

## CALL TO WORSHIP:

*God upholds the cause of the oppressed,  
and gives food to the hungry.  
He lifts up those who are bowed down;  
he loves the righteous.  
God watches over the foreigner,  
and sustains the fatherless and the widow.*  
Let us worship God.

(Psalm 146.7a, 8b-9)

**HYMN:** Joyful, joyful, we adore you! #410

## PRAYER OF APPROACH AND CONFESSION:

God of righteousness, love, and compassion:

We thank you that you call us to worship you; and that, even though we are physically separated, we are nevertheless joined together in spirit. We thank you that you desire to speak to us, and that you welcome our prayers. May our time of worship, then, help to strengthen and deepen our relationship with you.

We confess, however, that we so often fall short of your expectations of us, as we give in to our self-centered impulses, and fail to show appropriate consideration for the people around us. Too easily we lose patience with others; too often we ask “What’s in it for me?”; too often we do only the bare minimum of what you desire of us.

We confess that we have sinned, then; and we ask your forgiveness, through the sacrificial death of Jesus. Continue to work in us through the Holy Spirit, to shape us into the people you want us to be; so that we may live more and more in ways that honor you, and that reflect your righteousness and love.

We pray in the name of Jesus, our Savior; and we pray together, now, as he taught us:

*Our Father, which art in heaven:*

*Hallowed be thy name.*

*Thy kingdom come.*

*Thy will be done in 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,*

*for ever. Amen.*

(Matthew 6.9-13, KJV)

## ASSURANCE OF FORGIVENESS:

Hear this good news from the scriptures:

*This is how God showed his love among us:*

*he sent his only Son into the world*

*so that we might live through him.*

*This is love: not that we have loved God,*

*but that he loved us,*

*and sent his Son to be the sacrifice that pays for our sins.*

(1 John 4.9-10)

So, if we have confessed our sin to God sincerely,  
let us be assured that God will forgive us.

## SCRIPTURE READINGS:

- **Old Testament Reading:** Ruth 1.1-18, 22 - Ruth accompanies Naomi to Israel

In this passage, Ruth accompanies her mother-in-law Naomi when she returns to Israel.

Ruth was from the neighboring country of Moab, which was on the east side of the Dead Sea, in what is today Jordan.

- **Psalm:** Psalm 91 - “Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High ...”

Psalm 91 is a psalm of trust. It states that God protects those who are faithful to him, and that they therefore don't need to be afraid of any danger — which is very typical Old Testament thinking.

The words of this psalm may originally have been addressed to a *king* of Israel preparing to go into battle.

- **Letter Reading:** Romans 12.9-16 - Various exhortations

This reading is from a portion of the letter in which Paul teaches his readers how they should live as people of God.

- **Gospel Reading:** Mark 1.29-39 - Healings in Capernaum

This reading comes directly after last week's reading, in which Jesus spoke in a synagogue in the town of Capernaum.

The events in today's reading take place later the same day.

**SERMON:** “Motivated by Empathy” — *written by Andrea Perrett, edited by John Zondag*

It's a fair statement to say that 2020 was a difficult year, and we know that the challenges continue. We are not in the midst of a 100-yard-dash; rather we find ourselves in the middle of a marathon.

COVID-19 has impacted us all personally. For many, their work has changed, their children are at home with them, or they have been directly affected by the virus.

The coronavirus has also impacted communities. Businesses are closing, and recreation programs and group activities are no longer available — and for who-knows-how-much longer.

As well, the pandemic has definitely impacted congregations. For the first time in our memory, our congregations have been forced to suspend their in-person services. Our worship traditions have been altered for the foreseeable future, with the familiar singing and coffee time being reimagined.

The impact of COVID-19 goes beyond the borders of our country, too. Since it is a global pandemic, there isn't a nation that hasn't had its health or economic situation affected. Sadly, many countries were already running a marathon against food insecurity or poverty, long before COVID-19 became a reality.

While the COVID-19 pandemic is extraordinary, it's safe to say that we have all had things we struggle with throughout our lives. Years from now, when the pandemic is a distant memory, we will still have sorrows, regrets, and losses to contend with in all the important aspects of our lives.

The Bible is a source of comfort and strength for me, especially over the past months; and as I have spoken with others, I have been encouraged by the variety and depth of the scriptures that they have been sustained by during this time.

