

CALL TO WORSHIP:

*One thing I ask from the LORD,
 this only do I seek:
 that I may dwell in the house of the LORD
 all the days of my life;
 to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD,
 and to seek him in his temple.*
 Let us worship God.

(Psalm 27.4)

HYMN: God, reveal your presence

PRAYER OF APPROACH AND CONFESSION:

Holy and righteous God:

We come into your presence to worship you in response to your call. We praise you for your love and faithfulness toward us, and for calling each of us to become members of your family through the saving work of Jesus.

As we begin our worship, though, we confess that our response to your gracious initiative often falls short of what you expect. We fail to give ourselves to you wholeheartedly. We persist in following our self-centered desires, which lead us away from you. We cause you disappointment and frustration, as we keep falling back into sinful ways.

We confess our sin to you, then, and ask for your forgiveness.

Through the work of the Holy Spirit, guide and strengthen us, during this season of Lent, to break free of sinful habits, and to follow the teaching and example of Jesus more closely and more faithfully.

We pray in Jesus' name; and we pray together now, as he taught us:

THE LORD'S PRAYER

(Matthew 6.9-13, KJV)

ASSURANCE OF FORGIVENESS:

Hear this good news from the scriptures:

*God has rescued us from the dominion of darkness,
 and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves,
 in whom we have redemption,
 the forgiveness of our sins.*

(Colossians 1.13-14)

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

SCRIPTURE READINGS:

- **OT Reading:** Genesis 15.1-12, 17-18 - Abram believes God's promise

This is a story from the life of Abraham.

In it, God makes a covenant with Abraham, promising him a great number of descendants, and promising to give to those descendants the land of Canaan.

At this point in his life, Abraham is still called "Abram".

- **Psalm:** Psalm 27 - "The LORD is my light and my salvation".

Psalm 27 is a lament; that is, a prayer for God's help.

It begins with words expressing the writer's trust in God. Then, with the words "Hear my voice when I call, LORD", the writer begins his appeal to God for help.

- **Letter Reading:** Philippians 3.17 - 4.1 - Living as citizens of heaven

In this reading, Paul urges his readers to live godly lives. He reminds them that they are citizens of heaven, and that they should act accordingly.

- **Gospel Reading:** Luke 13.31-35 - Jesus' lament for Jerusalem

In this part of Luke's Gospel, Jesus is making his way to Jerusalem.

In this reading, he expresses sorrow for the city of Jerusalem — that is, for its refusal to listen to the messengers whom God has sent to them, including himself.

HYMN: As the deer ...

SERMON:

During the Season after Epiphany, the Gospel readings that we looked at each week were semi-continuous readings from the early days of Jesus' ministry. Now that we're in Lent, however, the lectionary gives us Gospel readings with Lenten themes. These readings are not semi-continuous, so we now jump back and forth in Jesus' ministry. Last week, on the First Sunday in Lent, we went all the way back to the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, which took place before he even began his ministry. And today, we jump ahead to the middle portion of Jesus' ministry. Today's reading is from the section of Luke's Gospel in which Jesus travels south from his home territory of Galilee to the city of Jerusalem, in the region of Judea.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus travels back and forth between Galilee and Jerusalem all through his ministry; but in the Synoptic Gospels — Matthew, Mark, and Luke — he makes the trip to Jerusalem only once. In Matthew and Mark, the account of the journey is quite brief; but here in Luke, it's much longer; it goes on for nearly ten chapters. This section of Luke is therefore called "the Journey Narrative". Most of the material in this section consists of teachings of Jesus — material that is found elsewhere in Matthew and Mark's Gospels, as well as material found only in Luke. If you happen to have a Bible in which the words of Je-

sus are printed in red, you'll notice that, in Chapters 10 to 19, you'll find more red print than black print!

The Journey Narrative begins shortly after the account of Jesus' transfiguration, and following the first two of his three predictions of his death and resurrection. It begins with these words: *As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem* (Luke 9.51). That's toward the end of Chapter 9, and today's reading is from Chapter 13.

Today's reading begins with a short story found only here in Luke, and ends with Jesus' lament for Jerusalem, which also is found in Matthew.

