

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

CALL TO WORSHIP:

*One thing I ask from God,
this only do I seek,
that I may dwell in the house of God
all the days of my life —
to gaze on the beauty of God,
and to seek him in his temple.*

(Psalm 27.4)

Let us worship God.

HYMN: As pants the hart ...

PRAYER OF APPROACH AND CONFESSION:

Almighty and holy God:

We praise you that you graciously call us into relationship with you through the person and work of Jesus Christ; that you offer to free us from the consequences of our sin, and that you offer us the gift of eternal life.

We confess, however, that we continually fail to give you the place in our lives that you deserve, and that we fail to produce the fruit in our lives that you expect — either in quantity or quality. We continue to be motivated most strongly by our desires for personal gain and personal pleasure; and in doing so, we often hurt others, or fail to respond to the needs of others.

We confess that we too easily fall back into sinful ways, and so we ask you once again to forgive us, through Jesus' sacrificial death. Help us once again to open ourselves to the guidance and influence of the Holy Spirit, so that we may produce the Spirit's fruit in greater abundance, and may come to resemble Jesus more closely in the way we think and act.

We pray in his name; 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:

*Jesus our Lord was delivered over to death for our sins,
and was raised to life for our justification.*

(Romans 4.25)

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

SCRIPTURE READINGS:**- Old Testament Reading:** Genesis 17.1-8, 15-16 - God's covenant with Abraham

In this reading, God repeats to Abraham promises that he has already made twice before: that Abraham and his wife Sarah will have a great number of descendants, and that God will give their descendants the land of Canaan. Up to now, however, Abraham and Sarah have been unable to have children.

- Psalm: Psalm 22.23-31 - "I will declare your name to my people".

This is the final *third* of the psalm that begins with the words, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

The psalm as a whole is a lament — or prayer for help. In it, the writer prays for recovery from a life-threatening illness — which is only made worse by the taunts of his enemies.

In the portion we're reading today, the writer promises to offer a formal and public thanksgiving to God when he recovers.

- Letter Reading: Romans 4.13-25 - Abraham was justified through his faith

In this letter as a whole, Paul argues that people are made right with God not by obeying the Old Testament law, but by believing in Jesus.

In this reading, Paul supports his argument by recalling the exemplary faith that Abraham showed in response to God's promises.

- Gospel Reading: Mark 8.31-38 - Jesus predicts his death and resurrection

This reading contains the first of three predictions that Jesus makes about his death and resurrection.

Jesus' disciples have just learned that Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus now begins to teach them what being the Messiah is really all about — as well as what it means to be the Messiah's disciples.

SERMON:

In the Season after Epiphany, we read Gospel readings from the early days of Jesus' ministry, beginning with Jesus' baptism. Except for one Sunday when we read a passage from the Gospel of John, those readings were all from the first chapter of the Gospel of Mark. But in the past

couple of weeks, our readings have been moving back and forth through Jesus' life. Two weeks ago, on the final Sunday after Epiphany, we skipped ahead to Jesus' transfiguration, which is roughly at the midpoint of Mark's Gospel. Then, last week, on the First Sunday in Lent, we jumped back to Jesus' forty days of being tempted in the wilderness, which happened right after he was baptized.

Today, on the Second Sunday in Lent, we're jumping forward again to the middle of Mark's Gospel, to read and reflect on a passage that comes right before his account of Jesus' transfiguration.

In fact, today's Gospel reading actually begins in the *middle* of a story. Jesus and his disciples are in the extreme north of Israel, in the region around the city of Caesarea Philippi. It is there that the disciples finally begin to understand who Jesus really is. Jesus asks them who people say he is, and they answer, *Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets* (Mark 8.28). Jesus then asks them who they themselves say he is, and Peter answers, *You are the Messiah* (Mark 8.29).

It's at this point, then, that *today's* reading begins. Jesus has new teaching to share with the disciples, and it comes as a shock to them. For the first time since he called them, he tells them that he is going to die. Mark puts it this way: *Jesus began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and teachers of the law; and be killed, and after three days, rise again* (Mark 8.31).

For us, of course, these words are familiar. We know the story of Jesus' life and ministry, and we know that what Jesus predicted here actually happened. But let's try to imagine what it must've felt like for Jesus' disciples to hear these somber words. Peter had just discerned that Jesus was the Messiah, and Jesus had not denied it. And the very next thing Jesus had done was to make this dire prediction. He would be rejected by Israel's religious establishment; he would suffer many things; he would be killed; he would rise again.

