

The Green Hill Presbyterian Church
Sunday, April 26, 2026 – Table Copy

SILENT PREPARATION

Where do you think Christ is leading you in your life? Where is He leading this congregation? In what way does this congregation demonstrate the work of the Spirit described in Acts 2? In teaching, prayers, signs, sharing, favor with those who meet us, and in the growth of the church? This week, pray for the growth of this church in all these ways.

PRAYER OF INVOCATION (*Unison*)

Wondrous God, present with us – even when we do not know it, valuing us – when we do not care for ourselves, and planting in us the seed of your Word, open our eyes to recognize you here: May we sense your presence next to us.... May we hear your voice.... May we know your touch.... May we see you in one another, and in the beauty all around us.... Indeed, may your reality emerge deep inside each life, transforming our thoughts and our deeds, and directing our relationships – both with one another, and with all your children. Amen.

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Most gracious God, awesome beyond our comprehension, yet revealed so personally in Jesus Christ: Speak to us this day through your Word, that we may embrace the abundant life you have offered to us. May we follow the example of Jesus, risking abuse and suffering for the sake of your children, and trusting in your abiding care for each one of us, until all of us join in praising you with mutual goodwill and great joy. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

FIRST READING:

Psalm 23

Our first Scripture Reading is the beloved 23rd Psalm.

*In addition to its meaning as a concise summary of God's grace,
it also functions as an affirmation of faith.*

I will be reading from the King James Version....

The LORD *is* my shepherd; I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:

he leadeth me beside the still waters.

He restoreth my soul:

he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,

I will fear no evil:

for thou *art* with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies:
 thou anointest my head with oil;
 my cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:
 and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

The Word of the Lord **Thanks be to God!**

SECOND READING: **Acts 2:42-47**

*Our Second Scripture Reading begins a description
 of the results of the Day of Pentecost –
 the day when Jesus' promised gift – of the Holy Spirit – is given.
Peter has responded to the skeptics – who witnessed the event –
 by giving a compelling speech,
 outlining God's gracious plan for salvation.
And – as a result –
 three thousand believers have been added to the nascent church.
Our reading – then – describes the particular practices –
 which characterized their new life together....*

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship,
 to the breaking of bread and the prayers.
Awe came upon everyone,
 because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles.
All who believed were together and had all things in common;
 they would sell their possessions and goods –
 and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.
Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple,
 they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts,
 praising God and having the goodwill of all the people.
And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

SERMON

**“Addressing the Absence of Awe –
by Pausing to Ponder Our Pacing”**

One day – some years ago – I was *visiting a parishioner* – **Werner Brown**,
who was a *former president* of the **Hercules Corporation** –
who was *hospitalized* in **Wilmington**.

I found him *sitting on the edge* of his bed, his feet *swinging below*.

And – during the course of our **conversation** –
Werner asked me *how I put together* my **sermons**.

I **told him** that I had accumulated a *variety of related resources*,
and – then – *pieced them together*,
adding **transitions** – and **segues** – as needed.

He said, *“Dave, I’m so glad to hear that.*
That’s how I wrote my speeches!”

Well, that’s how it is – once again – this morning:
Over time, I came across two, *complimentary, reflections* –
reflections on significant challenges we face
in view of the realities of contemporary life.

And – as it turns out –
they *both relate very well* to the **suggested readings**
for this, specific, Sunday in the church year!

One is by **Teri McDowell Ott** –
the **editor** of *The Presbyterian Outlook*.

The *other* is by **Frank Powell**,
who *authors a free blog* on **matters of faith**.
It is called **Sanctuary**.

So now – with thanks to both – we will proceed....

On this **Fourth Sunday of Easter**,
our reading from Acts describes the **early Christian community** –
a **community living in a state of awe**. (v. 43)

It *immediately follows* the **story of Pentecost** –
which includes **Peter's dramatic** – and *compelling* –
testimony.