Psalm 91 says,

*Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High,  
will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.*

*I will say of the LORD, "He is my refuge and my fortress,  
my God, in whom I trust." (Psalm 91.1-2)*

I have found myself particularly drawn to this psalm as a reminder of where I can find my shelter and strength. It's comforting to know that, for thousands of years, great clouds of witnesses — including Jesus himself — have also been seeking comfort and strength in these words.

Empathy is another thing I have been turning toward and grounding myself in these days. Life is difficult — I know that I am in need of empathy from others, and I am trying hard to use a hardy dose of empathy with others — that is, simply acknowledging and understanding someone else's suffering.

Empathy is one of the foundational values that underlie our Christian testimony. Ruth showed empathy in accompanying Naomi as she returned to her homeland of Israel in today's Old Testament reading. Jesus embodied empathy in healing the throng of people at Simon's front door in today's Gospel reading. In today's reading from the Letters, Paul reminds us to be empathetic with others when he says, *Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.* Likewise, the second half of the Great Commandment — *Love your neighbor as yourself* — encourages us to take a posture of empathy.

For me, drawing close to God in scripture and practising empathy go hand in hand.

We take on a posture of empathy because we *first* experienced empathy in God's being empathetic with us. Through the incarnation of Jesus, God joined in with our human story, and experienced the heights and depths of human life. Simply put, Jesus understands us. He felt the joy of friendship and the pain of rejection, and he died a human death. We know what empathy is because we have experienced it from God.

As we grow more and more into the likeness and image of Christ, we begin to take on a deeper posture of empathy — and we act on it. Today, on PWS&D Sunday, we are reminded that our work of supporting PWS&D — of responding to and lifting up other people and communities around the world — is testimony to God's empathy, care, and compassion for people.

During these extraordinary times, PWS&D's partners around the world remain deeply committed to their work, no matter what is going on in connection with the pandemic. While the need was great *prior* to the pandemic, meeting ever-increasing need has become even *more* challenging.

One of our partners from Malawi commented, "Since the beginning of the outbreak, we have never stopped working." Our partners are so conscious of the vital difference their programs are making at the community level that they continue, despite the difficulties and personal risks.

In many areas, the pandemic has amplified the needs that were already present. For example, in Somalia, a profound lack of resources and rising food prices due to COVID-19 have meant that many simply cannot access what is needed to sustain their own health and that of their children.

Single mother Fatuma lives in a camp with her two-year-old daughter Hawa. A few months ago, Hawa was very sick and severely underweight because she was malnourished. Fatuma brought her daughter to a nearby clinic supported by PWS&D, which she had heard about from others in the camp. "I was worried Hawa would die," recounts Fatuma. "She spent twelve days in the stabilization centre, where she was given medicine and nutritional feeding, and received a transfusion. I was given meals also while she was admitted." Now, Fatuma can hold her daughter close, knowing Hawa has made a full recovery.

Through the Canadian Foodgrains Bank, in countries like Somalia and Afghanistan, PWS&D is responding to increased food needs due to COVID-19 by ensuring that families and children have the food they need to survive.

In a number of countries, PWS&D has supported local partners as they re-purpose program funds to provide COVID-19 support. Even as we work to carry on with our long-term sustainable development work, families have received food kits, as well as hygiene and sanitation items, including hand soap and disinfectant wipes.

Lester, a recipient of these items commented, “I’m so thankful for your support, for the masks, for these small expressions of love. We’re so thankful. Honestly, we didn’t have access to buy these things ourselves, since we’re so far out. But now, thanks to you, we have masks, and won’t have to use our little bit of money to buy them. Thankfully, you are here supporting us with these. We’re so thankful.”

Part of finding our shelter with God is taking steps to extend that shelter to others around us. As a denomination, our support of programs like this, driven by our empathy, help to provide comfort and refuge to others around the world. When we see people seeking the comfort and refuge of God, we are called to use empathy to invite them into God’s embrace.

This has been a difficult time for us — as individuals, as congregations and as nations around the world. And it looks like the coming months will continue to be difficult. Yet, as we turn toward God to sustain us during these hard times, we find that God’s care, comfort, and empathy are not limited or finite. As we draw close and find refuge in God’s shadow during these uncertain times, let us work together to reflect this care to others, and invite *them* into God’s care as well.

