



Prayer and Reflections for the 4th Sunday of Lent March 22, 2020

For Goodwood United Church & Claremont United Church

By: Rev. Lionel Ketola

Introduction & preparation for worship:

During these recent days I'm aware that we have been involved in two unique 'observances' at the same time – the observance of Lent (which began Feb 26th on Ash Wednesday) and the observance of "social distancing".

As we continue with these two 'observances' side by side, I wonder how our practise of Lent can nurture and support us during these challenging days of social distancing? Let is a time of looking into our hearts, reflecting on our lives as disciples or 'students' of Jesus, and reflecting on the quality of our relationship with God. It's my hope that these reflections can help deepen our 'soul work' during this Lenten season.

Lent comes from the old Latin word meaning 'spring'. That's the hopeful side of spring – it leads to renewed life around us. And in these days of social distancing, I've become so aware of how important it is for us – when we are able – to take moments to sit or walk outside – to take in the healing power of creation. So I begin with some readings about the beauty of creation:

Opening Meditation

"God has always given evidence of God's existence by the good things that God does. God has shown kindness by giving rain from heavens and crops in their seasons, and filling you with food and your hearts with joy." (Acts 14:17)

A Call to Worship

The season of Spring brings its promise of new life

Our bodies begin to relax in the warmth of spring

Tiny buds grow in silence, waiting for the day of their opening

They bask in the warmth with anticipation

How fragile are spring's new beginnings!

But suddenly, a cold front brings icy winds and snow!

Tulips stand defiantly in the snow, daring to proclaim new life

Not even a blanket of snow can silence their voice

What will become of these new beginnings?

Will they be lost?

But the persistent sun keeps warming away winter's chill

Snowbanks slowly melt to water the fertile earth

and the promise of new life

slowly comes to fragrant flower.

SONG OF PRAISE

This is your garden, Creator God,

a thing of beauty

beyond understanding,

a poem that is being written

not in words

but in colours,

wind's whisper,

soaring bird,

snowdrop's petal,

gentle rain,

sunlight's warmth,

This is your garden, Creator God,

A thing of beauty

beyond our understanding

Source: John Birch, https://www.faithandworship.com/Prayers_Spring.htm

*During Lent, our worship usually includes a confession,
which is a time to look at our hearts, before God.*

CONFESSION Source: John Birch, <https://www.faithandworship.com>

As the days grow longer and warmer,
winter's snows melts away.
In the transformation that happens before us,
We see the creator's hand.

Creator God, forgive our moments
of not seeing or taking in the wonder that is this world;
the endless cycle of nature,
of life and death and rebirth.
Forgive us for taking without giving,
reaping without sowing.
**Open our eyes to see,
our lips to praise,
our hands to share.**
**May we touch the earth lightly,
as we journey through life, together, in your creation. Amen.**



Assurance of Forgiveness

Hear the good news: as spring renews the face of the earth,
so God's constant love is ever renewing and transforming us.
We are a forgiven people! Empowered by the Spirit, we are a new creation!
Thanks be to God! Amen.

Scripture Reading

An excerpt from the Gospel Reading for today (John 9:1-41)

As Jesus walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. ²His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” ³Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him. ⁴We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. ⁵As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” ⁶When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes, ⁷saying to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see.

⁸The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, “Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?” ⁹Some were saying, “It is he.” Others were saying, “No, but it is someone like him.” He kept saying, “I am the man.” ¹⁰But they kept asking him, “Then how were your eyes opened?” ¹¹He answered, “The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, ‘Go to Siloam and wash.’ Then I went and washed and received my sight.” ¹²They said to him, “Where is he?” He said, “I do not know.”

¹³They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. ¹⁴Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. ¹⁵Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, “He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see.”

Reflection: By Rev. Lionel

If you want to read the full story of Jesus’ healing of the man born blind in John’s Gospel (John : 1-41) it’s quite an incredible narrative filled with healing and new life; conflict and doubt. I’ve just included an excerpt of the full story above.

First, a word of caution about how we read this text: John’s Gospel is written late, after the expulsion of the Christians from the temple which is where many of the first Christians (who were Jewish) worshipped. So by the time that John’s Gospel was written, the early church was already looking at the Jewish community from which they emerged with resentment, suspicion and generally in a very harsh light. And this tension seeps into John’s Gospel quite a bit – especially in how the writer of John’s Gospel refers to the Jewish people as “The Jews” – an odd phrase considering that most Christians WERE Jewish originally. So – all to say that we need to be very mindful

of how John's Gospel is read and used, especially in the light of modern day antisemitism.

