

Immanuel United Church
Sixth after Epiphany
February 12, 2023

PRELUDE

Acknowledgement of the Land and Treaties

Today, we acknowledge the land that we are gathered on is Treaty 1 territory..... the traditional lands of the Anishinaabeg, Cree, Oji-Cree, and Dakota Peoples, as well as the homeland and the heart of the Metis Nation, who for thousands of years, walked gently on this land with deeply rooted gifts of spirituality, culture and ways of knowing.

We respect the Treaties that were made on these territories, acknowledge the harms and mistakes of the past, and give thanks for the connection we share with this land – in times past and also in the present day.

Today we are called to seek a new relationship as Indigenous and non-indigenous people, creating one based on friendship, built on respect, and one that produces peace, remembering that we are all treaty people.

***As we enter this time of worship,
we acknowledge the Christ candle, marking the presence of light in
our midst, and the Rainbow Candle, symbolizing that we are an
inclusive and affirming community, and all belong here.***

Welcome and Announcements

Lighting of the Christ Candle

It has dawned on us before that Jesus is with us.

It has occurred to us that he is here.

Yet in the wee hours of the night, we wonder and wait.

We do not always have the faith to see, to believe.

Yet, our mustard seed is planted.

Our light is lit.

We take the steps.

We walk and walk as we follow the light that is Christ.

Call to Worship:

Gather to praise the name of God.

We praise God in every part of our worship.

Gather to listen to the voice of God.

We gather to hear the word of the Lord.

Gather to gain strength to meet life's challenges.

We gather to refuel our souls as we turn to God with open vessels.

Gather and be aware that God loves us.

We are gathered as the loved ones that were created in God's image.

Gather to be rest assured that God is in control.

We gather, trusting that God will lead.

Hymn VU#232

Joyful, Joyful We Adore You

Opening Prayer

Dear God, as we approach this time of worship, we open ourselves to all your possibilities. We come with anticipation and joy to find new

ways to serve you. May your Spirit surround us as we join together in songs of praise. May we hear your voice in the scripture reading as we listen to the words that are spoken. As we commune with you, Almighty One, we pray that each person here will feel your arms around them and know that they are loved. With the joy that is in this Divine love, we continue our service in your name. Amen.

Hymn VU#562

Jesus Calls Us

Scripture:

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Psalms 119:1-8

1 Corinthians 3:1-9

Choir Anthem

“You Are the Light of the World”

Reflection – Made for Walking

In Deuteronomy two choices were set before the people, life and prosperity, or death and adversity. As we dig deeper into the scripture, we find that it isn't merely a choice of life or death, it's a choice about how you want to spend your time on earth.

God has already graciously given the Israelites life. So, in a sense, God invites them to respond to God's choosing and redeeming work in Israel's life by “leaning into” that life, by fully receiving the life God has already given them.

What does the kind of “life” that God calls Israel to choose look like? For not just Israel, but all those whom God has redeemed it looks a lot

like Deuteronomy 30:16: “To love the Lord your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws.”

I think on some level, none of us like being told what to do. Our independent and rebellious streak rears its head especially when we reach our teens and early twenties, at least it did for me. Looking back on that time, my mom gave me some excellent advice, but did I listen, nooooo.

The link between hearing the voice of God and obeying it is so established in Deuteronomy and elsewhere in the Bible that some modern translations simply translate “obey God.” In our contemporary context, obedience, especially unexamined obedience to authority, can get a bad reputation. We often view it as submissive or uncritical in nature.

Too often we make the mistake of thinking that God’s laws are like speed limit signs — they are just arbitrary hoops God has decided people should jump through. But as the people of God, we need to know that God’s laws are like gravity — God gave us these guidelines and rules as a kind of owner’s manual for life on earth. These rules describe the way things simply are. All in all, you will be far better off in life if you respect the law of gravity — when dealing with hammers, ladders, staircases, and the edges of cliffs, it’s a really good idea to know that gravity is not a law that depends on circumstances to take effect. So also with God’s law for the Israelites: God wanted his people to be safe, healthy, and well. But God knew that for shalom to come, it would come best and easiest and the most quickly when people followed the owner’s guide for life in the Promised Land.

