

From the Pastor ...

June 28

My Soul Waits

I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; Psalm 130:5

These words from the lectionary psalm assigned to yesterday's worship have been echoing in my soul this week as I traveled to celebrate the life of my friend, Sharon and to lay her to rest. This pandemic season has seen such grief play out over and over, and I was so grateful to be able to be present in person to say a final farewell to my friend. Even as my heart breaks at her loss, my soul waits, indeed my whole self waits, for the Lord, and in God's word I hope. The Christian hope is far more than wishful thinking, it is *embodied* hope – hope that finds a firm foundation in a God who loves all of us into wholeness, and who cares deeply about each one, right down the single hairs on our heads. To hope in Jesus is to put our trust in the love and justice that he proclaimed to all the world and that we have been attempting to live out as his body in the world for two thousand years. Even as life offers challenges that sometime feel insurmountable, our God continues to hold us firmly in her hand. This week, let us commit to opening our souls to God's presence that we may embody this hope as we work to be God's hands and feet in the world.

June 21

A Wide-Open Spacious Life

Companions as we are in this work with you, we beg you, please don't squander one bit of this marvelous life God has given us. 2 Corinthians 6:1 (MSG)

Paul is passionate about the new believers experiencing a life full of grace and joy. His plea to the Corinthians resonates with me today as I hear the invitation not to squander a single moment of this one wild and precious life we have been given.

As the reading unfolds, Paul details all the challenges we face as followers of Jesus, reminding the Corinthians we must remain at our posts as faithful believers, no matter the trials or the joys, "when we're praised, and when we're blamed; slandered, and honored; true to our word, though distrusted; ignored by the world, but recognized by God; terrifically alive, though rumored to be dead; beaten within an inch of our lives, but refusing to die; immersed in tears, yet always filled with deep joy; living on handouts, yet enriching many; having nothing, having it all." For Paul, this life of faith is rich and fulfilling and he desires to offer it to all who seek salvation. "I can't tell you how much I long for you to enter this wide-open, spacious life," he says. And I think God longs for us to enter too. What would it be like to choose each day to lean into those experiences that best enable us to live out our faith in ways that build up God's creation and allow us all to thrive? Indeed, this week, let us step out into this wide-open spacious life, not squandering a minute, but living our faith, out loud, to the glory of God.

June 14

A New Family

Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother. Mark 3:35

Yesterday, we heard Jesus define family in a brand new way. Mark writes about how Jesus has been healing and casting out demons and arguing with the Temple leaders. Now he is so mobbed by crowds that he cannot even eat. His mother and brothers have come out to "restrain him" because everyone is saying "he has gone

out of his mind.” But, when told his family are looking for him, Jesus responds not with relief that they have come to rescue him, but with a question, “And who are my mother and my brothers?”

In those days, one’s first loyalty was to immediate family members. But as Jesus’ ministry unfolds, he builds a brand new community where such sibling relationships expand to include people from all across society. Suddenly, he appears to have no time for his family of origin, embracing instead anyone who does God’s will as someone who deserves his loyalty and attention. Today, we too tend to be most loyal to those closest to us – our immediate families, our various affinity groups, our congregations. Jesus, however, has a much broader vision of who should command our greatest attention and care. He sees anyone who knows God and follows God’s will as having a claim on our kinship.

What would happen, I wonder, if we began to view our neighbors who love God but belong to a different political party from us, or are a different color from us, or have fewer resources than us, as our siblings, too. How might that affect the way we allocate resources, the way we respond to conflict, the way we view our responsibility for others’ wellbeing? This week, let’s look around at our siblings and ask ourselves what God calls us to be and do for these sisters and brothers of ours.

June 7

Holy Ground

Yesterday, we finally experienced that beautiful moment we’ve all been waiting for – our return to the sanctuary for in-person worship. As we stepped onto this holy ground, the sense of coming home was palpable. What a joy that this moment should coincide with the celebration of our youth and the baptism of our newest member. Even as we reveled in seeing one another in person, hearing our voices echo against the clinker bricks of our sacred space as we praised God together, we also celebrated the presence of others in our community who gathered with us through the gift of virtual space, standing on the new sacred ground we discovered and created together during the time of the pandemic.

We have always known the church was much more than a building. In fact, we like to say that the church has left the building and, indeed, we did just that over the past year. What did we learn while we were away? I think God taught us that the bonds we share can stretch and bend and remain unbroken. They can grow and encompass new members from places we never imagined would be included in our worshipping community. They can flourish across time and space to create new sacred spaces where joy and sorrow can be shared, God’s ministry can be carried out, and new perspectives can be discovered and integrated into our sense of who we are. As we return to this particular holy ground, let us bring with us this expanded idea of what it means to occupy sacred space together and let us continue to open wide the doors of our sanctuary, and of our hearts, to welcome the stranger in.

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This week, as we prepare for that joyous moment when we will fling wide the doors to our sanctuary and welcome our community home, I have been thinking about what it means to stand on holy ground. The first image that leaps to my mind is of Moses standing before the burning bush. He has turned aside from the path to wonder at this flame that burns and brightens but does not destroy, and God tells him to remove his sandals for he stands on holy ground. What power lies in God’s presence in these holy places, what mystery and awe they evoke. We preach all the time that God is everywhere, but it is undeniable that we feel the divine presence especially strongly in certain places.

As we prepare to return to our sanctuary, a place that has witnessed so many important moments in our individual lives and in the life of our community, we will step again onto the holy ground where we have been meeting God every week for more than fifty years. I think we may be surprised by the great joy and power in that long-anticipated moment. After so many months gathering in virtual space, how wonderful it will be to worship together, to hear the echo of our voices bubbling up in the sanctuary, to rejoice in the ring of the piano and the organ creating music that lifts us toward God, to settle into the quiet of that moment before our call to worship begins. Surely, as our voices rise in community, we will be deeply aware that we are standing on holy ground.

And even as we embrace this return to a place that we love, a place that holds God's presence for us in so many ways, the Holy Spirit will invite us to hold onto the new places in our lives where holy ground has been created anew. For, surely, holy ground has always been about much more than a physical location where God's presence has been made manifest. All through the pandemic, we have been creating, or maybe better yet, recognizing, holy ground in unexpected places. When someone types out a joy or a concern in our YouTube worship chat, we are standing on holy ground. When someone sends an encouraging note in the mail to lift the spirits of someone living alone, we are standing on holy ground. When we gather on zoom to pray or study the Bible together, we are standing on holy ground.

Even as we begin to return to in-person life, this expanded sense of holy ground can strengthen and enrich our ministry together. When someone shares a story of deep pain or joy or grief with us, we are invited onto holy ground. When we venture into the sacred space of God's natural kingdom, we are invited onto holy ground. When we share in a moment of transition in someone's life, we are invited onto holy ground.

We find holy ground in the places where we encounter God and feel the Holy Spirit. We recognize it in the moments where we experience the deep love and grace offered by the God who will not let us go. We create it in the radical hospitality we offer one another when we truly see every neighbor as uniquely and perfectly made in the image of the living God. Holy ground is the physical and mental and emotional and spiritual space that God invites us into; a place from which we can go out to do God's work, to which we can return for replenishment and renewal, in which we can shelter when we need comfort and rest.

Welcome home to this place of God's deep presence. Here, we stand on holy ground.

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