

Call to Worship

Psalm 37:1-7

Don't get upset over evildoers; don't be jealous of those who do wrong,

because they will fade fast, like grass; they will wither like green vegetables.

Trust the LORD and do good; live in the land, and farm faithfulness.

Enjoy the LORD, and he will give what your heart asks.

Commit your way to the LORD! Trust him! He will act and will make your righteousness shine like the dawn,
your justice like high noon. **Be still before the LORD, and way for him.**

Prayer of Invocation

Come to us, O God our creator, you who made us in your image.

Come to us, O Lord Jesus, you whose saving work has been accomplished for us.

Come to us, O Holy Spirit, you who continually invites us to trust in you
and be part of your church on earth.

Come to us, O Triune God, and bless us with your presence. Amen.

The Word 1 Corinthians 15:57-16:4; Psalm 37:23-26

Thanks be to God, who gives us this victory through our Lord Jesus Christ! **As a result of all this, my loved brothers and sisters, you must stand firm, unshakable, excelling in the work of the Lord as always, because you know that your labor isn't going to be for nothing in the Lord.**

Concerning the collection of money for God's people: You should do what I have directed the churches in Galatia to do. **On the first day of the week, each of you should set aside whatever you can afford from what you earn so that the collection won't be delayed until I come.**

Then when I get there, I'll send whomever you approve to Jerusalem with letters of recommendation to bring your gift. If it seems right for me to go too, they'll travel with me. **A person's steps are made secure by the LORD when they delight in his way. Though they trip up, they won't be thrown down, because the LORD holds their hand.**

I was young and now I'm old, but I have never seen the righteous left all alone, have never seen their children begging for bread. **They are always gracious and generous. Their children are a blessing.**

Turn away from evil! Do good! Then you will live in the land forever. **The LORD loves justice. He will never leave his faithful all alone. They are guarded forever.**

Living the Word

'Making the best of it:' A few years back, I had the good fortune to see a stage production of 'Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dream Coat,' based on the Biblical Story of Joseph from the book of Genesis. If you haven't ever had the chance to see this fun musical drama, I highly recommend it.

The Musical begins with a Narrator giving us these words: "Some folks dream of the wonders they'll do
Before their time on this planet is through -Some just don't have anything planned
They hide their hopes and their heads in the sand - Now I don't say who is wrong, who is right
But if by chance you are here for the night - Then all I need is an hour or two

To tell the tale of a dreamer like you”

The narrator goes on to tell the ups and downs that Joseph experienced in his life. The Bible is full of good stories that describe who God is and who we are as human beings. Because our lives here on earth are finite, we only have one lifetime of chances to make the best of it all. Yet we know from Christ’s time here that God created us and knows our short-comings, and loves us anyway.

Day in and day out, year by year we have many ways as we go, to look at our situations:

Seven weeks ago 11 of us began an Old Testament Study named Disciple Bible Study. It is an excellent way to know your Bible and your God better. In one weeks study it asked –

- “What does this passage tell us about God?”
- “What does this passage tell us about us humans?”
- “What does this passage tell us about the relationship between God and Humans?”

These three questions can apply to any situation.

For example, the words of Scripture that we read together this morning, from Old Testament Psalm 37, which are attributed to David – about 4000 years go, and the new testament letter from Paul to the Corinthians about 2000 years ago. Both pieces tell us that first, God has come to them in some way with a knowledge of what God has to be told to all people. They have also been given a way to give these messages to people. So we can see that God has equipped people to share the good news about who God is and who we can be.

Second, God knows us better than we know ourselves. As humans, we are sometimes unsure of what to do or if God is even present. So through David and Paul God reassures us with statements like: “don’t get upset over evil doers; don’t be jealous of those doing wrong.” And “you must stand firm, unshakable, excelling in the work of the Lord as always.”

Third, we can hear that these writers had a personal relationship with God. They listen to God and speak God’s word. Then we can repeat lines like “because you know that your labor isn’t going to be for nothing in the Lord.” The relationship between God and us? God trusts us to realize that we will feel secure in the Lord when we spend time learning who God is, and allowing ourselves to trust in our Creator.