Of all the things that Jesus might've said about the future of his ministry, this is probably the last thing his disciples would've expected to hear. They knew that Jesus had already gotten into disputes with people of a certain religious mindset — several times, even — but they would never have anticipated that those controversies would culminate in Jesus' being rejected by Israel's religious leaders; much less that he would be put to death. As people who admired, respected, and loved Jesus, they would no doubt have been horrified to hear this prediction.

Beyond that, the thought that the *Messiah* would be rejected by Israel's religious leaders and be put to death simply didn't make sense to them. Although First-Century Israelites had a variety of expectations regarding the Messiah, the main one was that he would be a new King David — a wise leader and a military genius, who would claim Israel's throne, drive out the hated Romans, and make Israel a strong, independent, and prosperous country once again. In addition, he would command respect for God's law, and head a government that cared about the poor, and protected the interests of the powerless. Why would such a person be rejected by Israel's religious establishment? Wouldn't they rather welcome him with open arms, and support

his claim to Israel's throne? To the disciples, the fact that Jesus was this long-awaited Messiah, and his prediction that he would be rejected and put to death just didn't add up.

One disciple, at least, couldn't contain his feelings of confusion and dismay — Peter, of course; the lead disciple; the one who was most likely to say exactly what he was thinking. Mark says, *Peter took [Jesus] aside, and began to rebuke him* (Mark 8.32). Mark doesn't tell us what Peter actually said, but the word “rebuke” implies that he used strong language, and that he spoke forcefully. Perhaps what he said was, “Are you out of your mind?”

Jesus, of course, didn't back down; on the contrary, he gave as good as he got. Mark says, *He rebuked Peter. “Get behind me, Satan! You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns”* (Mark 8.33). Ouch! That must have stung!

Why such a forceful response to Peter's protest? The fact that Jesus used the name “Satan” reminds us of Jesus' forty days of being tempted by Satan in the wilderness — the story we read last Sunday. In that experience, apparently, Satan had attempted to sabotage Jesus' ministry before it even got started. Jesus seemed to see the same threat in Peter's apparently well-intentioned rebuke. To avoid the grim future that he had just predicted would mean compromising his ministry and making it ineffective — precisely what Satan had presumably tried to persuade Jesus to do in the wilderness. Jesus would have none of it, and so he rebuked Peter in no uncertain terms.

As for his words “Get behind me”, some versions of the Bible mis-translate them as “Get out of here” or “Get out of my sight”. But that's not what Jesus meant. Jesus didn't want Peter to leave; he just wanted him to remember his place — that he was a disciple; a follower, not the leader. To “get behind” Jesus meant to follow him, not to try to lead him.

One more question that arises from this prediction is, why did Jesus say these things *had* to happen? In the New International Version, it says, ... *the Son of Man must suffer many things* — and so on (Mark 8.31); while Mark's original Greek says, ... *it is necessary for the Son of Man to suffer many things* — and so on. Why was it “necessary”?

The answer to this question lies in the fact that Jesus' understanding of the will of God was significantly different from that of the religious authorities of the time. It's not that the Father specifically *wanted* him to be put to death. Rather, it was inevitable that his ministry would eventually *challenge* the religious authorities to the point that they decided he had to be gotten rid of. Events were headed for a showdown in Jerusalem, in which the authorities ultimately would decide that Jesus was so unorthodox that he had to be done away with.

Peter had been correct to say that Jesus was the Messiah, but he and his fellow disciples misunderstood what that actually meant. Jesus would re-define the word, and he began to do so in today's reading. The disciples then would have to unlearn what they had been taught prior to meeting Jesus, and then learn from him what the word “Messiah” really meant. They would then also need to learn what it meant to be *disciples* of such a Messiah.

For this reason, Jesus then launched into some further teaching for his followers — not only

the disciples, but also the crowd that was with them. Having given his disciples and followers some indication of where his ministry was headed, he now told them what he expected of *them*. And again, these words, although familiar to *us*, must have been surprising and disconcerting to his original audience: *Whoever wants to follow behind me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me* (Mark 8.34).