But what does abundant life mean? Careers, homes, cars, vacations are all great goals. We all dream of achieving these fruits of our labours. Are they the abundant life? Are they rewards for being children of God?

I have a feeling they are just icing on the cake. They are not the substance of which abundant life is made.

And what happens if we do obey the law of God. Is obeying the law any guarantee of a great life? I mean it says choose life and prosperity, or death and adversity. As we know, bad things happen to good people all the time. Do you suppose choosing life is not just choosing our day-to-day external activities? Could it be our internal life; the life of the soul? Could it be our spiritual life and simply put, our relationship with God?

I think that's why finding other gods to worship is so tempting. The promised rewards are so much more appealing and seem within our reach. We can see them and enjoy them now. However, as we learn over time, so much of what we have can be snatched from us at a moment's notice even when we obey God. As we see on the news, natural disasters destroy property all the time, people get laid off, vacations are disrupted by lost luggage or worse. We live with the faith that all these dreams of the good life will transpire, but as we know, there are no guarantees. Thankfully, God gave us something to cling to.

But what exactly are we clinging to? What are the laws? I'm sure the ten commandments are in there somewhere, but I personally believe it goes much deeper than that. I believe that following God's law involves not only the laws of the Old Testament. These laws are not to be totally abolished but they are joined with an ongoing relationship with God who speaks to us through the voice of the Holy Spirit.

The reading today from Psalm 119: 1-8 describes this experience as walking in the law of God, but again what does that mean?

Psalm 119 is not the prayer of a perfect person. It is the prayer of a serious disciple who needs both law and Spirit, both moral effort and helpless faith, both obedience and trust in Christ. Verse 5 is a very

human cry for help, “O that my ways may be steadfast in keeping your statutes!” Deuteronomy, too, envisions obedience as a response to God’s covenant. It is active — walking and listening.

I like walking and I love to hike. There are so many things that appeal to me. I love the fresh air, the sights, the sounds, the anticipation. It helps me think. It can be even more enjoyable if you have someone to walk with. What happens when you walk with a friend? Walking with a close friend requires saying "no" to many other things. Walking with God also requires letting go of anything that would be a distraction. If you were on a walk with a friend but you brought a kazoo and played it the whole time, the walk would not be satisfying for either of you. Many people attempt to walk with God, but they bring along kazoo-like habits. They know these things are not God’s choice for them, but they pretend everything is fine. The relationship is not satisfying to either of them.

However, if we bring ourselves without all the distractions, I believe it is in this actual walk or figurative walk that we can get close to God. All kinds of things become revealed. I’ve experimented with different ways of praying and I find that I’m the most honest when I talk to God while I am walking. When we walk, we see all kinds of things and experience so much. Our life walk too is full of many changes in landscape and scenery. And one of the things I love about a new hike is that you never know what can be around the next bend. I’m egged on by what I might find. Can our walk with God also be full of surprises? Can we continue to be amazed by what God shows us around the next bend? Some hikes can have very treacherous paths. That’s why it’s so important to come well equipped with good footwear and perhaps some walking sticks. We learned the hard way that walking in sandals or having no bug repellent can defeat the purpose of a good walk. God is patient as we learn along the way. On our spiritual walk, we have at our disposal the tools to equip ourselves; the Bible, prayer, fellow pilgrims on the

journey, our weekly worship. What do we have at our disposal that prevents us from falling or straying from the path? What spiritual practices give us strength to keep going? To remain close to God and God's voice.

Jesus was the quintessential example of a man who walked with God. Jesus was sent to us to show the image of God. He was the one who walked with God and believed in the old laws but also believed in the new covenant that finds salvation through the saving power of Christ.

I'd like to touch on the scripture reading in 1 Corinthians for a few moments. Paul ministered to the Christians in Corinth for eighteen months and Apollos ministered to them for an extended period of time, however, these Corinthian Christians failed to grow spiritually as they should have. Their development has been arrested. Their growth has been stunted.

In the passage we read today, some of the members of the church were favouring Paul and some Apollos. Paul emphasizes that both himself and Apollos are human, each with their own gifts, but it was God who was responsible for all of it.

