

WORSHIP – March 22, 2020

Let us be **Called to Worship** in answer to the first question from the Westminster Catechism, by proclaiming aloud: **Our chief purpose is to glorify and to enjoy God forever!**

Call to Confession: “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” 1John 1:8-9. *(Pause now for a time of silent confession.)*

Proclaim aloud, this **Assurance of Forgiveness:** “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death.” Romans 8:1.

*If able, click on the link below to sing aloud **the Gloria Patri:***

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dgcYD_m4OhU

Now state aloud, our **Call to God’s Word:**

“Scripture cannot be set aside... What does Scripture say?” John 10:35 & Romans 4:3.

Pray aloud, our **Prayer for Illumination:** **Lord, give us eyes to read, ears to hear, and a mind, heart, body, and will to heed your will, according Scripture. Amen.**

*If able, click on the link below to respond with **“How Firm a Foundation”***

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-x-U3VMYf4g>

SERMON: “Empty” by The Reverend Dr. Janet Hufford

Let us now begin before the dawn of time. Before the events of this current time came to be. Before time came to be. Let us begin before the dawn of time.

“Once upon a time” is a common beginning to a fictional story, but this is not a fictional story. This refers to an account before the dawn of time. This sermon refers to the first verses of Scripture. “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.” **Genesis 1:1-2.**

The sermon focuses on the first phrase of the first verse, “In the beginning God...” Now don’t move. Stay focused on that phrase, “In the beginning God...” Meditate on God alone. Be aware of God’s eternal presence with us right now as Immanuel, God with us, because God has always been and always will be. Before anything else came to be, God! Enough said for now. Stay centered, and pause in silence on that truth.

(Pause. Take a deep breathe. Pause a little while longer.)

There is a New Testament verse held in parallel with this first phrase from Genesis 1:1. “In the beginning was the Word (*Logos*), and the Word was God, and the Word was with God in the beginning.” **John 1:1-2**. Who is the Word? The Word who was God is the Son of the Living God. “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” **John 1:14**. There came a time, which we celebrate each year at Christmas, when the incarnation of the divine was born in human flesh. Jesus is not created. He has always been with the Living God, as revealed in Scripture. Jesus, being God and the Son of the Living God, is “the same yesterday, today, and forever” **Hebrews 13:8**. Let us respond to this truth in pause or in song.

If able, click on the link below to respond with “Praise to the Lord, the Almighty”

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=roxlm_gCb7c

Now read again the two verses in Genesis. “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.” **Genesis 1:1-2**. Note that “the Spirit of God was hovering.” Here and elsewhere Scripture reveals that God is in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The first person of God specified in the Bible is the Holy Spirit. That realization probably surprises many, since many of us don’t speak much of the Holy Spirit. Some of us might even admit that we’re frightened to speak of a person, who we cannot see. He is after all Spirit, without flesh and bone. However, we are not to be afraid of the Holy Spirit. In John 14, where Jesus prepares the coming of the Holy Spirit, Jesus begins, “Do not let your hearts be troubled.” Jesus then explains in verses 16-17, “And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever – the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.” When Jesus was on earth, he was Immanuel, God with us. Now Jesus is on the throne with the Father in heaven. Neither the Father nor Jesus are with us. Thank God they have not relinquished the throne! The Holy Spirit is God with us. Although Jesus is now our advocate at the Father’s right hand in heaven, the Father gives us another advocate, the Spirit of truth. Another word for advocate is counselor. In other words, the Holy Spirit, as he is with Jesus, is our friend. Jesus has left his best friend with us to be our friend. What good news, especially in these times. Let us respond to this truth in pause or in song.

If able, click on the link below to respond with “Holy, Holy, Holy”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vrg7jQ5lc8c>

Finally, consider further how “the earth was formless and empty.” As of yet, nothing has been created. The Lord has not yet spoken. All is silent. All is still. There is empty space. Nowadays shelves in stores are empty. Aside from grocery stores, hospitals, and other

essential places, buildings are empty of people told to work from and stay at home. Financial accounts are emptying of assets. Emptiness is not comfortable, but there can be a good purpose to emptiness. A good purpose in deserted places. A good purpose to being in the wilderness. (Please read again later the 1/19 sermon at the end of the 3/18/20 church letter.) In the January sermon, we learn that Jesus went to deserted places to pray. To hear from God, we need to do the same. But there is more to consider in emptiness.

Jesus submitted to emptiness, not just during prayer, but even before the point of his conception and incarnation. To understand, we go to that which is believed to be the oldest Christian hymn in Philippians. "In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing (or in ESV, emptied himself)" vv. 6-7a. Why would Jesus do such a thing? To understand read the entirety of the hymn from **Philippians 2:1-11** in your Bible or as below.

Or, if able, click on the link below.

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Philippians+2%3A5-11&version=NIV>

Then click on this link below to hear the Scripture above.

<https://www.biblegateway.com/audio/mclean/niv/Phil.2.5-Phil.2.11>

Another good online source is below, but there is not the ability to listen.

<https://biblehub.com/niv/philippians/2.htm>

Use the resources above to read other Scripture, too.

Jesus emptied himself for these reasons. First, in order not to take advantage of his equality with God (v. 6). Second, to take the nature of a servant (v. 7). Third, to die on the cross (v. 8) for us! Fourth, to be exalted to the highest place (v. 9). Fifth, to bring glory to God the Father (v. 11). Finally, so that we might willingly do the same (back to v. 5). But why should we submit to emptiness as Jesus did?

Return again to **Genesis 1:1-2**, where the earth was empty and the Spirit of God was hovering. We don't know how long the emptiness and hovering lasted. We don't know how long the silence endured. For "the lights" that govern time were not yet created. Remember we are "before the dawn of time." Now look at the oldest book in the Bible: Job. After Job has lost everything, after questions raised by his wife, friends, and himself, "Then the Lord spoke to Job out of the storm. He said: 'Who is this that obscures my plan with words without knowledge? Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me. Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me, if you understand'" **Job 38:1-4**. Where were we? Where are we? Do we understand? No. But God has plans. God knows. God understands.

The Creator always knew what he was doing and why. God knew before he created anything. God knew that the good he created would be quickly marred by those who he created, but he went forward with plan A anyway. God doesn't have a plan B. God knew sin

and evil would enter his good creation, and illness, suffering, and death would result. Yet God acted anyway. God spoke. God said, “Let there be... and there was...” Genesis 1 (various verses). The emptiness was a canvas for God’s very good work. “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning – the sixth day.” Genesis 1:31.

God’s word is ever enduring and never failing. But now is the emptiness, the pregnant pause before God speaks and acts. During this time of what seems like dreadful silence, we must keep our eyes turned upward and our ears tuned to God, so that we are ready to hear when God speaks. We must keep our ears are pressed upon his lips, which breathed all creation to life. And when we break silence in this empty time, we should raise praises to God. Whether gathered together or in worship apart, we are created to glorify God and enjoy God forever.

Respond to this truth with the Lord’s prayer:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

Close worship with a hymn of praise.

If able, click on the link below to sing “Morning Has Broken”

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

Benediction: May the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Philippians 4:7. **Amen.**