

CALL TO WORSHIP:

*Show me your ways, LORD;
 teach me your paths.
 Guide me in your truth, and teach me,
 for you are God, my Savior,
 and my hope is in you all day long.*
 Let us worship God.

(Psalm 63.1)

HYMN: As the deer ...**PRAYER OF APPROACH AND CONFESSION:**

Holy, mighty, and loving God:

We come into your presence once again to worship you in response to the love you have shown us in Jesus Christ. We thank you that you love us whether we deserve it or not, and we thank you that, through Jesus' death and resurrection, you have acted to reconcile us to yourself.

We confess, however, that, in spite of our efforts to live in your ways, we easily revert to sinful ways. We neglect our relationship with you, and fail to live by your guidelines and teachings. We do things that hurt people around us, and that dishonor you, because we are preoccupied with our own desires and agendas.

Forgive our sin, we pray. In this season of Lent, help us, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to renew our commitment to following Jesus, to living in your ways, and to being your daughters and sons.

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:

*Just as human beings are destined to die once,
Christ was sacrificed once,
to take away the sins of many.*

(Hebrews 9.27, ad.)

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

SCRIPTURE READINGS:**- Old Testament Reading:** Jeremiah 31.31-34 - A new covenant

This passage was written at the time when Israel was conquered by the Babylonians. In it, Jeremiah speaks of a new *covenant* that God will make with the people of Israel, to replace the old covenant, which the Israelites had broken through their disobedience.

- Psalm: Psalm 51.1-12, 16-17 - “Have mercy on me, God”.

Psalm 51 is a penitential psalm — in fact, it’s the classic penitential psalm.

In it, the writer confesses his sin to God, and asks for God’s forgiveness.

The writer’s prayer for a “pure heart” resonates with God’s promise of a new covenant in today’s Old Testament reading.

- Letter Reading: Hebrews 5.1-10 - Jesus, High Priest

In this reading, the writer argues that God has made Jesus a high priest, superior to all human high priests.

- Gospel Reading: John 12.20-33 - “The hour has come”

The story in this reading takes place near the end of Jesus’ public ministry.

It is just before the Passover festival, and Jesus has just entered Jerusalem amid the cheers and celebration of his followers. Now he looks ahead to his impending death on the cross.

HYMN: There is a Redeemer**SERMON:** “Transformed Hearts?”

Today’s psalm, Psalm 51, is a classic penitential psalm; and as such, is a suitable psalm to read and reflect on during the season of Lent. In it, the writer confesses his sin to God, expresses contrition, and asks for God’s forgiveness. He also makes another very significant request: for “a pure heart”, or as some English versions put it, a “clean” heart. In words that are very familiar, he says,

*Create in me a pure heart, God,
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.*

*Do not cast me out of your presence,
or take your Holy Spirit away from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.* (Psalm 51.10-12)

What exactly was the writer asking for? What did he mean by a “pure heart”?

The ancient Israelites, lacking an accurate understanding of human physiology, considered the heart to be the organ with which people thought, made choices, and made plans — functions that we today attribute to the brain. So what the writer was asking for was the capacity to see reality as God sees it, and to value the things that God values; and therefore, also, for the desire and self-discipline to live in God’s ways.

It’s an unfortunate fact of life that we human beings find it difficult to live in God’s ways. Often, our self-centered desires, our shortsightedness, and peer pressure from the world around us combine to overpower our commitment to living in God’s ways, and we then find ourselves doing things that go against God’s values — or, of course, failing to do the things that God wants.

It’s for this reason that the psalm writer asks God, *Create in me a pure heart*. With a pure heart, he would have not only the knowledge, but also the desire, motivation, and strength to live in God’s ways consistently.

The Bible attests to humanity’s inability to live in God’s ways, focusing, of course, on the people of ancient Israel. God had established a covenant relationship with them at the time he rescued them from a life of slavery in Egypt. The terms of the covenant were pretty straightforward: The people of Israel would be God’s people, and God would be their God. God would give them the land of Canaan to live in, as he had promised generations before to their ancestor Abraham. The people’s end of the bargain was to live in God’s ways — to follow the teaching and commandments that God gave them through Moses at Mount Sinai. If they failed to keep their end of the bargain, they were told, God would expel them from the land he had promised to Abraham.