The passage begins with a warning: A number of Pharisees warn Jesus that Herod wants to kill him, and that he should move on. Presumably, this is a friendly warning, since Luke seems to have a more favorable attitude toward the Pharisees than the other Gospel writers do.

The "Herod" they speak of is not the same Herod who was king of Israel when Jesus was born, but rather, one of his sons. The history books call him "Herod Antipas", although in the Gospels, he's referred to as just "Herod". Herod Antipas was the ruler of just a portion of Israel — the territory of Galilee, as well as some territory on the east side of the Jordan River, which was called "Perea". In any case, the threat to Jesus' life was certainly believable, since Herod Antipas had already had John the Baptist put to death by that time.

Jesus doesn't seem to be concerned about the warning, though. Referring to Herod as "that fox" — which was probably not a compliment — he tells the Pharisees that he will continue doing his ministry until he's finished. He says, *I will keep on driving out demons and healing people today and tomorrow, and on the third day, I will reach my goal* (Luke 13.32). Whether he meant a literal three-day period by that is uncertain; if not, he probably meant that he had only a short amount of time left.

It's no surprise to Jesus, though, that he will suffer an untimely death. Indeed, he has already predicted that — and not just once, but twice. Here, however, he implies strongly that Jerusalem is the place where he is destined to die. What he says is, *In any case, I must press on today and tomorrow and the next day — for surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem!* (Luke 13.33).

The words "surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem" tell us two things. First, they tell us that Jesus saw himself as being in the tradition of Israel's prophets. He was much more than a prophet, of course, but, just like any regular prophet, his job was to speak to the people of Israel as a representative of God.

The second thing those words tell us is that Israel — and particularly Jerusalem, its political and religious capital — was resistant to the message of Israel's prophets; that Israel's leaders were more inclined to put a prophet to death than to heed his message. This seems to be a common sentiment in the New Testament, particularly in the Gospels. In Luke's Gospel, for example, Jesus has already taken Israel's religious leaders to task for putting prophets to

death, by saying, *Woe to you, because you build tombs for the prophets, and it was your ancestors who killed them. So you testify that you approve of what your ancestors did; they killed the prophets and you build their tombs* (Luke 11.47-48). Jesus makes a similar point later on, in his parable of the tenant farmers. They refuse to give the owner of the vineyard his share of the crop; they mistreat the servants whom the owner of the vineyard sends to collect his share of the crop; and finally, when the owner sends his son to collect his share of the crop, the tenants kill him. The tenant farmers in the parable represent the people of Israel, the servants represent Israel's prophets, and the son, of course, represents Jesus.

It's extremely ironic — or counter-intuitive — that Israel's leaders would be so resistant to the message of God's spokesmen, including Jesus himself. One would think that they, of all people, would be the most receptive to what the prophets had to say.

This, then, leads Jesus to utter the lament that makes up the second half of today's reading: *Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets, and stone those sent to you! How often I have longed to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate. I tell you, you will not see me until you say, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"* (Luke 13.34-35).

Jesus speaks these words in great sadness, rather than in anger. He uses a parental image to convey his affection for the city and its people — the image of a mother hen and her chicks. He laments their unreceptiveness, and he laments also the consequences of that unreceptiveness. The consequences are that, some forty years later, the people of Israel will revolt against Roman rule, only to see that revolt violently repressed by the Romans. And as a crowning indignity, the Romans will tear down the temple in Jerusalem, just as the Babylonians had done centuries earlier. Any parent who has had a son or daughter who has gotten into trouble because he or she didn't listen to the parent's advice or warning can surely appreciate the affection, the frustration, and the sadness that Jesus must've felt.

It's interesting that, in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus utters this exact same lament, except that he does so after having arrived in Jerusalem. Here in Luke, on the other hand, Jesus, still on his way to Jerusalem, anticipates a hostile response from the city, particularly its leaders. He will continue his journey there, of course, but with no illusions that he'll get a positive reception.

The emotions of affection, frustration, and sorrow are expressed also by the apostle Paul in today's reading from the Letters. In that case, those emotions have been aroused by members of the congregation in Philippi who are failing to live the way they should. Paul says that they *live as enemies of the cross of Christ* (Philippians 3.18), and says of them, *Their destiny is destruction; their god is their stomach; and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven* (Philippians 3.19-20a).

