

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

SILENT PREPARATION

Neighbors supported a poor, elderly lady in Scotland. They were happy to do this, but what bothered them was that her son had gone to America, had become wealthy, and seemingly neglected her. The mother defended her son, saying, "He writes me every week and always sends me a little picture." Showing them her Bible, she continued, "See, I keep them in my Bible." Between the pages of her Bible were hundreds of United States banknotes. The woman had a treasure in her Bible but didn't realize it.

CALL TO WORSHIP

Leader: Today, we have received the gift of a new day.
People: **Unlived, untried, ready to be opened.**
Leader: A new day, with surprising opportunities:
People: **With love to be given.**
Leader: Kindness to be shared.
People: **And peace to be enjoyed.**
Leader: The gift of a new day; God's gift to us!
People: **Let us receive it with joy, and live it in expectation!**

PRAYER OF INVOCATION (*Unison*)

Meet us here, in this new day, holy God, to search our hearts and strengthen our spirits. Plant your Word among us, that it may spring up in nurturing, inviting ways, for the sake of all your creatures. In these moments of worship, may we find the assurance we need to live triumphantly – even in the face of loss, discouragement, and suffering. Lead us – by the teaching and example of Jesus Christ – to trust you, and your will for us; for it is in his matchless name that we pray. Amen.

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Loving God, whose realm is like treasure hidden in a field,
like a pearl of great value,
like a flourishing tree which emerges from a tiny seed:

Now focus our attention on your will for us, for our community,
and for our world; that we might experience your reign among us,
yearn for its fulfillment,
and work toward the realization of the community of faith –
on earth, as it is in heaven. Amen.

FIRST READING: Psalm 105:1-11, 43-45

*Our first reading comes from the Book of Psalms –
the worship book of the Second Temple.*

*In these selected verses from Psalm 105,
the psalmist speaks of God's steadfast love and faithfulness,
and of God's gracious care for his people....*

O give thanks to the LORD, call on his name,
make known his deeds among the peoples.
Sing to him, sing praises to him; tell of all his wonderful works.
Glory in his holy name; let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice.
Seek the LORD and his strength; seek his presence continually.
Remember the wonderful works he has done, his miracles,
and the judgments he uttered,
O offspring of his servant Abraham, children of Jacob, his chosen ones.
He is the LORD our God; his judgments are in all the earth.
He is mindful of his covenant forever, of the word that he commanded,
for a thousand generations,
the covenant that he made with Abraham,
his sworn promise to Isaac,
which he confirmed to Jacob as a statute,
to Israel as an everlasting covenant,
saying, "To you I will give the land of Canaan as your portion
for an inheritance."
So he brought his people out with joy, his chosen ones with singing.
He gave them the lands of the nations,
and they took possession of the wealth of the peoples,
that they might keep his statutes and observe his laws.
Praise the LORD!

SECOND READING: Romans 8:26-39

*Our Second Scripture Reading is from Paul's letter to the church at Rome.
Paul is nearing the end of his ministry,
and this letter covers a number of topics which were very important to him.*

*Chapter Eight compares and contrasts life in the Spirit with life in the flesh –
the latter referring to those who attempt to live their lives
based on worldly values,
and rely on their own wisdom and abilities
to face the trials and tribulations of life.*

In our reading this morning, Paul states his firm conclusion.....

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness;
for we do not know how to pray as we ought,
but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.
And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit,
because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God,
who are called according to his purpose.

For those whom he foreknew,
he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son,
in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family.
And those whom he predestined he also called;
and those whom he called he also justified;
and those whom he justified he also glorified.

What then are we to say about these things?
If God is for us, who is against us?
He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us,
will he not with him also give us everything else?

Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies.
Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised,
who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us.

Who will separate us from the love of Christ?
Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine,
or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all day long;
we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered."

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers,
nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers,
nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation,
will be able to separate us from the love of God
in Christ Jesus our Lord.

SERMON

“Facing the Facts with Faith”

It was a beautiful, sunny, summer day – in Baltimore, Maryland.

People – in a neighborhood of neatly kept brick rowhouses –
were going about their usual business.

Then – a few minutes before 10 a.m. — there was a massive explosion –
that rocked the entire neighborhood.

A great plume of white smoke shot into the sky, and a hail of debris —
bricks, scraps of wood, roof shingles —
came raining down on the manicured front lawns.

Articles of clothing were left hanging from tree limbs.

A security camera across the street captured the scene – on August 10, 2020:
Three houses simply exploded.

In the blink of an eye,
nothing remained of them but a massive pile of rubble.

It appeared to have been a natural gas explosion.

An investigation ensued – with five months of questions, and uncertainty.

Finally – on January 11, 2021 – the gas company called a press conference.

They reported that the explosion happened when someone turned on a stove –
in one of the houses.

Nothing unusual about that.

But, it was also discovered that a contractor had done unpermitted repairs –
in that house – the day before.