Centuries later, at the time of the prophet Jeremiah, the people actually *were* expelled from the land of promise. They were conquered by the Babylonians, and taken into exile in the Babylonian heartland, in what is today southern Iraq. Prophets such as Jeremiah and Ezekiel, both of whom lived during those turbulent times, told the Israelites that this disaster was their own fault. They had failed to live by the commandments and teachings that God had given them, and so, the deal was off; the covenant was broken.

However, as today’s Old Testament reading shows, God wasn’t ready to give up on the people of Israel. Contrary to what they might have thought, the Babylonian conquest and exile didn’t mean that their relationship with God was over and done with. In fact, in this passage, God promises to make a new covenant with them, replacing the old one, which they had broken through their disobedience.

In some ways, the new covenant would be the same as the old one, for God says, *I will be their God, and they will be my people* (Jeremiah 31.33) — which is just the same as was the case in the previous covenant. What would be different about the new covenant, though, is this: God says,

*I will put my law within them,
and will write it on their hearts. ...
No longer will they teach their neighbor,
or say to one another, “Know the LORD”,
because they will all know me,
from the least of them to the greatest.* (Jeremiah 31.33, 34)

The key difference about the new covenant, then, is that the Israelites would all instinctively know God’s ways, and instinctively follow them, rather than having to learn them, and having to struggle to put them into practice. Remember, for the ancient Israelites, the heart was the organ with which people thought, made choices, and made plans. God’s promise that he would write his law on their hearts thus meant that their “hearts” would be transformed, so that living in God’s ways would come naturally to them; it wouldn’t be something they’d have to work at.

The prophet Ezekiel, who lived at the same time as Jeremiah, and who also experienced the devastating Babylonian conquest, recorded a message from God that was very similar: *I will give you a new heart, and put a new spirit into you; I will remove from you your heart of stone, and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit into you, and move you to follow my decrees and to be careful to keep my laws. Then you will live in the land I gave to your ancestors; you will be my people, and I will be your God* (Ezekiel 36.26-28).

Ezekiel thus also speaks of a transformation of the “heart”. The reference to “a heart of stone” refers to what is often spoken of in the Old Testament as Israel’s “hard-heartedness” or “hardness of heart”. To us, to be hard-hearted means to be lacking in compassion; but to the ancient Israelites, it meant to be stubborn. When Israel’s prophets accused the people of being “hard-hearted”, they meant that they stubbornly refused to live in God’s ways, or that they stubbornly refused to turn away from sin.

The promise in today’s Old Testament reading, then, is that God would transform the “hearts” of the people of Israel, to make it easier for them to live up to their covenant obligations. His law would be internalized, so that it would become part of their nature; not something external that they would have to learn and appropriate. This promise resonates with the prayer of the writer of Psalm 51, who asks God to create in him “a pure heart”.

As things turned out, the Babylonian exile came to an end after some fifty years, and the people of Israel were allowed to return to the land of promise. The temple in Jerusalem, which the Babylonians had torn down, was rebuilt; and the covenant relationship between God and the people was renewed. But it appears that God’s promise to “write his law on their hearts” was *not* fulfilled — not yet, anyway. The people of Israel after the exile continued to struggle to

obey God and live faithfully in his ways — and often failed.

There was one person, however, who came along a few centuries later, who did live faithfully in God's ways. I'm referring to Jesus, of course. The writers of the New Testament testify about Jesus that he was totally without sin; that he always lived and acted as God wanted, even when the going got tough.

A few weeks ago, on the First Sunday in Lent, we looked at Jesus' forty days in the wilderness, in which he experienced a period of temptation and testing prior to beginning his ministry. However, his greatest temptation or test would come much later: the temptation to avoid the cross. Would Jesus resolutely continue carrying out his ministry even though the religious leaders in Jerusalem were conspiring to have him put to death? Or would he try and placate those leaders, and tone down his message? Would he perhaps get out of town while the getting was good, and wait for things to settle down?