In it, **Peter rebutted** – and *shared the Gospel* with –
those who attributed the **extraordinary happenings** of that day:
to *“those present being filled with new wine.”* (2:14-16)

And – *as a result of Peter's Holy Spirit-inspired words* –
the **Early Church** was born!

Indeed, that day was a very new – and very different – day:

Jesus is gone....

The **Holy Spirit** has *arrived....*

Signs and wonders are *abundant....*

And, the **first community of Christians** is learning:
how to live together – in their *new reality....*

This passage often gets *idealized* – and even *romanticized* –
due to the **community's sharing of resources**,
and *caring for each other's needs*.

But – as she read this text – what got **Teri McDowell Ott's** attention
was *her attraction to the pace* this brand new **Christian community**
had *set for their life together*.

And – as **verse 43** relates –
one of the effects was that *“AWE came upon everyone....”*

The Greek word for *awe* can be translated as “*fear*” or “*terror*.”

But, *it is not the kind of fear that sends you running.*

Rather, it is the **kind of fear** that *immobilizes you* –
with **wonder**, and **astonishment**.

The “*awe*” of this **first Christian community** –
living in the afterglow of the **resurrection**, and the **Pentecost miracle** –
slowed them to a pace of reverence – and respect,
and a *sanctifying* of daily, common rituals.

Our text also says this **early Christian community** lived “*day by day*:”

Day by day, they *worshiped together* in the **Temple**....

Day by day, they *broke bread* at **common tables**....

Day by day, they *welcomed new people* –
new people attracted by the sanctity, beauty, and wonder of their lives....

In other words, “awe” was attractive!

Their **life together** had *become precious* —
precious enough to be measured in *day-by-day, awe-filled, increments*.

And – as a result – *they leaned into their lives*,
enchanted by *all they had discovered*;
that is, in their **new connections** –
to **each other**, and to **their God**.

In her book – *Enchantment: Awakening Wonder in an Anxious Age* –
Katherine May chronicles *her search to reclaim her childhood wonder*.

She describes an **“absence”** that haunts her – and society at large;
a **disconnection from meaning**:

“The **last decade** has filled so many of us
with a *growing sense of unreality*,” she writes.

“We *seem trapped* in a **grind of constant change** –
without ever getting the chance to integrate it.

“Those rolling **news cycles**, the constant chatter on **social media**,
the way that *our families have split* along **partisan lines**:

“It feels as though we’ve undergone a *halving*,
then a *quartering*,
and – now – we are **some kind of social rubble**.”

The **first Christian community** could *also have known* this **absence**,
this **disconnection**,
this *crumbling* into **social rubble**.

To be sure, the **soil of their lives** had been *completely upturned*.

Yet they **responded** with an *intentional slowing* –
and – as a result – they *found the blessing* of a **“day by day”** beat,
and – *then* – lived into *the beauty* of their **new rhythm**.

To this point, Teri McDowell Ott has focused on the **“positive”** –
the *wonders* – and *blessings* – of a **slower pace of life**.

But – now – we turn to **Frank Powell**.

Frank *warns us* of the **opposite** – the *negative side*;
that is, of the **dangers** – and the **debilitating downside** –
of the *hectic pace of our contemporary lives*.

And, the **metaphor** Frank uses is that of *walking* –
deliberately walking.....instead of *mindlessly running*:

[Think multi-tasking, for example!]

Powell wrote: *In the Bible, verse after verse uses WALKING WITH GOD
as a metaphor for healthy spirituality.*

This **metaphor** shows up *so many times*,
that you would think **God** is *quite serious* about the matter.”

Like **when you're a child** – and **your mom** tells you *not to play* in the street.

She *tells you repeatedly* for **one, simple reason**:
That is – if you *don't listen* –
bad things are *much more likely* to happen!

Here are a few examples.

*Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation.
Noah WALKED with God.* -Genesis 6:9

*Enoch WALKED with God, and he was not,
for God took him.* -Genesis 5:24

*You shall WALK in all the way that the LORD your God has commanded
you, that you may live, and that it may go well with you,
and that you may live long in the land –
that you shall possess.*
-Deuteronomy 5:33

*He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice,
and to love kindness,
and to WALK humbly with your God?* -Micah 6:8

*But I say, WALK by the Spirit,
and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.* -Galatians 5:16

Over and over – throughout the Scriptures –
we see this reminder to walk with God.

But why?

WALKING WITH GOD is the single greatest factor
in determining a person's spiritual health.

That is, *more than morality...*,
more than spiritual disciplines...,
more than anything else...,
the **pace at which we live our days** shapes the people we become.

That's why this metaphor – **of walking** – is *used over-and-over* in the **Bible**.

Walking with God also describes a *way of life* –
a way of life that is *attentive to the world* around us.

It sees **beauty** in *unexpected places*,
in the **people** we *least expect*.

And, [perhaps even more importantly] **God** *wants to reveal himself* to us.
God *wants to heal* us.
God *wants to shower* us with **peace...**, and **joy...**, and **hope...**

But, [too often] **we** would *rather accomplish more*.
We would *rather be successful*.

So, in *his grace*, **God** *allows us to drive full-speed*,
to *go as fast* as **our hearts desire**.

[That can even be *true in terms of over attention* to “**church work**” –
as opposed to the “**work of the church**”!]

And – appropriately – the cautionary words –
“**How is this enhancing God's mission in the world**” –
appear at the top of each monthly Session Meeting Agenda!]

On the other hand – *if we run ourselves ragged* –
God is there to *take our hand*, and *pull us back up*.

[Here, the image of a shepherd rescuing a lost sheep comes to mind....]

But, the **underlying question** is this:
*when will we stop relying on **God** to peel us off the pavement,
to heal our exhausted souls,
and – instead –
slow down, and **move at a pace** that is more sustainable?*

The **Good News** is that *we don't have to keep living* like that.

But, *we must have* the **courage to change**.
We must have the **strength to say no**.
We must value our soul more than we value **success**.

And – *about this* – **Frank Powell** has even more to say:

That is, *the speed at which we live is often a violent act to our souls*.

No wonder we're *depressed....*

No wonder *stress* is our *closest companion....*

Our lives are just too *busy*, too *fast*.

We [zoom] through life at **break-neck speeds** –
and **we wonder** why *we're exhausted*.

We wonder why **our society erodes** before our very eyes.

Almost **every problem** – both *individual* and *collective* – lies in this one truth:
we are moving too fast.

Whether it's our **fractured society**,
our variety of **addictions**,
our **blind pursuit** of progress, and success,
our **superficiality**,
the exponential rise of **chronic illnesses**;

every form of brokenness – and **evil** –
begins when we stop walking with God,
and – *instead* – [seek to] move at **our own speed**.

And **Our souls** – then – *are wounded by our pace.*
We become *disconnected* from our **Creator....**
Severed from Life.

So, **we must slow down.**
We must learn how to **walk with God....**
how to live in such a way that *we feel the ground under our feet,*
that we *have some margin* in **our schedules.**

The reality of *“life while over-booked”* became *an issue for me*
back when *I was an elder* at the **First Presbyterian Church,**
in **Newark.**

Our mission was to *more fully engage* our **members**
in the *joy of bringing* the **kingdom of God** closer and closer,
in *our own day and time.*

I soon *came to envision* each **parishioner's life** as a seesaw:

On one end is **convenience** – the *god of this age*:
How much can I get?
How soon can I get it?
Do I need to *get it on credit* – or *on margin*?
Do I need to *get a second job*?

Or, do I need to *declare bankruptcy* – and *start over*?