It's a tough teaching. Essentially, what Jesus does here is to challenge his disciples and followers to be just as single-minded in their loyalty and commitment to God as he himself is; and to do what is right regardless of what people around them say or do — even if their actions stir up the hostility of others. To “deny oneself” doesn't mean to deny oneself pleasure, but rather to adopt God's agenda rather than one's own. To “take up one's cross” means to accept the possibility of resistance, opposition, hostility, or even violence from others as one seeks to live in God's ways.

In his ministry, Jesus showed himself to be tough and courageous; he didn't let himself be sidetracked, and he didn't play it safe. In today's Gospel reading, then, he challenges his followers to be the same.

This main teaching is followed by four followup sayings, each of which reinforces the main point Jesus makes. The first is, *Whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it* (Mark 8.35). This is a warning against trying to play it safe.

The next two followup sayings are rhetorical questions: *What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their life?* and *What can anyone give in exchange for their life?* (Mark 8.36-37). In these sayings, Jesus challenges his followers to recognize that life is of greater value than material things — both life in the present age and life in the age to come.

And in the fourth and final followup saying, Jesus challenges his followers to be loyal and steadfast. He says, *If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels* (Mark 8.38). He's referring to the judgement at the end of the age, of course. In this saying, as well as in the others, Jesus challenges his followers to take a long-term view of life, rather than a short-term view. He challenges them to be mindful of the long-term consequences of the choices they make in the present, rather than to think only in terms of the here-and-now.

Today's Gospel reading, then, is a particularly suitable one for the season of Lent, for, in it, Jesus looks ahead to his appointment with the cross, as it were, just as we look ahead to commemorating his death and resurrection in a few short weeks. In today's reading, Jesus reveals to his disciples for the first time where things are headed in his ministry, so that, when it happens, they won't be caught entirely by surprise; they will have had advance warning. He likewise challenges them as his followers to have the same commitment to God's ways, the same loyalty to God, the same steadfastness, the same courage, and the same long-term perspective that he himself has.

In this season of Lent, this is an important message for us today to be reminded of. There are those who “sell” the Christian faith, as it were, as a way of getting what we want out of life — security, prosperity, health, happiness, and whatever else we may desire. People who think that way seriously misunderstand what Christian faith and life are all about. Christian faith is not about securing a comfortable life for ourselves; it’s about learning God’s ways, striving to live in God’s ways, and striving to serve God by being fair, kind, compassionate, caring, helpful, and generous toward others. It’s about living in God’s ways in a world in which many refuse to live in God’s ways, opting instead to be self-centered and self-indulgent, even at the expense of others. It’s about taking a long-term view of life, just as Jesus looked beyond the suffering and death that lay ahead of him to his resurrection and vindication, which would come afterward.

May this season of Lent then be a time in which we re-focus and re-orient ourselves. As we observe Jesus’ determination, single-mindedness, and courage, may we be inspired to follow his lead, as we seek to live in God’s ways in today’s world.

HYMN: “Take up your cross, the Savior said”

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE: *[by Charlie Clifford]*

Heavenly Father, Your Word says that the pure in heart are truly blessed, because they will see You. We want to enter into Your presence. We want to be in the place where You meet us. Guide us to that place, forgive us for being careless and unthinking in the way we approach You. We acknowledge that You are a holy and righteous God. We receive the cleansing of our sins through the blood of Jesus. We worship You in humility and love. Thank you for the privilege of entering confidently into the place where You dwell because of the atonement of Your Son made in our behalf. Loving God, for Your help in the past and your grace promised for today, the future, and life beyond this life, we give You thanks.

God of hope, God of mercy, faithful God, forgiving God, holy God, we have Your word, Your promise — and we trust in the fact that the Lord is near to all who call upon Him, to all who call upon Him in truth. We have been invited to ask, to seek, to knock, with promises of answer, for we believe You rule over all, and in Your hand is power and might. So we address our petitions to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, worthy to receive honour and glory forever and ever.

Father God, we would that our moments of trust were with us always, but events come into our lives, and we are filled with questions. We need the reinforcement that You have the answers. We stand mute before inexplicable circumstances but there are no mysteries for You. There are no facts You do not know; no problem You cannot solve; no event You cannot explain; no hypocrisy through which You do not see; no secrets of ours unknown to You.

We are truly unmasked before You, and You see us as we really are — filled with our pride, our selfishness, our shallowness, our impatience, our blatant carnality.

