

The Green Hill Presbyterian Church
Sunday, March 16, 2025

SILENT PREPARATION: "This is the true joy in life, the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one; the being thoroughly worn out before you are thrown on the scrap heap; the being a force of Nature instead of a feverish selfish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy."

--George Bernard Shaw, from "Epistle Dedicatory," the preface to his play, *Man and Superman: A Comedy and Philosophy*, 1903.

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Self-revealing God,
whom we meet both in quiet retreats,
and amid the hustle and bustle of life,
draw us now into closer fellowship with you.

Be to us an overshadowing presence that gathers us into community,
so that we may hear your voice, and receive your Word.

So empower us that we may be authentic witnesses for Christ,
wherever you may send us. Amen.

FIRST SCRIPTURE READING

Philippians 3:17 - 4:1

*Our first reading is from Paul's letter to the church at Philippi.
In it, Paul calls on the Philippians to join in imitating him.*

Or – perhaps better – to be imitators of Christ, as he is.

*It begins and ends with concise statements of exhortation,
between which, it focuses on a stark comparison
of the realities and rewards of two, diametrically-opposed,
ways of living.*

Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me,
and observe those who live according to the example you have in us.

For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ;
I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears.

Their end is destruction, their god is the belly, and their glory is in their shame;
their minds are set on earthly things.

But our citizenship is in heaven,
and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

He will transform the body of our humiliation –
that it may be conformed to the body of his glory,
by the power that also enables him to make all things
subject to himself.

Therefore, my brothers and sisters,
whom I love and long for, my joy and crown,
stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

SECOND SCRIPTURE READING Genesis 15:1-18

*Our Second Reading – from Genesis, the book of beginnings –
describes the covenant that the Lord made with Abram.*

*As we come to the reading, Abram – with the Lord's help –
has defeated the enemy kings who had abducted his nephew, Lot...*

After these things, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, “Do not be
afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.”

But Abram said, “O Lord GOD, what will you give me,
for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?”

And Abram said, “You have given me no offspring,
and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.”

But the word of the LORD came to him,
“This man shall not be your heir;
no one but your very own issue shall be your heir.”

He brought him outside and said,
“Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.”

Then he said to him, “So shall your descendants be.”
And he believed the LORD;
and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.

Then he said to him, “I am the LORD who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans,
to give you this land to possess.”

But he said, “O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?”

He said to him, “Bring me a heifer three years old,
a female goat three years old, a ram three years old,
a turtledove, and a young pigeon.”

He brought him all these and cut them in two,
laying each half over against the other;
but he did not cut the birds in two.
And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses,
Abram drove them away.

As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram,
and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him.

Then the Lord said to Abram, “Know this for certain,
that your offspring shall be aliens in a land that is not theirs,
and shall be slaves there,
and they shall be oppressed for four hundred years;
but I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve,
and afterward they shall come out with great possessions.
As for yourself, you shall go to your ancestors in peace;
you shall be buried in a good old age.
And they shall come back here in the fourth generation;
for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.”

When the sun had gone down and it was dark,
a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces.

On that day, the Lord made a covenant with Abram,
saying, “To your descendants I give this land,
from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates....”

SERMON

“The Divine Dichotomy”

The so-called “**Law of Distinction**”
is attributed to the *early 20th century humorist*,
Robert Benchley.

It goes something like this:

***“There are two kinds of people in the world:
those who believe there are two kinds of people,
and those who don’t.”***

Benchley's Law strikes a cord with us:

We love how he pokes fun at our human tendency
to perceive the world in *dichotomous*, **Manichean** terms.

That is,
good versus evil...
Conservative versus Liberal....
Republican versus Democrat...
Beatles-lovers versus Elvis-lovers...

And – possibly even more polarizing –
milk chocolate versus dark chocolate!

The fact is that we are really good at putting ourselves –
and others – into categories.

And – too often – with disastrous results.

Here, a brief sidebar – on the origin of “*us and them*” thinking:

Recall how – in **Genesis Chapter 3** – the **Adversary**,
wearing serpent's clothes,
convinced the **first couple** that he and they were “*us*,”
and **God** was “*them*.”

That is, the *serpent* convinced **Adam** and **Eve** that **God**
did not have their best interest at heart – that is –
when **God** placed the **Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil**
off limits!

And – subsequently – the enduring **poison** of “*us and them*” thinking is evident –
and can be traced – down through history, both *human* – and *biblical*.....
And – dare we say – *political*.....

Therefore, we *should all be aware* that “*us versus them*” thinking –
based on *false assumptions*, and *stereotypes* –
can *drive a wedge* between people.

And that **wedge** can *lead to anything* –
from **ridicule**, to **discrimination**, to outright **warfare**, and even **genocide**.

The problem is that we humans
are just not very good at categorizing –
our knowledge – and our perceptions – are *far too limited*.

But – *thankfully* – **God** has *no such limitations*.

And, the **story of Scripture** is a story about
how **God** is *distinctly different* from **human beings**.

But, it is also a story about
how **God** *makes distinctions* between those **humans** –
based on their responses to God.