This is the question that comes up in today's Gospel reading. Jesus has just arrived in Jerusalem for the annual Passover festival, and is coming to the end of his public ministry. In today's reading, he says, *Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say — "Father, save me from this hour"?* *No; it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!* (John 12.28).

By the term "this hour", Jesus is referring to his impending death on the cross. This is a term unique to John's Gospel. Earlier in the Gospel, in Chapter 7, we find a story that ends with these words: *They tried to seize him, but no one laid a hand on him, because his hour had not yet come* (John 7.30). Another story in Chapter 8 concludes with similar words: *No one seized him, because his hour had not yet come* (John 8.20). As we read through John's Gospel, then, we get the sense that events are moving inescapably toward Jesus' death on the cross; as if it's an appointment that draws closer and closer.

And sure enough, in today's reading, Jesus says, *The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified* (John 12.23). This too is a reference to Jesus' impending death; for in John's Gospel, his crucifixion is seen as a glorification of Jesus, rather than a humiliation.

Clearly, Jesus is not looking forward to "the hour"; but he also makes it clear that he is not going to try to avoid it, either. He asks whether he should ask the Father to save him from "the hour", but he promptly rejects that option. In this respect, the Gospel of John tells the story a bit differently than the Synoptic Gospels do — Matthew, Mark, and Luke — for in the Synoptic accounts, Jesus does pray to be spared the ordeal of the cross — in the garden of Gethsemane, shortly before he's arrested. In Mark's account, for example, he says, *Abba, Father, everything is possible for you. Take this cup away from me. Yet not what I want, but what you want* (Mark 14.36).

The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews also seems to have the scene in Gethsemane in mind, when he says in today's reading from the Letters, *During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from*

death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission (Hebrews 5.7). In today's Gospel reading from John, though, Jesus refuses to ask to be saved from death. There is no agonized prayer in the garden of Gethsemane in John. Instead, his prayer is, *Father, glorify your name!* (John 12.28).

Nothing demonstrates Jesus' faithfulness and commitment to God more than his willingness to undergo the ordeal of the cross. Even in the Synoptic accounts, although he struggles with the prospect of the ordeal that lies ahead of him, he nevertheless agrees to go through with it. His "heart" was in the right place.

The New Testament writers often characterize Jesus' commitment to God's will as "obedience", as does the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews. In today's reading, he writes, *Although he was a Son, he learned obedience from what he suffered, and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him* (Hebrews 5.8-9). The apostle Paul also characterizes Jesus' actions as "obedience" in these familiar words in Philippians, Chapter 2: *Being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death — indeed, death on a cross* (Philippians 2.8).

However, given what we believe about Jesus' being the second person in the Trinity — that is, not just "the Son of God", but "God the Son" — I'm not sure that Jesus' actions constitute "obedience" as much as they constitute commitment, perseverance, and tenacity. Surely Jesus wanted the same things that the Father wanted. I don't believe either of them wanted Jesus to die that horrible death as much as they wanted Jesus to continue his ministry, no matter what the consequences were.

Although Jesus would understandably have balked at the prospect of being crucified, I don't believe that he stuck to the plan for his ministry because he was overruled by the Father, but rather because he himself realized that that was the way things had to be. He went through with the plan for his ministry because God's law was "written on his heart", as it were — meaning that what the Father wanted he also wanted.

This brings us back to the new covenant that God promises in today's Old Testament reading. Has that promise been fulfilled? Certainly a new covenant was inaugurated through Jesus' death and resurrection; but is it the new covenant that's promised in Jeremiah? I would argue that that promise remains to be fulfilled, because God's law is not yet "written on" human "hearts". We still need to learn about God; we still need to learn God's ways; and we still struggle to live in God's ways, failing at least as often as we succeed. None of us instinctively knows God's ways, and none of us instinctively and automatically lives in God's ways, which is what the promise in today's Old Testament reading anticipates will happen. Nineteen hundred and fifty years of church history have shown us that Christians have not been any better at living in God's ways than the people of ancient Israel.

