

Call to Worship

All moments are yours, O God. Time is the gift we cannot manufacture. Its mysteries are perceived by each of us differently. For some it is fast. For others this time may pass slowly.

Abide with us this precious hour. Strengthen our hearts for the drama of the cross. Hold out the hope once more of the resurrection.

Prayer of Invocation

We thank you for your mercy, which found us when we were lost and leads us even now to the light of your presence. Abide with us in our worship today, that your love may fuel our words, our actions, and our resolve to become and remain your healing hands, your loving heart, and your welcoming face in the world. Amen.

*The Word

John 12:23-33

Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.

Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

"Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again."

The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him."

Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

Living the Word

*From the day we arrive on the planet, and blinking, step into the sun
There's more to see than can ever be seen, More to do than can ever be done.*

*There's far too much to take in here more to find than can ever be found.
But the sun rolling high through the sapphire sky, keeps great and small on the endless round.*

*It's the Circle of Life and it moves us all, through despair and hope, through faith and love.
Till we find our place, on the path unwinding, in the Circle, the Circle of Life.*

The song written by Tim Rice is from 1994, The Lion King movie: "The Circle of Life." A circle we know goes round connected from ending back to beginning. The circle of life is an ever changing circle, which continues to be played out before us again and again.

When a baby cries during a funeral we are reminded of the hope of the circle God has created for us to live within. Another circle is found in the seasons of the year. During this time of Lent, which happens as the dark of Winter turns into the new light of Spring, we know that we are ever drawing nearer to that horrible cross, which symbolizes death for Christ.

If we can ignore Christ's impending death for forty days, and glide over it during Holy Week, we can jump right up to Easter and happy times, without having to suffer too much in the process. But Easter will only be as rich for us as we allow ourselves to experience the whole process of Lent, including time to go to the cross.

We need to face death for Christ with all of its pain, in order to see the glory beyond. There is no way we can know ourselves as Christians just through the life and resurrection of Christ. But when we do allow ourselves to go to the cross, we find that through that single event is offered the strength and hope of salvation for each of us.

The circle of life begins way back at the creation of everything. It is an order that our Creator has given us for our human lives. Out of chaos – God created order. Within that order God created humanity. In the beginning Jesus was a part of the creating as he was a part of God and he watched as the circle turned over and over; things sprouted and grew and died in order for the sprouting to begin again.

We live each day within the circle. We especially love the baby part. First comes the pregnancy and waiting: Isn't God wise to give us time to prepare for babies? Time to share the news so everyone can get excited and wait together. Then there is the birth – trauma!

I always thought it was quite clever of God to make the 'memory' part of humans not really begin until we get through some of the 'infant juggling' people unintentionally do to us and the first shots we get at the clinic.

We love the family and community gathered around one so small and precious, to celebrate in baptism that this new life is a child of God. We become in those moments a part of each other, all children of God gathered together.

As babies go from infant to toddlers we watch each day for the changes and progress of life. As a pregnant mother we are anxious for them to be born, as the physical load inside us becomes heavy. Then they are born and we hold them until they become a load again and then we put them down and coax them to crawl. Soon they are scurrying around and we encourage them to walk and once they walk, it becomes hard to keep up with them and we wonder how this all happened so fast.

At another level of the circle, Spring comes each year with new life. The colors of Spring we receive are soft green and pastels popping through the dead left from winter. Though we are 'Springing' ahead an hour today, Spring hasn't truly arrived in Hayward yet. I remember one Spring morning, a few years back - when I walked early every morning, as I took my walk, there were Maple tree seeds scattered on the sidewalk ahead of me. The sun was just coming up and each seed cast a shadow, some as long as 4 inches across the pavement.

But that is all most of those seeds will ever grow to be as only a few seeds actually make it to grow into a big Maple tree. I know when I see Daffodils, and hear the birds returning to sing up a storm that Spring is arriving; or I notice those with allergies and they will tell you that 'Spring is in the Air.'

Just as Spring soon turns into Summer, our toddlers turn into children. They begin to think for themselves, asking thousands of questions. Then, Author John J. Plomp says: *"You know that your children are growing up when they start asking questions that have answers."*

Just as Summer brings flowers which bloom and grow in rich primary colors, the children do the same - becoming little people spreading entertainment and joy before them as they go. It all happens so fast: How many here cried a tear on their first day of school? Did anyone begin the series of 'First day of school pictures' that was taken every year to show the changes? My first career was as a mother, so I know!

Before you know it they become teenagers, and you pray that they remember all of the things you have taught them and that they have learned in the school and church class rooms. We let go of them, slowing inviting them to 'be somebody;' 'bloom where you are planted' or some other pithy statement found on graduation cards. And the parents and grandparents pray for them and God listens and protects, where possible.

And they turn into adults. Just as summer continues to get warmer and hotter, adult life gets more intense as we go. We find our vocations, create more babies, and value things very differently than when we were younger. All through life we keep trying to figure 'it all out' and about the time we get a handle on things, the seasons have changed and we are at another spot on the circle. We spend a majority of our lives as adults, yet it seems like the circle keeps turning faster and faster...Until Fall.