It's not entirely certain what the problem is that Paul is referring to. Certainly he is talking about members of the Philippian congregation, rather than the general population of Philippi. Apparently, the people he finds fault with are those whose actions are governed by their de-

sires. Although they have accepted the Christian faith, they are self-indulgent rather than self-disciplined. Perhaps they have misinterpreted Paul's message about freedom from the Old Testament law to mean that they are free to do anything they like. Or perhaps, as people who previously worshiped pagan gods, they continue to live as they did as pagans, even though they have accepted the Christian faith. Paul's remark "their god is their stomach" suggests that what really mattered to them was pursuing and fulfilling their desires. "Their mind is set on earthly things," he says.

Paul finds this situation distressing; indeed, he says that it brings him to tears. Adopting a self-centered, self-indulgent, live-for-today lifestyle makes them "enemies of the cross of Christ".

He urges his readers, then, to follow his example in the way they live. To modern ears, it sounds a bit presumptuous to say that, but in the ancient world, it was customary for people to seek to follow the example set by their teacher or leader.

He urges his readers also to remember that they are citizens of heaven, and that they need to live as such — not only with a view to what is important to God, but also with a view to the future that God has in store for them. Specifically, he speaks of Jesus' *transforming [their] lowly bodies, so that they will be like his glorious body* (Philippians 3.21) — referring to what will happen when the dead are raised to eternal life. We looked briefly at these verses a few weeks ago, when we were looking at Paul's teaching on the resurrection of the dead in 1st Corinthians Chapter 15.

What Paul is speaking against, then, is a lifestyle that is governed by a person's desires for comfort and pleasure, and by a live-for-the moment attitude. It saddens him to see members of the congregation in Philippi living this way.

Today's scripture readings are excellent texts to reflect on in the season of Lent. In the Old Testament reading, God reaches out to human beings through Abraham and his descendants, to draw them into relationship with himself. The New Testament readings, on the other hand, show how easily we human beings can either resist God on the one hand, or fall short of God's expectations on the other.

The Gospel reading is a story of human resistance to God's initiatives. Although Jesus definitely had a following in Israel, the nation as a whole — and particularly its leaders — failed to accept him as a legitimate spokesperson for God — let alone as the Son of God. Indeed, they condemned him for misleading the people, as well as for blasphemy — which means speaking disrespectfully about God. It's ironic in the extreme that those who rejected Jesus, and ultimately conspired to have him put to death, sincerely believed they were being faithful and obedient to God. How could they have been so wrong?

The story thus serves as a warning to all of us, who consider ourselves to be faithful worshipers of God. Do we get into patterns of thinking and acting that prevent us from accepting God's message to us, as it comes to us through the person and work of Jesus, and through the words of scripture? Do we fail to see the hand of God at work in things going on around us? Do we

resist God's leading by insisting that the church continue to do things the way it has always done them? This is a question we'll be confronted with once we get back to the New Beginnings process. All of these are questions that we would do well to reflect on during Lent, as we seek to prepare ourselves for Easter.

The reading from the Letters, on the other hand, is an example of how human beings can easily fall short of God's expectations. As people of God, we need to accept and live by God's values, not by those of the world around us. Paul's idea of being citizens of heaven is a useful way of looking at this issue. As human beings, we are citizens of the world; and as believers in Jesus, we are also citizens of heaven. As citizens of the world, we are constantly pressured to accept the world's values, the world's way of doing things. However, as citizens of heaven, we are constantly challenged to accept God's values and God's way of doing things. As citizens of heaven, then, we need to give priority to God's values — being kind, fair, generous, gracious, honest, and dependable in our relationships with our fellow human beings. To seek only our own advantage is to do what Paul objects to in today's reading from the Letters. It's so easy to live by the world's values; that's our default setting, so to speak. It's much more challenging to live by God's values, and so it's easy to fall short of God's expectations.

Today's New Testament readings, then, lead us to reflect on two important questions. The first is, To what extent are we either receptive to or resistant to God's purposes? And the second is, As citizens of heaven, how fully do we accept and live by God's values in our everyday lives?