On one hand,
God warns us *about making judgments* about others –
note **Jesus’** teaching, in **Matthew 7:1-5**.

But – *on the other hand* – it is clear that **God** *judges us*
based on the *criteria of our faithfulness* to **God** –
and **God’s way in the world**.

We could *truthfully say* then, that – from **God’s perspective** –
there are two kinds of people in the world:
those *who have faith*, and those *who don’t*.

In the first book of the **Bible**,
the *poster boy* for faithfulness to God is **Abram** –
later to be named Abraham.

(17:4ff)

Or – more accurately – **Abram** is the *poster patriarch*.
He’s an **old geezer** – so old that, as **Paul** later said, in **Romans chapter 4** –
he was *“as good as dead.”*

In fact *it is precisely* because of
his advanced age,
his barren wife,
and his nomadic life
that **Abraham** *becomes the prototype*
for those who would be **God's** *kind of people*.

That is, *people who follow God*, in faith –
as opposed to the other kind of people,
who would rather sit still – or cower in fear,
and put their faith in *safety, security,*
and *self-serving ways* of life.

Indeed, some **other famous people**
have picked up on this **kind of distinction** –
between the *faithful*, and the *futile*.

So, *we'll use some of their quotes* to help us understand how **Abraham**
becomes the kind of person **God** puts in the *divine category of distinction*.

First, C. S. Lewis.

Lewis says,
*“There are two kinds of people:
those who say to God, ‘Thy will be done,’
and those to whom God says,
‘All right, have it your way.’”*

When we pick up the story of **Abram** –
in our reading from **Genesis chapter 15** –
the patriarch and his wife
have *already been tested* along the journey.

In **Genesis 12**, God called **Abram**,
asking him to *pick up everything*
and *start walking west* –
to an unknown land – that **God** would show him.

And – looking back on the story of **Abram** –
we have to wonder *if there were others* –
others that **God** had approached with this deal –
this offer to *start following God*,
and *receive an immense blessing* –
a blessing that would *ultimately be passed on* to the rest of the world.

How many nomadic patriarchs in Ur
may have been offered this deal – **and turned it down?**

How many might have preferred to die fat and happy in their tents,
surrounded by *fat and happy sheep*,
willing for *that* to be the sum – and substance – of their lives?

One of the most significant verses in the whole **Bible**
is found there – in **Genesis 12:4**.

There, it says,
“***So Abram went as the LORD had told him....***”

Abram went –
without questioning God,
without needing to have the itinerary all set out in advance,
with no guarantee – other than **God’s promise of future blessing**.

Abram *went*, and became a member of the “***Thy will be done***” category of people.

Now, *that* does not mean that **Abram** *never tried* to hedge his bets.

His *fear of death* – in spite of **God’s promise** –
gets him in trouble in **Egypt**. (12:10-20)

He questions **God’s promise** of a son, (15:1-3)
and – when **God** tells **Abraham** and **Sarah**
that they are – *finally* – going to have the promised son –
they both respond by laughing. (17:17; 18:12)

Yet – later on –
when **God** tells **Abraham** to offer up
that *long-awaited son* on **Mount Moriah** –

Abraham responds –
by *faithfully proceeding* to carry out **God's** command. (22:1-19)

Abraham – then – appears to be – *alternately* –
shaky – and strong – in his early walk with **God**.

Yet – because *he chose to follow God* – he is *ultimately blessed*.

Abraham is a “*Thy will be done*” kind of person,
but he shows us that *being in that category is not always easy*.

And – throughout the **Scriptures** –
God makes *these same kinds of offers* to a number of people;
people who would much rather *have minded their own business* –

Think of **Moses, Gideon, and Jeremiah** – just to name a few.

And – centuries later –
Jesus called his disciples with the same, simple invitation,
“*Follow me...*”

But there were *those who chose not to do so* –
like the **rich young ruler**. (Mark 10:17-27)

In *that case* – as in many others – **God in Christ** said simply,
“*All right, have it your way...*”

In a “*Have it your way*” world,
following **God** *is not* popular – or easy.

So, *where in our lives do we need to surrender ourselves to God,*
and say, “*Thy will be done*”?

Remember *what we say* weekly – in the “**Lord's Prayer**”!!!

Second, we turn to Indira Gandhi.

She says,

*“There are two kinds of people,
those who do the work
and those who take the credit.*

*“Try to be in the first group;
there is less competition there.”*

Those who are in the *“Have it your way”* category of life
are *most likely to seek credit* for their accomplishments,
or – even –
to *take credit* for the accomplishments of others – in their charge.

Their *theme song* is **Frank Sinatra’s “My Way,”**
and their lives are *bound up* in the rewards of money, titles,
and possessions.

Or – we might more aptly say –
their lives are *bound by* the pursuit of money, titles, and possessions.

“Thy will be done” people – on the other hand –
are those who recognize that – in the **eyes of God** –
their self-made accomplishments – and titles – *mean nothing*.

They know that the *only thing* that matters to **God**
is **their faithfulness**.

And, they know that the *only work* that matters to **God**
always follows that faithfulness.