In the Fall the leaves begin to turn the colors of gold and orange and brown. We also change; we are now wiser because of our life experiences. We even slow down a bit. Preacher Kent Crockett wrote this in *The 911 Handbook* - Mid-life is when: You know all the answers--but nobody asks you the questions. You are too tired to work--but too broke to quit. Your work is less fun--and your fun is more work. Your narrow waist and your broad mind change places. You have more hair growing in your ears than on your head. You read the obituary page every day to see if anyone your age has died.

Did you know that at one time, I owned a bookstore on the main street in Hayward. Spring was usually pretty quiet, in my little shop. But on a rainy summer day I would be mobbed by families, just fresh from free samples at the candy store with their sticky little fingers ready to thumb through the books. I wanted the business, but looked forward to the Fall when the kids were back in school and only the retired still had time to meander and wander up and down the streets. You see many things move in a circle.

God has a plan for the leaves that come to rest on the ground. They are there to insulate and mulch. Sounds like an excuse not to rake, but part of the seasonal cycle is to fertilize those cast off seeds so they can grow. And winter comes...the land is covered with snow, the trees look empty, the bear and skunk hide. The earth sits dormant the colors become black and white.

In the winter of our lives we become frustrated that we can't be and do what we have been able to do in the past. Things don't work like they used to. Two men in a retirement center were talking. Norm said, "I'm 85 years old and feel like I'm falling apart. How do you feel George?" George replied, "Even though I'm almost 100, I feel like a new-born babe."

"How in the world can you feel like a new-born at your age?" Norm asked. "I don't have any teeth, I don't have any hair, I can't sleep through the night, and I'm back to wearing diapers."

When you're younger, you think of your age in fractions: 4 1/2, 5 1/2. You don't hear 36 1/2. You become 2, you turn 40, you reach 50, you make it to 60. By now you're going so fast you hit 70! It all seems to happen so fast...Many do not get to 100 years, some do not reach 70. Richard J. Needham in his book 'Wit and Wisdom' writes: "The seven ages of man: spills, drills, thrills, bills, ills, pills, wills."

And then death comes. But a circle never ends...This is what Jesus is telling the disciples. One more time he is trying to tell them what his mission really is. "The hour has come." The disciples were expecting this statement, but they defined it differently than how Jesus meant it. They knew that there was a crisis brewing. The Jewish people had been waiting for a Messiah, who they thought would be the power to conquer their oppression and then they would be the ruling power. Their number wasn't large but they believed that with God, and Jesus their time had come.

God's campaign of victory was on the move! It is an hour to which Christ's whole life has been leading, an hour in which he is to be glorified. Next he gives them an agricultural parable: "Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies it bears much fruit." Tree seeds are no good sitting on the sidewalk.

He goes on to say "Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life." Life like the treasures of this earth can't be held onto. For the circle to begin again we have to accept the whole circle of life. Death is a part of life. In some moment in time, we will each die.

For nature, in the transitions the plants and trees become fertilizer and mulch to help the next set of plants to grow. In the circle of our lives, who we become can be handed down to the next generation. If we hold our lives just to ourselves we will lose all that we are and could be for others. When we give our lives away to others, what we lose is any fear of dying - worthless. Jesus says follow me, serve and then will come greatness.

Let me share with you part of a poem by Linda Ellis entitled *The Dash between the Dates*
I read of a man who stood to speak at the funeral of a friend.
He referred to the dates on her tombstone from the beginning to the end.
He noted that first came the date of her birth and spoke of the following date with tears,
But he said what mattered most of all was the Dash between those years.

For that Dash represents all the time that she spent alive on Earth,
And now only those who loved her know what that little line is worth.
For it matters not, how much we own, the cars, the house, the cash,
What matter is how we live and love and how we spend our Dash.

For two thousand years people have been living Christian action and Christ into their dash. Jesus was teaching them and teaches us about a different kind of suffering, not for one's own sake but on behalf of others. For the disciples on that day – this was all way too much to absorb. The life span wasn't as long as today, but Jesus was just getting started with only three years of ministry.

He had come to the Jews with a new view of life. They looked on glory as conquest, acquiring and having power and the right to rule. Jesus saw glory through the cross and he knew the only by spending life do we retain it. Jesus knew they couldn't take it all in for that moment, but he also knew they would reflect back on these moments and know that what he was saying would be true.

Yet in the end, with the experiences of Jesus' resurrection and the coming of the Spirit, the disciples did come to understand it. The Gospel stories weren't even recorded for forty more years after these words were spoken, but some words, some moments in time are unforgettable. As with Christ all we teach, we give as a gift to those who come behind us. How many of you can recall who took you out and taught you to drive a car? It may have been your dad or your mom, an aunt or uncle.

As with the words Christ spoke, the stories he told, the many things he taught, everything we teach others puts us in a place of awesome responsibility. As people may base their lives on what they learn from us: good and bad. We teach by example in all that we do, if we intend to or not.

Unlike the first disciples, we can put on our 'Gospel colored glasses' and see back through the words of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John to the death of Jesus in all of its dreadfulness, but then forward with understand to Christ's resurrection. The mystery of it all is still with us, but we can believe with hope in something beyond this life. Death is not the end, but a new beginning.

Life goes quickly in the whole scheme of things, so will we give ourselves or keep ourselves? It is about quality not quantity. Corrie ten Boom once said: "The measure of a life, after all, is not its duration, but its donation." Christ walks with us every step of the way to the cross and beyond.

PRAY

The Faith We Sing #2051 *I Was There to Hear your Borne Cry*