

Call to Worship

Come and let us be church together. **In sorrow and joy, in poverty and abundance, we come.**

Come and let us be church together. **In caution and eagerness, in silence and proclamation, we come.**

Together, in Christ, we become a church bearing God's great love into the world. **In Christ, we come and worship.**

Prayer of Invocation

Creator and Creating God, we praise you that your hands are still shaping us according to your plan. In the chaos of our lives, you touch us with moments of peace, assuring us of your nearness. When our eyes are clouded by evidence of despair, you hold before us in Christ a vision of hope for a new world yet to come. Send your Holy Spirit to be with us as we worship together. Amen.

The Word

Hebrews 10:19-25 NRSV

A Call to Persevere: Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh) **and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.**

Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. **And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.**

Living the Word

Once upon a time there was a church, Where we used to dip the bread in juice. Remember how we sang away the hours And dreamed of all the great things we would do. Those were the days my friend, We thought they'd never end, We'd sing and pray forever and a day. We'd live the life we choose, We'd hug and never mask, For we were young and sure to have our way.

Then these seven months went rushing by us, we lost all our hand-shakes along the way. If by chance I'd see you in the city We'd smile behind our masks and we would say. Those were the days my friend, We thought they'd never end, We'd sing and pray forever and a day. We'd live the life we choose, We'd hug and never mask, Those were the days, oh yes those were the days.

Just today, I stood before the church, Nothing seemed the way it used to be. In the glass I saw a strange reflection, Was that lonely woman really me? Those were the days my friend, We thought they'd never end, We'd sing and pray forever and a day. We'd live the life we choose, We'd hug and never mask, Those were the days, oh yes those were the days. Through the door there came familiar laughter, I saw your

face and heard you call my name. Oh, my friend we're older but no wiser, For in our hearts the dreams are still the same.

Giving God our Worship: Abundant Joy ... The stewardship materials for planning this Sunday's service, about Sabbath and worship, begin with these words: "Design and plan a worship service to develop the Biblical understanding of giving the Sabbath to God through gathering for and participating in worship."

My mind goes to Psalm 137:1-4 *Alongside Babylon's streams, there we sat down, crying because we remembered Zion. We hung our harps up in the trees there because that's where our captors asked us to sing; our tormentors requested songs of joy: "Sing us a song about Zion!" they said. But how could we possibly sing the Lord's song on foreign soil?*

Then the planning materials say: "Sabbath includes worship within the household of the faithful to celebrate one's faith with others, participating in the act of praising God through corporate song, prayer, liturgy, fellowship and proclamation." And my heart says "But Lord, I can't even see them. They all seem so far away. How can we celebrate our faith in the midst of this pandemic? How can I preach about how important it is for us to worship together - when we are apart?"

So the materials then say: "Worship is the most important corporate activity of the local church. To worship is to take time to rest and reflect, to actively pull away from life's distractions, much as one does each day for devotional prayer, and to take intentional time to be in the presence of God within the church setting and with the people of the church." And so, I pray, and I pray, "Lord, what can I do."

The Creator of the whole universe - my Creator, the one who knows me best and sees my weaknesses long before I do, once again tells me "Buck up girl, It's Friday Night and you just need to keep doing what you have been doing all through these seven months." Then I understand that the worship of God is not limited by the walls of the building.

I remember my mother telling me how during World War 2 they sat around the radio to hear the news about the War. It was important to hear the positives along with the heartaches, finding encouragement when everything seemed to be falling apart. I remember the family gathered at the TV to watch the funeral procession for John F Kennedy and when the space shuttle landed on the moon.

So now, I envision you gathered around your computers to be in worship with your church family. You are still here in spirit, I am still your pastor and preacher. We have been, and will continue to worship together – just apart for a while longer. We can still sing together, pray together and so I will proclaim the Word as it is before us today!

Hebrews 10:19-25 (verse by verse) A Call to Persevere: ¹⁹*Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus...* It is good news that Jesus changes how we

approach God. In Christ, we approach God together, as friends rather than individuals. We are family; we belong to Jesus and to each other.

