Jesus who knows what suffering feels like as he walks with us.

So, like Jesus, confronted with wilderness times, we hang on to hope. Maybe it is a bit like a faint oasis glimmer at this point, but it is there, nonetheless. God’s Easter promise. New Life.

Our own wilderness journeys are certainly not easy these days. It is sometimes hard to keep our confidence, to stay joyful, to know which way to turn, to remember we are called to love each other. Things can be tough!

But Isaiah’s vision reminds us of God’s promise; another world IS possible. God’s promise is a rebuke against human structures of oppression and suffering. Instead, we are invited to the feast and called to love each other in the way Jesus showed us. This is not easy love. We are challenged to examine our own failings and brokenness. Indeed, in Luke’s Gospel Jesus is quite stern is reminding us that we do need to repent. We must turn towards God. But even here, the parable Jesus tells leaves room for another chance; the gardener is encouraged to fertilize the fig tree one more time to see if it will produce fruit. We are called to trust God’s healing and forgiving mercies, and to work with God to build Isaiah’s vision of defiant hope against all odds.

Let us care for those who are sick, comfort those who mourn, work for justice, and celebrate the goodness of creation in all we do. Let us not forget to love each other. Let us always remember to love each other.

**Offering Hymn:** “Come Touch Our Hearts” (More Voices #12)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4s6nvJIKO4U>

**Offering Prayer**

Gracious God,

bless and transform all that we offer:

our faltering steps, our brokenness,

our hope, our risking, our hearts,

that your covenant may be written on our hearts

and we may be a blessed and transformed covenant people.

In Jesus’ name.  Amen. (CGP 5R001)

**Prayers of Intercession** *Adapted from prayers from the Iona community*

We pray for all those who will be born today,

and who, even in the womb may fear the world . . . .

And we pray for all those who will die today,

who wonder who will hold them when human hands are left behind . . . .

God in your mercy, **Hear our prayer.**

We pray for those who must make a decision today,

which may affect their lives or the lives of others . . . .

And we pray for those who must leave today –

leave home, leave work, leave a relationship, an addiction, or a hard place …

God in your mercy, **Hear our prayer.**

We pray for all those who face discrimination, or fear for their safety...

for those who will not have enough food to eat or clean water to drink...

for the people and places, known and unknown to us,

where your people cry out for mercy and justice.

God in your mercy, **Hear our prayer.**

We pray for peace in the world, harmony and concord among nations and their leaders,

for love in our hearts, and for hope in our lives.

We remember especially the people of Ukraine…

God in your mercy, **Hear our prayer.**

We pray for those who are sick, and for those who care for the sick

for all those who are troubled and anxious, all who are fearful and in distress

And we pray also, aloud or in silence,

for all those who need our compassion, our prayers, and your presence . . . .

God in your mercy, **Hear our prayer.**

*One:*  As a mother hen broods over her chicks, we turn to you, Our father in heaven…

*All recite the Saviour’s prayer together*

**Closing Hymn: “If We Ever Needed Love Before”** Traditional

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7zkC762fj-g> (alternative hymn: Voices United #595)

If we ever needed love before, we sure do need it now.

We sure do need it now. We sure do need it now.

If we ever needed love before, we sure do need it now.

Need it every day and every hour.

We need it in the morning. We need it in the night.

We need it in the noon day and when the sun is shining bright.

If we ever needed love before…

**Closing Prayer:**

God, you are in the desert places

as you are in the green and growing land.

Help us to look for you when life is barren and our spirits ache.

Help us to walk with you in the wilderness,

and to be changed in spending time with you.  Amen. (GCP 5G007)

**Blessing:**

May the blessing of God give us strength for the journey;

may the Spirit of wisdom give us vision for the road;

may the love of Christ make us caring companions;

as together we go forth in the Lenten time.  Amen. (CGP 5X002)

**Sending:**

Go forth to care for the sick, comfort those who mourn, work for justice, and celebrate the goodness of creation in all we do. Go forth to love each other just as God loves us.

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This service was prepared by Dr. Becca Whitla, Professor of Pastoral Studies at St. Andrew’s College for the clergy retreat of the Living Skies Regional Council. Prayers are from *Celebrate God’s Presence* (CGP) as indicated. Hymns are from *Voices United* and *More Voices*, as indicated except for “If We Ever Needed Love” which is traditional.

Special thanks to Alan Gasser and Emma Whitla for musical collaboration.