My takeaway from this passage is that Christians have maturity levels. And if we don't mature, we do silly things like the people of Corinth and fight over who is the better leader. Instead of some being on the Paul team and some being on the Apollos team, they needed to realize that each leader had their role and gave a unique gift to the Christians they were serving. It was also wise to know that no matter who they backed, both men were servants of God. I'm convinced that maturing spiritually is a lifelong process. So, as Christians, it's important not to get stuck. We may rely on the faith that saw our parents through, but what does it mean to us. Have we purchased our own walking shoes?

As we saw with the Corinthians, I believe that obeying the laws of God is, in addition to being for our personal well being, it's for the collective good as it was for the collective good of the Israelites.

The law we have today can be summed up in a few words: We are to love God with all our hearts and minds and strength, and we're to love one another, even as Christ loved us. The apostle Paul said, "He who loves another has fulfilled the law."

Deuteronomy says, "Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob." God has set before us the land, the land that was promised to Israel. Don't we have some obligation to fulfill our end of the bargain?

Law, when you see it in today's world, is essentially a restraint on people who do not live in love toward others. There are traffic lights, pollution controls, laws against murder, kidnapping, theft, fraud, and a host of other things. All these laws seek to prevent conduct that will hurt someone else. But for those who walk in God's love, law doesn't really need to exist--no law to burden or bind them, because they naturally and voluntarily fulfill through the spirit all the righteous demands of the written law.

This is the season of Epiphany which can mean there is a sudden manifestation or perception of the essential nature or meaning of something or it can mean an illuminating discovery, realization, or disclosure and it can even mean a revealing scene or moment.

As growing Christians what new discoveries have we made? Do we see the essential nature of God as we are led to follow the law? Following

the law is an ongoing process. It is not static. We have the choice. The weight of our desire. What is at the heart of what we love? When we walk with God, we walk with the law in ever forward motion.

Before God works through us, God wants to walk with us. When God has a friend, divine activity accelerates. When God has a useful vessel that has been prepared, that vessel will be used. Amen.

Hymn MV#157 I Am a Child of God

Offering VU#540 Grant Us, God, the Grace

Grant us, God, the grace of giving,
with a spirit large and free,
that ourselves and all our living
we may offer faithfully.

Offering Prayer

Thank-you for these offerings that have been given by your people, O God. There is so much that you have provided. We honour the monetary gifts and talents that are received. Each person here has their own unique way to serve you and we praise you for the time and effort they give. Help us to use all our resources for the work that you have laid before us, whether it's here in our community or on the other side of the world. We welcome these opportunities and thank-you for your blessings. Amen.

Prayers of the People

During this season of Epiphany, we discover something new everyday, and we thank-you, dear God for the many insights that you give us. You have made it possible for us to grow in our Christian walk, while gaining a greater understanding of your vision for this world. We seek your guidance continually.

We pray for situations in the world that have caused so much pain and sorrow. The people in Syria are devastated by an earthquake. May they find some comfort from you as they struggle with the loss of so many lives.

As we celebrate Black History Month, we know that you God, need no reminder that these lives matter. Help us to honestly examine ourselves and our systems for all the obvious and not so obvious signs of racism. We honour the lives of so many people of colour who have stood in defiance to have their voices heard.

We encounter people close to home who have reason to wonder if you exist, dear God. May we carry on the mission of Jesus as the Holy Spirit enables us to show them that, yes, there is hope in the love that is God. Help us to be ambassadors for your new heaven and new earth as we gather those in need around into the great circle of belonging.

We pray for those who are sick within our church family. Give them your healing touch, lighten whatever burden they may have. In this moment of silence, we humbly lay all of our concerns before you as we bring our unspoken prayers before you.

Prayer of Jesus

Hymn MV#183

I'm Gonna Shout, Shout

Commissioning and Benediction

Walk with God in all that you do. Find each step a joy and an expression of gratitude as we meet our fellow travellers. Be encouraged by the life that Jesus led and lean on the strength of the Holy Spirit.

I pray that we feel exhilarated as we anticipate our walk with God. Know that the air will hit you in the face and leave you breathless. It's okay. You're taken care of; you're not going to be led astray. We have something to cling to, we have a path, we have each other. Thanks be to God. Amen.