On the other end of the seesaw is **commitment:**

Living life in reference to a *higher power*, or a *higher standard!*

And – *then* – I realized that **most people** were *so busy*
that **they** did not even *have time* to even *think about it!*

Years later – *when I began* my **doctoral studies** –
my **first thought of a project** involved **Sabbath:**

Sabbath – of course – is a *gift so important* that **God** *made it a commandment!*

But – *on second thought* – it occurred to me that **most contemporary folks**
perceive **“Sabbath”** as both *anachronistic*, and *negative*.

That is, *not* as a **gift**, but as *an outdated penalty!*

Hence, the **product of my project** turned out to be a **five-session,**
adult education course – *a complete curriculum* –
on the *discipleship duty* of **incorporating rest** in our **lives of faith.**

And – in recognition of the *comfortingly-restful nature* of the **23rd Psalm** –
our *first reading today* –

I included *the following paraphrase*
as one of the **handouts for Session 5:**

I called it **The Alternative Life-Style Version** of the *beloved psalm....*

The LORD is my Calendar-Keeper;
I have all the time I really need.

He slows me down so that I may truly see my surroundings;
He leads me to linger in places of rest and repose;
He refreshes and renews my life;
He guides me minute-by-minute –
so that not one is wasted.

Yea, though I walk through a week of multiple commitments,
I cannot be over-scheduled,
for You are with me;
Your love and Your limits –
they comfort me.

You lay out each day before me in the presence of my e-mails;
You enable me to live fully in each moment;
even my smart phone has become my friend.

Only peacefulness and true priorities will I pursue
all the days of my life;
and I will rejoice in the LORD's timing
every day that I live,
until my time and His time are One,
forever....

But – *for our "last words"* – we return to **Teri McDowell Ott**,
who reminds us of the *mysterious nature* of our faith:

"Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

"There is *rhythm* and *ritual* to our lives as **Christians** –
rhythm and *ritual* that can **slow our racing hearts**,
calm our frayed nerves,
and **position us** [to *address the absence of*] **awe**.

"As the **Easter narrative** reveals, our **Creator** is ever ready to amaze [us] —
there, a blossoming red tulip;
here, a cup of coffee pressed, into an outstretched hand;
there, a child dancing in puddles, left by the rain;
here, the decadent taste of chocolate;
there, the deep-throated warble of a frog;
and, here, the fragrance of lilacs....

"We *are not* disconnected from the **world** – in which we live.
We *are not* alone – and *not abandoned* by **God**.

So, *“slow down. Pay attention.”*

And, *“stand in awe of all that God is doing – day by day by day.”*

With credit to that old Christmas movie title:

It is a wonderful life – if we only take the time to live it!

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit: *Amen.*

AFFIRMATION OF FAITH (*Unison*)

Adapted from the Confession of 1967

The reconciling work of Jesus was the supreme crisis in the life of humankind. Jesus' cross and resurrection become our personal crisis, and present hope for us when the gospel is heard and believed. In this experience, the Holy Spirit brings God's forgiveness to us, moves us to respond in faith, repentance, and obedience, and initiates the new life in Christ.

This new life takes shape in a community in which we know that God loves and accepts us in spite of what we are. We therefore accept ourselves and love others, knowing that none of us have any ground on which to stand, except God's grace.

The new life takes its direction in the life of Jesus, his deeds and words, his struggles against temptation, his compassion, his anger, and his willingness to suffer death. The teaching of the apostles and prophets guides us in living this life, and the Christian community nurtures and equips us for our ministries. Amen.

CHARGE AND BENEDICTION

God has a speed, and that speed is slow. There is no other way.

God will not punch the gas to catch up to our busy lives –
because love does not work that way.

Rather, love is slow. Love takes time.

As we go forth into this new week, may we take time for love:
To love our God with all our hearts, with all our minds,
and with all our strength;

To love our neighbors, as we love ourselves;

And, to love ourselves – to love ourselves enough to slow down,
and then to live – and to enjoy –
the more abundant life that Jesus promised!

(John 10:10)

Let us receive the Lord's benediction....