In these and all words from God, we can see God’s plan for humanity to prosper and be loved. Church and community help us to be reminded of all of this. It is a great responsibility to choose the words that I ask you to say with me during worship, I work hard to not put things in your mouth that you won’t agree with. Yet within the scriptures, prayers and the hymns, along with the sermons, we can find God sharing who God is through the words.

Then when we sing or say those words together, corporately, they gain strength as we feel that we aren’t on this journey alone. Saying the Lord’s prayer together, reading the scripture together, singing a meaningful hymn together. It is nice if you come to church for the fellowship, even so, it is great if you find within the worship, God speaking to you or through you for another. If you can open yourself to the experience, you can be blessed in it.

But today it isn’t about the Master’s plan for the church, community and world. Today’s scripture is about each of us individually and our relationship with the one who Created us. Within 1st Corinthians we find an example of first century offering within the congregation. It doesn’t sound unfamiliar to us. It is an earthy example, of the logistics of taking the offering and getting it where it belongs – to be used in mission for others in another

community. Yet, it is God's gifts to us that it is about. God knows who we are inside and out and our intents as we share of our talents.

John Buchanan, the pastor at Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, Illinois says this: "The point is not really about doubling your money and accumulating wealth. It is about living. It is about investing. It is about taking risks. The greatest risk of all, it turns out, is to not risk anything, not to care deeply and profoundly enough about anything to invest deeply, to give your heart away and in the process risk everything."

He goes on to say: "Now for most of us, our personal faith, has not seemed like a high-risk venture. In fact it has seemed to be something like the opposite. Faith has seemed to be a personal comfort zone. Faith is no more risky than believing ideas in our heads about God and Jesus, a list of beliefs to which we more or less subscribe to intellectually. Faith, we think, because that is what we have been taught, is getting our personal theology right and then living a good life by avoiding bad things.

In his final book, published this week, the late Stephen Hawking writes that there is no God. The famed physicist, who died earlier this year, believes "the universe was spontaneously created out of nothing," writing that, for him, "there is no possibility of a creator, because there is no time [period] for a creator to have existed in." The book is titled "Brief Answers to Big Questions."

One of my favorite Duke professors, Dr. James Efird, would say about that: "*You pay your money and make your choices.*"

Jesus invites us to be his disciples, to live our lives as fully as possible by investing them, by risking, by expanding the horizons of our responsibilities. His is the invitation to the adventure of faith: the high-risk venture of building your relationship with God by being a disciple of Jesus Christ.

We were all given one or two gifts from God or many according to our abilities...We have all been entrusted with many talents. We can and do make the choices what we will do with our talents. God is gracious, yet has expectations. God wants to interact with us in the talents/gifts we have received. Advancing the kingdom of God, one blessing, one person at a time.

If you are generous with sharing your talents, you may know what it is like to enter into the joy of your God. Granted, things don't always go as well as God would plan, but we are still called to be faithful. When you share your talents, if things don't seem to be working out as you planned, you may have to take another look for what else you can offer, or work to change things – gently!

There will also be missed opportunities, when you didn't share your talents and you are disappointed to the point of gnashing your teeth. That is as close as any of us want to get to the 'outer darkness.'

You can use these three questions in your own life as you make all of your decisions in situations:

- "What does this tell me about God?"
- "What does this tell me about me?"
- "What does this tell me about the relationship between God and me?"

It can be a check-up of how you are doing toward God's expectations and your reality.

Please know that I am not here to question what you might put on your "Estimate of Giving Card." It is not even up to me to judge if you should turn one in or not, but it is an opportunity for you to share your intentions with God, and in the process help your church know if we can afford to continue the ministries of this church.

Yet, wait, today is about much more than just the finances of the church. Your talents/gifts may be that you are giving of yourself in another way to God, and to the church. We have many areas of opportunities for you to use your talent.