We would despair were it not so that You, O Lord, are compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in loving-kindness. You have not dealt with us according to our sins, for as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is Your loving-kindness toward those who fear You. So we crave today a clean life, a quiet spirit, an honest tongue, a believing heart, a redeemed soul. Thank you, God, that the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all unrighteousness. Now, may we enjoy You forever!

Understanding God, help us to learn to pray. Increase our faith to believe You for the answers to our prayers. Enable us to become intercessors for others — especially those who do not know You. We pray that everyone around us will be able to recognize by our lives that we are a people of great faith and power in prayer, and that they can trust in the God to whom we pray. Although Pharaoh — in Your word — pridefully resisted You and Your messenger, Moses, it was actually Moses whom Pharaoh turned to when he had been humbled. We pray that unbelievers will see so much of Your love in us they will ask us to pray for them, and to tell them more about You.

Father God, we don't want to make excuses for not doing Your will, but we feel inadequate to do the things You are calling us to do — and especially in prayer. Yet we don't want fear to keep us from doing it. We want to depend on You to do it through us. We pray that You would put Your words in our mouths so that we can intercede for others by the power of Your Spirit. Help us to remember that it is not our abilities that will cause us to pray in power, but it is Your Spirit in us who enables us to pray as we ought.

Father, in this season of Lent, give us a holy Lent, O God, and encourage us with Your promise to remember our sins no more. Give us thankful hearts for the freedom Your forgiveness brings. Bring us to our knees, Lord, to receive and remember Your love. Keep in our hearts the poor, the lonely, the broken-hearted, that our hearts may be closer to You.

We worship You, Lord of heaven and earth, the God who made the world and all things in it! We extol You for the immensity of Your love in sending Jesus Christ, the long awaited Messiah, the Saviour who died for us, and for all people everywhere. We exalt You because Your plan embraces the whole world and all of time — not just the Middle East which cradled the gospel, but also Europe and North America, Asia and Africa, the entire southern hemisphere and every tiny island on the globe. Thank you that Jesus with His blood purchased sons and daughters for You from every tribe and language and people and nation ... and that You yearn for all people everywhere to repent; You have no desire that any person should spend eternity without You!

Thank You that You made Your light shine in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of Your glory and the face of Your Son ... that You drew us to Yourself, and honoured us, making us a member of Your royal family and a citizen of Your kingdom ... and that You have enlisted us in Your worldwide task force to be Your witnesses. What a high privilege that You have destined us to have a share not only in Your love but also in Your glorious purposes, both near and far ... that You have gifted us for a unique part in Your global search for people who

will repent and believe in You, and learn to live for Your glory. We celebrate our high calling of knowing You, and making You known! And we praise You for giving us Your Holy Spirit to fill and empower us, and for promising to be with us always. Be exalted, O God, above the heavens; let Your glory be over all the earth.

Merciful God, we would bring the issues of the COVID-19 to You once again, and ask You to give peace to those that have anxiety over it. We pray that the vaccine will get distributed as quickly as possible and into the arms of those who want it, and that it will lead us quickly to herd immunity.

God of knowledge and understanding, we pray for the leaders of the Presbyterian Church. We pray for the General Assembly, the Synod, the Presbytery, John and the Session, and ask that You would be with them in their deliberations, and that they would seek Your wisdom in all of their dealings. We ask that You would assist them in looking at creative ways to carry on the work of the Church and in their leadership.

Heavenly Father, we would bring the congregations of Knox Church Neepawa and First Church Portage la Prairie to You in prayer. You know the needs of each and every one. Draw them close to You, and give them peace. Direct us as we seek to do Your will; give us wisdom to do the right things in our lives and make good choices. Help us to develop strong communication skills with You and strong relationships. Father, many of us have heavy hearts and great concerns that we want to bring to You at this time in silent prayer: _____.
Lord, hear our prayers.

Go with us now as we leave this time of worship. Continue to bless us and make us a blessing to others. We thank You for the blessings that we will receive in the coming week, we want to be about Your work. We ask these things in the precious name of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

HYMN: Sing them over again to me

COMMISSIONING AND BLESSING:

Brothers and sisters in Christ:

Go into the week ahead

in peace,

and in the strength of the Holy Spirit,

to continue denying yourselves, taking up your cross, and following Jesus
in the midst of everyday life.

And may God bless you:

May he give you strength, courage, and steadfastness;
in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.