Nevertheless, we now have the example of one person, who has shown us what the implications of that new covenant actually look like in real life: Jesus. We also have the help of the

Holy Spirit, who helps us to understand God's ways, and empowers us to live in them; but that's still a big step away from having God's law "written on our hearts". The "hearts" of human beings still remain to be transformed, and we continue to live in anticipation of the time when they will be. Along with the writer of Psalm 51, then, we continue to pray, *Create in me a pure heart, God, / and renew a steadfast spirit within me* (Psalm 51.10).

HYMN: When voices are confusing ...

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE:

Faithful God:

We are grateful for your patience with us human beings throughout history. When we fail to live in your ways, you continue to love us, and you continue offer us opportunities to change our ways.

We thank you, then, for your promise of a new covenant in which you will write your law on our minds, so that we may know it without having to learn it; and may also be motivated and empowered to live by it without faltering. We thank you for the way this promise was illustrated for us in the person and life of Jesus; and we pray that his example may both inspire and encourage us, as we continue striving to live in your ways.

We give you thanks also for the single-mindedness with which Jesus carried out his ministry — that he didn't allow opposition or danger to deter him, but boldly carried on. And we thank you that his death on the cross provides the way for us to be reconciled to you and adopted into your family.

We pray for your church. Imperfect as it is, may it nevertheless strive to be the community you call it to be — a community that seeks to embody your values and principles, and in which every member is valued and affirmed. Continue to guide your church during this pandemic, we pray, as normal ways of doing things are disrupted, and as we are forced to adapt. Today we pray especially for student ministers, that creative ways may be found to give them opportunities for practical ministry experience, to complement their theological studies.

We pray also for members of our congregation, our families, and our circles of friends, who are dealing with challenges, difficulties, or setbacks; in particular, those whom we now name before you [\[in silence\]](#): _____. In your compassion, reach out to each one, gracious God, to provide for their needs, and to sustain and strengthen them.

We pray also for the world around us. As we pray for people in positions of authority today, we pray in particular for our MLAs, that you would give them wisdom and discernment as they discuss and make decisions on changes to the education system that the government is proposing. We pray also for governments at all levels, that they may deal more decisively and effectively with the issue of violence against women — in the home, in the workplace, and in public

life at large.

We pray again for Michael Spavor and Michael Kovrig, unjustly imprisoned in China, and facing an uncertain future. We pray that you would continue to sustain and strengthen them, to strengthen the family members and friends who are worried about them, and to guide our leaders and the leaders of like-minded countries to continue putting pressure on the Chinese government to release them.

We pray as well for our country and the rest of the world, as we continue to deal with the pandemic. Once again, we give you thanks that effective vaccines have been developed as quickly as they have; and we pray for your continued blessing on the effort to manufacture sufficient quantities, and to vaccinate the largest number of people in the shortest amount of time. We give you thanks also for the assistance the military has been providing, first in long-term care homes, and now also, increasingly, in First Nations communities; and we ask your continued blessing on their efforts to give support and assistance. We pray for wisdom for governments and public health authorities that are considering the further easing of restrictions. Guide them as they constantly look for a balance between the desire to return to normal and the need to reduce transmission of the virus. We pray as well for those whose lives have been disrupted or complicated by the pandemic. Especially today we pray for essential workers on the one hand, who face an increased risk of exposure to the virus; and on the other hand for those who have been laid off because of restrictions, and are finding themselves in financial difficulty. Grant your blessing to people in both sets of circumstances, we pray; and continue to guide our governments in responding to their needs.

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: Lift high the cross!

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 resume your everyday service for God,
with the guidance and strength the Spirit gives.

And may God bless you:

May he continue to guide you in his ways,
and to strengthen you for the challenges that each day brings;
in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.