The work had been done under the radar – as they say –
without calling the gas company in to certify the repair.

Two people died instantly. Seven more were injured.

One of the dead was Joseph Graham Jr.

He was supposed to begin his sophomore year –
at nearby Morgan State University – in a few weeks.

He was studying electrical engineering.

By all accounts, Joseph was an outstanding student –
well-respected by his classmates and professors.

He had gone to a party with a friend – the evening before –
and decided to spend the night at his friend's house afterwards.

It was one of the three houses leveled in the blast.

Firefighters found his body in the rubble the next day.

Responding to the gas company's report,
Joseph Graham's mother issued a written statement that expressed –
with quiet dignity – the family's agony.

"We're still trying to process – and accept – the loss of our son Joseph.
He was such a beautiful young man with inspiring dreams.
He had so much drive and ambition.
This hurts like hell."

An event like that raises all sorts of questions –
not just for the survivors, but for everyone else.

Some questions can be answered in time –
as the gas company did – when it issued its report.

But there are other questions – many of them unanswerable.

The hardest questions usually begin with "What if ...".

What if Joseph hadn't gone to the party on Sunday evening?

What if he hadn't decided to sleep over at his friend's house?

What if he hadn't slept so late on Monday morning —
and walked out the front door —
minutes before the fateful hour of 9:54 a.m.?

Everything depended on timing.

The explosion just happened out of nowhere.

Whether or not you were a victim came down to dumb luck.

Or did it?

Dumb Luck?

Is there such a thing as luck —
if God is all-knowing, and all-powerful?

If — as Jesus says —
not even a sparrow falls, that God does not know about —
does the same go for exploding houses?

Matthew 10:29

This raises even more disturbing questions.....

If God knew those three houses were about to blow up,
and God — being all-powerful — had the ability to stop it,
then why did the Lord of love not intervene?

Could not God have at least set off a fire alarm — or something —
so that everyone — inside those three houses —
could have been standing outside on the sidewalk?

Such questions are as old as the hills – and really do not have an answer.

The long-standing, theological term for such questions is “Theodicy...”

But that doesn’t stop us from asking them.

Indeed, it’s only human to wonder about such things —
and to wonder what role luck may play —
in determining who lives and who dies.

Furthermore, we talk about luck all the time.

Will we have the good luck to find a great parking space,
a better job,
or the right person to marry?

And – if we plunk down a greenback or two for a lottery ticket –
we are confessing a certain belief in luck ...

– Or – at least – our fervent hope that some may come our way.

Some folks are said to be “lucky in love” –
meaning they find a life-partner who is better-looking,
smarter, or richer than they are.

As poet – and humorist – **Dorothy Parker** once wrote:
“Why is it no one ever sent me yet
One perfect limousine, do you suppose?
Ah no, it’s always just my luck to get
One perfect rose.”

The truth is — as park bench sage **Forrest Gump** famously pronounced —
“Life [is] like a box of chocolates.
You never know what you’re gonna get.”

So, there is Good news and bad news – we all get a portion of both.

And, the best any of us can hope for — on this earth, anyway —
is that – in the final analysis –
the good and the bad will cancel each other out.

Only a fool imagines a life free of all trouble – and disappointment.

Reality – then -- brings us to the really big question –
raised by our reading from the Book of Romans:

How do All Things Really Work Together?

That related, well-known verse, is embedded in today's Scripture reading.

And, many of us are fond of quoting it –
in response to the troublesome question --
of why bad things happen; especially to “good” people.

Romans 8:28 reads like this in the NRSV:
“We know that all things work together for good –
for those who love God,
who are called according to his purpose.”

On first hearing these words,
we may think that this is a promise of good luck –
bestowed on those who believe in God.

After all, it does say, “all things work together for good.”

So, isn't Paul saying — if you believe —
that the Lord – dealing cards at the heavenly blackjack table –
will make sure most of your hands are just shy of 21?

That is an appealing thought, is it not?

And it probably explains why this verse – or at least the first half of it –
has made it onto a huge assortment of bumper stickers,
T-shirts, and coffee mugs.

But that is not what Paul is actually saying!

“All things work together for good ...”
does not mean only good things will ever happen to us.

The key to the meaning of that promise lies in what follows:
“... who are called according to God’s purpose.”

God does – indeed – have a purpose for the world,
a purpose much bigger than any individual person.

We are all part of that divine purpose – together, not separately.

It surrounds us.

It’s the universe we inhabit, the air we breathe, and the life we live.

The great British preacher – Leslie Weatherhead –
used to encourage his listeners to think of God’s purpose like a great river,
rushing to the sea.

Within that river – as with all rivers at spring flood –
are scattered bits of debris:

Logs and branches float – and spin upon the surface.

Rocks and pebbles are borne along beneath –
scouring the stream bed,
bumping up against each other,
and – sometimes – causing damage.