Having said that, this is such a beautiful story about healing and new life. And, how fitting that I'm writing this on March 20th, the first day of spring! But today I think that mother nature is having fun with us! We've just had beautiful warm temperatures overnight and this morning, and now we are being plunged into thunder storm warnings and we're preparing for a cold front to arrive tonight. So much for spring!

The ups and downs of our weather are a fitting metaphor for the experience of this blind man who experiences the wondrous gift of new life and new sight from Jesus, only to be plunged into a storm of interrogation, distrust and fear by the people around him. It almost overwhelms the beauty of his initial healing experience with Jesus.

Bit maybe the blind man's experience is true to life for many of us. Simple, beautiful moments of healing, new beginnings and simple everyday miracles so often get lost in the challenges of our everyday lives.

And yet, the gift of sight that Jesus gives this man is as lasting gift. It can't be taken away from him, no matter how the community around him responds. And for the writer of John's Gospel, sight is a metaphor for faith: being able to **see** what truly matters in life. Being able to see through all of life's challenges, distractions and uncertainties, so that we can discern God's presence ... before and behind us, above us and below us, and beside us, as St. Patrick would say.

This is the kind of sight that anchors us when everything else gets too overwhelming. And let's face it – it's easy to feel overwhelmed by the flood of news coverage about COVID-19. The gift of sight that Jesus gives us helps us see through life's distractions ... to what really matters ... to God's presence in our lives. To see God's love at work in our families, friends, communities and faith communities. To see and believe that God is truly at work in our lives, and in our world - no matter what.

St Paul put it this way: (Romans 8: 35 – 39)

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ³⁶As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered." ³⁷No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

May we, too, receive the gift of sight. The gift of sight that can open us seeing and experiencing God's loving and steady presence in the thick of it all - in our struggles and joys; in our faith and in our turmoil; in our feelings of isolation and connection.

May this gift sustain us through these days ahead.

May this gift remind us that – as we say in the United Church's "New Creed":

"We are not alone. We live in God's world.

Thanks be to God! Amen."

A Centering Prayer

*"Be still in the presence of the Lord,
and wait patiently for him to act." Psalm 37: 7*

Lord, help me to relax.

Take from me the tension
that makes peace impossible.
Take from me the fears
that do not allow me to venture.
Take from me the worries
that blind my sight.
Take from me the distress
that hides your joy.

Help me to know
that I am with you,
that I am in your care,
that I am in your love,
that you and I are one.

~ written by David Adam in *"The Open Gate"* SPCK 1994. Posted on the **Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand** website. <http://www.presbyterian.org.nz/>

Song of Assurance: The Lord's My Shepherd

1. The Lord's my shepherd, I'll not want
He makes me down to lie
In pastures green; he leadeth me
The quiet waters by.

2. My soul he doth restore again
And me to walk doth make
Within the paths of righteousness
Even for his own name's sake.

3. Yea, though I walk through death's dark vale
Yet will I fear no ill
For thou art with me, and thy rod
And staff me comfort still.

4. My table thou hast furnished
In presence of my foes;
My head thou dost with oil anoint
And my cup overflows.

5. Goodness and mercy all my life
Shall surely follow me,
And in God's house for evermore
My dwelling-place shall be.

A Blessing

By Rev. Lionel

May God bless us with eyes opened to the wonder of God's presence,
 through neighbours and strangers alike;
ears open to the reassuring sound of God's voice,
 through the voices of others extended in care;
and hearts open to Healing Presence of God
 through simple everyday, ordinary miracles
 that bring God's restoring presence into focus in our lives. Amen.

ANNOUNCEMENTS



Find us online! Check out our websites!

These weekly Sunday devotions will be posted on our church websites, so check them out!

www.claremontunitedchurch.com

www.goodwoodunitedchurch.com



Find us on Facebook!

I have also been busy setting up a new Facebook page for Goodwood United Church, and I have now updated the Facebook page for Claremont United Church so it's current. I'll be posting updates on them regularly through this time, so please check them out.

Continued Support for our Congregations

During these weeks when our churches are not meeting for public worship, we ask you to please prayerfully consider how you are able to continue supporting our congregation with its continued financial obligations. Offerings can be mailed to the church address itself, or you can mail your offering to your church's treasurer. PAR forms are also available if you would like to use one for direct debit givings. Thank you for your continued support of our congregation's ministry.