God sides with the vulnerable. Right now, it may seem like we’re all vulnerable — but God is big enough to shelter each of us, and to come alongside us in our hurt and suffering. There is plenty of room in the shadow of the Almighty, where we can all find comfort and refuge.

**HYMN:** Where cross the crowded ways of life ... #760, verses 1-2, 5-6

### **PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE:**

God of abundant growth:

In the mystery of the mustard seed, you gift us with the possibility that your kingdom is among us, even when it is not yet visible. Those things we desire most — that we long and yearn for — are within reach.

We yearn for a world in which every person, young or old, is safe, protected, and filled with good things. Fresh water, fresh food, and fresh air are simple commodities, and yet so inaccessible for many in our world.

Many wander far from home, seeking shelter and belonging, a place to grow and to put down roots. Mothers and fathers cry in fear for their children, anxious about the availability of medical care, education, food, water, and hope. In your mercy, gracious God, cause seedlings to emerge out of the dry ground.

When we can not perceive your kingdom, direct us toward streams in the wilderness, flowers sprouting out of the rocks, life emerging from the empty tomb. May we be signs of your kingdom, living proof that you bring miraculous and amazing growth from even the smallest seed,

the smallest beginning.

May we continue to plant seeds, through the work of Presbyterian World Service and Development. We pray for the churches and organizations that partner with PWS&D, that their work may flourish, and bring comfort to those who need it most. We pray for the staff of PWS&D, that they may be courageous and creative in their planting and watering. We pray for the entire Presbyterian Church in Canada, and all those who support PWS&D, that we may see signs of green, lush growth in unexpected places, and be able to celebrate your kingdom made visible.

We give you thanks for your daily care for us, and for all the ways in which you provide for our needs. Hear our prayers for members of our congregations, our families, and our circles of friends who have particular needs today, whom we now name before you: \_\_\_\_\_. In your compassion, reach out to each one, we pray, and grant them the support and blessings they need.

On this cold winter day, we give you thanks for those who have to work outdoors in the cold to provide various services that we depend on; and we pray for their safety. We pray also for those who are homeless, that adequate shelter may be provided for them, especially when safety measures during the current pandemic require physical distancing, and therefore more space per person.

We pray for people in positions of authority. We give thanks for the leadership they give, and pray that they may be guided by your wisdom as they make decisions and formulate policies. We pray in particular this week that world leaders may respond appropriately to the military takeover in Burma, and pressure the military to restore the democratically-elected government.

We pray for people in authority also as they continue to give leadership in the ongoing pandemic. We thank you that numbers of infections and deaths from COVID-19 continue to decrease; and we pray for wisdom as our leaders make decisions about easing restrictions further. We give thanks for the hard work done by doctors, nurses, researchers, and all other health care workers; and we pray that you would continue to strengthen and sustain them in this extremely stressful time. We give thanks also for the work of people who provide long-term care for frail seniors and for people with disabilities. We pray that their work may be properly valued, and be given the recognition and support it deserves. We pray also that long-standing problems in the long-term care system that have become obvious during the pandemic may be appropriately dealt with and resolved.

We pray that people who have lost their jobs, those who have experienced a decrease in income, and those whose businesses are in difficulty may receive the assistance they need to see them through this crisis; and that the easing of restrictions may result in an improvement in their situation. We give thanks for the vaccines that have been developed and those that are still in development. We pray that greater quantities may soon become available, and that they may be effective in protecting individuals and communities from the effects of the corona virus.

We thank you that you hear our prayers, gracious God, and we offer them up to you in the name of Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

**HYMN:** Love divine, all loves excelling ... #371

**COMMISSIONING AND BLESSING:**

Sisters and brothers in Christ:

Go into the week ahead, now,

in peace,

and in the strength of the Holy Spirit,

to invest your lives in the works of faith,

and to make a name for yourselves in compassion and generosity.

And may God bless you:

May he make you rich in faith,

and loving and merciful in action;

in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

*Note: This service, including the sermon, is adapted from the worship resource provided by PWS&D for this Sunday. The sermon was written by Amanda Perrett, convener of the PWS&D Committee; and the first half of the Prayers of the People was written by Sarah Travis.*