As those who have a place in God's presence, through Christ, we can hold fast to our hope. As God's people of hope, we meet together, encouraging and nudging one another to live as God's people in love and good deeds. As God's people of hope, we're not concerned with naming people's sin and shaming them into submission.

Rather we appeal to one another as children of God, brothers and sisters of Christ. We prod each other to compassion. We egg each other on to acts of mercy. When we gather as church to worship, in whatever way we can, Christ brings us into the Holy of Holies, into the very presence of God, and assures and empowers us to live as God's people.

20 by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), 21 and since we have a great priest over the house of God, 22 let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

The Gospel of Mark tells us what happened when Jesus died: "Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from the top to bottom. The curtain shielding the Holy of Holies had been replaced and improved as Jesus opened access to God for all and for always.

The people who first received these words from Paul could immediately picture the curtain that guarded the Holy of Holies. God was behind that curtain in the meeting place of the living God and humanity. Jesus who is God veiled in flesh, is torn open on the cross to take away our fear of the unknown and to make ample space for all to come into God's presence, to approach God's throne, and to commune with the Eternal One.

²³ *Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful.* We as believers are called to persevere in our faith. This is not a TV commercial, with multi-million dollar athletes in expensive running shoes telling us "Just do it!" It is a scriptural statement, grounded in the faithfulness of God, who has promised to sustain us on our journey.

This is also the second of three times that Paul writes 'Let us.' We should strive for a time in the church and in our faith journey together, when we can say together 'We Will approach with true hearts in full assurance of faith and we will hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering.

²⁴ *And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds...* Paul is here addressing a problem familiar to today's Christians: congregational decline. His congregation is basically tired and discouraged – tired of trying to live the Christian life in a culture that offers no support for it and discouraged about the way evil seems to persist in the world. (sound familiar?) As a result the congregation has begun to question the value of being followers of Christ. Attendance at worship has begun to falter,

zeal for mission has faded, and the kind of congregational life that is rich with love and compassion has begun to disintegrate.

We see this happening in our times for differing and similar reasons. A year ago – a more 'normal time' we could see the slow decline in Christian church attendance across all denominations, including Hayward UMC. Now during this pandemic year, we need to hold fast to worship in the simpler forms that we have. Continuing to keep in touch with each other through Zoom Bible Studies and meetings and Facebook Live Services and some older ways of telephoning each other and even sending letters and cards. We all need encouragement as the days and weeks go by until we can worship together again.

25 not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching. The phrase 'not neglecting' could just as easily be translated 'not abandoning' each other. This expression is used elsewhere in Scripture to refer to 'leaving something vulnerable to destructive forces.' In other words, when we worship only independently without the community even if at a distance, we may be leaving ourselves open to broken or lost relationships with others and with God.

The chapter ends with a call for continued encouragement in the face of hardship and disaster. For Christians today, the need for courage and for an anchor of hope may be even greater as we consider the prospects of pandemic, terrorism, environmental catastrophes and violence. We too, need to persist in our confidence that the presence of Jesus Christ will give us faith and strength to serve God, no matter what the future may hold.

We must gather for mutual encouragement and support. The gift of Christ is not one that we receive and keep to ourselves. It is meant for the building of the whole body. In Acts 2:44 it tells how the early Christian community not only survived but grew strong by holding all things in common and meeting regularly for fellowship, encouragement, prayer and study.

Life in Christian community also summons us to acknowledge the unfinished nature of what God has set in motion. Our transformation personally and communally is not yet complete. Yes, Christ's sacrifice has opened the gates of heaven for all to enter, but the fullness of the kingdom of God has not yet been revealed. We are a people who live in the dance of the already, but-not-yet, and to dwell in that place requires much encouragement.

It is terribly easy to lose hope and focus in the face of a reality that seems to suggest that not much is happening to move us closer to the kingdom. This is another reason for us to connect with each other and tell our stories of where we have seen God at work in these times. It is also a reason for the Christian community to live out - even more passionately - the grace we have been shown in Christ.