Does God – who made the river, and charts its course –
manipulate every bit of flotsam and jetsam?

And, do the random collisions of those pieces of debris
make the least difference to the river's larger purpose?

Of course they don't.

Within the great plan,
things happen that we can only explain as accidents.

To be sure, they cause us no end of consternation –
and make us wonder why God delivers such afflictions upon us.

Or – even – why does God even permit such afflictions?

But – in the larger, in the cosmic view –
they are part of a greater movement for good.

What about the decisions of the people –
residing in those three, Baltimore houses –
to be in that very place on that sunny August morning of 2020?

Was that part of God's plan for their lives?

Or, was it entirely their doing – the result of choices they made –
in all innocence?

Or was it sheer randomness,
a floating chunk of wood,
turning end over end in the torrent of God's greater purpose?

It is perilous to think of the accidents of our lives in that way –
as random.

But consider the alternatives:

Either God exercises ultimate – and complete – control,
manipulating every tiny event that happens —
from whether I wave a hand right now,
to whether a house collapses....

Or, God has walked away from the universe – and no longer cares.

Both alternatives are distasteful –
because either one makes God sound like a monster.

On the one hand, God is like an evil, willful child –
catching flies, and tearing off their wings for sheer amusement.

Or, on the other, God is the ultimate deadbeat parent –
having moved away – with no forwarding address,
and never sending another child-support check.

It is much better to envision a God who does care, deeply, –
but who is also committed to the foundational principle
that there is going to be freedom in this world.

We human beings — the crown of creation, made in the very image of God –
have been graced with such a gift.

But that gift comes at a price – and that price is accidents.

These accidents are not just random gas explosions –
but include anything incidental to the main – the foundational – purpose.

Bad things most certainly do happen in this world –
things that cause pain and heartache.

But here is the good news:
pain – and heartache – are not the last word.

Rather, the great river of God's purpose flows onward...to the sea.

And – like it or not – we are carried along with it.

At times, our progress is slow – and languid —
a peaceful paddle, on a meandering stream.

But – other times -- it has all the excitement – and terror –
of a whitewater rafting expedition.

Either way, the river carries us.

We can't predict its route,
nor can we declare what obstacles we will encounter along the way.

The only certainty is that the Lord will bring us to our destination.

But – when we do finally emerge from the waters —
wet or dry, exhausted or exhilarated, bedraggled,
bewildered, or bemused — we have a promise.

The promise is that Someone will be waiting for us on the shore.

Maybe it will be something like what happens to the apostle Peter –
in the 21st chapter of John.

That old – sometimes petulant – fisherman hauls himself out of the water,
dripping wet, after jumping out of his boat.

Peter's eyes – then – lock with those of his master, the risen Christ.

“Come,” Jesus says to him, with a smile –
turning over a fish filet on the fire –
“Come, and have breakfast.”

Friends, we can take that as a promise –
even as the promise Paul makes to the Romans:.

There will be a welcome awaiting us on that – ultimate – riverbank.
Arms will embrace.
Gentle voices will offer comfort.
Love will be pervasive.

And the words of Revelation, chapter 21, will come true:
See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them;
They will be his peoples ...
 he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
 mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
 for the first things have passed away.

It's not that experiences – such as mourning, crying, and pain –
have no reality, or true existence.

The good citizens of that Baltimore neighborhood can certainly attest to that –
as they think back to that awful day.
Their tears were all too real.

But — and may we hear this well — tears are not forever!

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

AFFIRMATION OF FAITH (*Unison*)

Adapted from the Second Helvetic Confession (1561)

Christian faith is not an opinion or human conviction, but a most firm trust and a clear and steadfast assent of the mind, and then a most certain apprehension of the truth of God. This truth is presented in the Scriptures and in the Apostles' Creed. It includes an apprehension of God himself – the greatest good – and especially of God's promise, and of Christ who is the fulfillment of all promises.

This faith is a pure gift of God which God alone – of his grace – gives to his elect according to his measure. God does this by the Holy Spirit by means of the preaching of the Gospel and steadfast prayer.

This same faith keeps us in the service we owe to God and neighbor, strengthens our patience in adversity, fashions and makes a true confession, and – in a word – brings forth good fruit of all kinds and good works.

PRAYER OF DEDICATION

The gift of participating in your realm is precious to us, O God. It is worth our greatest efforts, and most caring sacrifice. As we search for the best in life, we also want to share our faith discoveries with friends and neighbors. We do that both personally, and through our giving. May our outreach proclaim to all that nothing can separate us from your love for us in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

CHARGE AND BENEDICTION

In 1972, a love song was introduced by The Carpenters;
this is the refrain;

When there's no getting over that rainbow
When my smallest of dreams won't come true
I can take all the madness the world has to give
But, I won't last a day without you

The Carpenters were singing about the value of human love -- .
but, how much more can we depend on the Love of the Eternal God!

BENEDICTION RESPONSE

POSTLUDE