So it was in **Abraham’s case**.

Abraham received credit from **God**,
not because he had done great things,
but *because he believed* **God’s promise**.

And then – despite his anxiety and doubt – he stuck to that belief.

Indeed, so it is that the **Scripture** says,
Abraham “believed the LORD;
and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.”

(15:6)

By grace, **God** gives us the gift of **faith**.

(Ephesians 2)

And then – *in gratitude* – we respond to **God’s grace**.

We then shift the focus of our lives –
from getting credit for ourselves –
*to letting **God’s grace** flow through us to others.*

That’s the whole idea of the **Abraham story**:
We are blessed so that – through us –
that blessing can be shared with the world.

[And, the *same thing can be said* regarding the **gifts of the Holy Spirit** –
about which **Paul** writes – in **I Corinthians Chapter 12!**

But *that* is another sermon....]

To put it another way,
God’s grace always comes to us *on its way to someone else*.

We can *never simply hold on to it* for ourselves –
like a treasure, or a title.

Being a “**Christian**” is *less a status* than it is a **vocation**.

Note that the definition of a **Christian**
is “*a person in whom the Holy Spirit is resident.*”

And, the **Holy Spirit** is *always in action!*

So, *what have we done* with the amazing **gift of grace** –
that **God** has offered us in Jesus **Christ**?

Are we *sharing* it – or *hoarding* it?

Third, we turn to **John M. Richardson, Jr.** –
a professor of international development
at **American University**:

Richardson says,

*“When it comes to the future,
there are three kinds of people:
those who let it happen,
those who make it happen,
and those who wonder what happened.”*

It’s interesting that – in *this morning’s* reading from **Genesis 15** –
the **lectionary** *omits* verses 13-16.

Certainly, it would have *been more pleasant*
to *simply focus* on the **promise of God**.

But, *it is also important* to include **God’s warning**
about the *difficulties which lie ahead* for **Abraham’s descendants**:

Abraham’s offspring will be
*“aliens in a land that is not theirs,
and shall be slaves there,
and they shall be oppressed for four hundred years.”*

(15:13)

The point is that **faithfulness to God**
is *no guarantee* that life will *unfold without hardship*.

Nor is it a **panacea** for suffering, and pain.

Abraham’s descendants would undergo *generations of pain* –
not only as **slaves in Egypt**,
but *also as a result* of their own apostasy, and **sin**.

The latter would *lead to their exile* in **Babylon**,
many years after their arrival in the **Promised Land**.

So we could *say about them* what **John Richardson** said:
that they *let* those things happen,
made them happen,
and then *wondered what* happened!

Yet *right here* – in the *very beginning* of the story –
God reminds **Abram** that –
despite all that hardship, and wandering –
God *would not back off* from his promise:

God was *still going to bless* the world – through **Abraham's offspring** –
even when those **offspring** *were not* as faithful as their patriarch.

Human sin is *always debilitating*, but **God's grace** is *always liberating*.

Even in the midst of our brokenness,
God comes to us with an **invitation**:
to come home,
to receive forgiveness, healing, and reconciliation,
and then to begin again, in faith.

And – *while we don't know* what the future holds –
what we do know is that **God's constant promise**
is *still in force*.

That is, **God's promise** to **Abraham** – and his descendants –
including us, his *spiritual offspring*:
"I will be with you."

(Genesis 26:3)

Finally, we quote **Henry Ford**:

***"There are two kinds of people:
those who think they can
and those who think they can't,
and they're both right."***

Faith requires that we be willing –
to *surrender ourselves* to **God**, and his will –
trusting that **God** *will keep* his promises.

And, the **story of Abraham** tells us that **faith**
is *less of a leap* than it is *a single step* in a **God-ordained direction**.

So, as we take that step,
we need to recognize that it won't be easy.

But – *if we are willing* to take that step –
we move across the **divine dichotomy**,
and our lives will be *transformed* – from futility, to faithfulness.

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Thanks be to God! Amen.

*** AFFIRMATION OF FAITH (*Unison*)**

Adapted from the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647)

The Lord Jesus, by his perfect obedience and sacrifice of himself, which he through the eternal Spirit once offered up unto God, has fully satisfied the justice of his Father; and purchased not only reconciliation, but an everlasting inheritance in the kingdom of heaven, for all those whom the Father has given to him.

To all those for whom Christ has purchased redemption, he does certainly communicate the same, making intercession for them, and revealing to them – in and by the Word – the mysteries of salvation. He persuades them by his Spirit to believe and obey, and governs their hearts by his Word and Spirit, overcoming all their enemies by his mighty power and wisdom, as befits God’s gracious will toward them through him.

*** CHARGE AND BLESSING**

Pastor

I will leave it to you to decide whether there are – indeed – two kinds of people.

But – if we are willing to believe God –
God will credit us with the righteousness of Jesus,
and we will – most certainly – be on the good side of the divine dichotomy.

Let us receive the Lord’s blessing....

The love of God, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
and the fellowship – and power – of the Holy Spirit,
be with us this day, and even forever more. Amen.