But know that there are opportunities in all areas of the church to add more people; talk to me, if you want to share your talents in some way. God & I can help you find a place. There is great joy in serving. The Psalmist wrote in the 23rd Psalm *"You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows."* God has an abundance of joy to be shared. Enough joy to make your life feel like it is overflowing... And there is less joy if you can't get past your doubts and fears.

Today is a Celebration of wherever you are. I can't give you the joy, and I don't want to even know where the outer darkness is, as it doesn't sound pleasant. I do know that you can experience either one according to how you are relating to God. I have a sign in my office which says "Faith is a journey, not a guilt trip." I speak to you not to scold, but to invite; not to guilt, but to give you opportunities to experience God's joy.

When I taught Confirmation classes, I would talk with them about making the most of what you have, by surrendering yourself to what God has for you. We spoke of Jesus' mother, Mary, teenage girl, giving herself over to God's desire to carry and birth 'the Son of God.' She became an unwed mother in a culture that stoned unwed mothers. But she had faith that God would help her to use the talents she had been given to work with.

Ever year as part of my Christmas Preparations, I watch the movie "The Nativity Story." This movie was released in 2006, it is very well done, and if you have not seen it before, I promise it can help you grow in your understanding Christ's birth and how you will experience Christmas this year and in the future. It takes you to that place and time to experience the journey of Mary, a young teenager and her fiance', as they make their way to Jerusalem and the birth of Jesus.

Since the commercial world is well into advent, though the church doesn't start celebrating it for a couple more weeks: I want to end with a Christmas image: It's Christmas: picture coming into the room, the tree is decorated, the family is gathered, and the children are anxious to open the beautifully wrapped gifts under the tree.

You peeked ahead, so you know there are at least two beautifully wrapped gifts for you. Sure enough when the gifts are handed out, you have a number of them. But the two, the ones that stood out even amongst the rest, are even more dazzling up close. Then you make the choice to open them last.

With everyone in the room you ooh and aah at the things you have been given, knowing that surely the best is yet to come in those two packages. Everyone else are admiring them as well. So much so, that you begin to think maybe you shouldn't open them in front of the others.

Certainly you don't want to embarrass anyone because you have been given the greatest gifts; nor do you want to be disappointed in front of others – after all you can only see the elegant wrapping and well formed bows at this point. So You make excuses to them and to yourself so you can set them aside.

For hours and then days and then months, the packages get moved from a prime spot so you can admire them to a bit lesser spot, and eventually when they begin to look a little shabby you decide to discard them completely. After all by now whatever is in there is surely as bad off as the package has now become.

Still you decide maybe you should at least check them out. So you open them, first the red one, which holds the talent you had always wished to have, but were afraid to hope for. The joy of it has diminished some over time, but you decide to ask the Holy Spirit to guide you in the use of it, and there is still great joy to be had.

Now you remember the old childlike anticipation of opening gifts and you tear into the blue box to find that Christ has been sitting in there waiting to help you build that relationship with God, for a very long time. You see that there is still much joy in that as well. It can be time to celebrate, and anticipate what God has waiting for you in the next package on the journey.

Like the story in Genesis of Joseph, who had to trust God when he got very near the outer darkness of life, God has a master plan to bring us each joy, but we have to open and share the gifts we have been given.

I now invite you to look to the screen or turn to number 607 in the hymnal and join me in reading A Covenant Prayer, written in the Wesleyan Tradition. On the screen or in your hymnal #607.

A Covenant Prayer in the Wesleyan Tradition (UMH #607)

I am no longer my own, but thine. Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt. Put me to doing, put me to suffering. Let me be employed by thee or laid aside for thee, Exalted for thee or brought low for thee. Let me be full, let me be empty. Let me have all things, let me have nothing. I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal. And now, O Glorious and blessed God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Thou art mine, and I am thine. So be it. And the covenant which I have made on earth, Let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.

2153 I'm Gonna Live So God Can Use Me