Let's give these questions some careful consideration as we prepare to commemorate the death of Jesus and to celebrate his resurrection.

HYMN: Softly and tenderly, Jesus is calling

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE:

Loving and gracious God:

We give you thanks and praise that, through Jesus, you offer citizenship in your kingdom to everyone who believes in him. We thank you that, through his death on the cross, you have provided a way for us to be reconciled to you through the forgiveness of our sin. We thank you that you call us into relationship with you, not just by ourselves, but along with others, forming us into a whole community of people who love you and believe in Jesus.

Forgive us, we pray, for those times when we fail to act as citizens of your kingdom — when we act in ways that are self-centered and self-indulgent, rather than ways that show self-discipline and self-control. During this season of Lent, enable us to live more and more by your values, and less and less in the ways of the world around us.

Continue to guide, bless, and prosper the work of your church in the world, we pray. May this

season of Lent be a time of renewal for the entire church. May we be reminded of what is important and what is not; and may we give priority to our relationship with you, and our relationships with each other. Bless in particular the work that your church does to support and assist people in various kinds of need, including the local Food Bank and the Soup Kitchen. May those ministries help to sustain people, especially in this time when everything is getting more expensive. May these ministries be tangible signs of your love and your concern for people in need.

We pray for members of our congregation, our families, and our circles of friends who are experiencing challenges or difficulties — those dealing with disease, infirmity, or disability; those coping with bereavement; those experiencing difficulties in their relationships; those suffering from worry and anxiety; and those dealing with issues of any other kind — in particular, those whom we now name before you: _____. Grant each one, we pray, blessings to sustain and encourage them.

We pray again for the people of Ukraine, as they suffer hardship upon hardship because of the Russian invasion. We pray that you would strengthen those who are struggling to defend their country against the invaders; that you would give wisdom to world leaders as they respond to this outrage; that you would grant safety to those who are seeking refuge; and that you would grant strength to those providing care for refugees. We give thanks for the widespread support for Ukraine that exists in the international community, not only from governments, but also from business. We pray that economic and political pressure being brought to bear on Russia may convince its government to break off the attack, and to withdraw its forces.

We continue to pray also about the divisions that exist in our society, divisions that appear to have been aggravated by the pandemic. We pray that people with differing viewpoints may be willing to listen to each other, even if they don't agree with each other. We pray that conspiracy theories may be discredited and rejected. We pray that people may treat each other with greater mutual respect and with civility.

We continue to pray as well about the pandemic, which has now officially been with us for two full years. We give thanks that things are looking more hopeful at the moment, and pray that the worst of the pandemic may indeed be behind us. Continue to grant wisdom to public health officials and governments as they provide advice and guidance to the public, especially as decisions are made to ease pandemic restrictions. Grant that support may continue to be forthcoming for businesses and charities that have been negatively impacted by the pandemic, as well as for individuals who have lost their jobs. Give strength and stamina to those who work in the health care system, and may they know that their efforts are greatly appreciated. Grant that appropriate care may be made available to those whose mental health has been negatively affected by the pandemic, as well as to those who are experiencing long-term symptoms of COVID-19. Grant strength as well to those who work in the daycare sector, as well as those who care for frail seniors. May the coming months be a period of healing and recovery, and may we all gradually be able to get back to normal.

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.

OFFERING

PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING AND DEDICATION:

God of grace and generosity:

We give you thanks for the gifts we receive from you day by day, including your gifts of guidance, strength, and healing.

Most of all, we thank you for claiming us as your people through the saving work of Jesus, and for offering us citizenship in your kingdom through his sacrificial death on the cross.

In response to your gracious acts, we present to you these offerings. We set them apart to be used in your service, to help you accomplish your purpose in the world.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

HYMN: Jesus, lover of my soul ...

COMMISSIONING AND BLESSING:

Brothers and sisters in Christ:

Go into the week ahead, now,

in peace,

and in the strength of the Holy Spirit,

to resume your daily service for God

as citizens of his kingdom.

And may God bless you:

May he equip you for the service he calls you to do,

and may he give you joy in doing it.

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