

# Alexandra Presbyterian Church

February 28, 2021

## Second Sunday of Lent

**Minister: Rev. Vern Tozer**

Stephanie Burgoyne, music director

Kaitlin Vandertuin, soprano

### GOD'S PEOPLE GATHER

**PRELUDE**

"Cantabile"

H. Purcell

### WE ARE CALLED TO WORSHIP

Jesus has issued the best invitation we will ever hear : Come unto me all you who labour and heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me for my yoke is easy and my burden is light. We will cast all our cares upon Him for He cares for us.

**HYMN 275**

Jesus shall Reign

### PRAYERS OF ADORATION AND CONFESSION

Dear Lord and Master of us all, we are so thankful that we can come to you this day and have no fear that you will turn away from us. We have no claim on your love when we come in our own name, but we come in the name of Jesus our Lord and Saviour. In His amazing name we are bold to approach you because of His love and righteousness. We ask that you would perform a work of grace in our hearts as we offer our worship in word and song. When we hear familiar things this day, may the Holy Spirit take those oft spoken words and fill them with new meaning. We ask for these blessings so that your name will receive glory and honour and praise. Thank you for the forgiveness of sins that you offer through the one who took all our sins to the cross.

In Jesus name we pray and join together with one voice in the prayer he shared with his disciples.

### LORD'S PRAYER

*Our father who art in heaven,  
hallowed be thy name;  
thy kingdom come,  
thy will be done on earth as in heaven.*

*Give us this day our daily bread  
and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.  
Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.*

*For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory,  
forever and ever. Amen.*

## **ASSURANCE OF FORGIVENESS**

Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed upon us that we may be called the children of God. Through his love and mercy we are assured that we have been forgiven. All praise be given to Him.

## **LENT LITURGY**

We are not the first to make the journey to Jerusalem;  
many have gone before us and many will come after us.  
From near and far, God's people gathered to celebrate God's goodness on the holy mountain.

**We are pilgrims on a journey.**

**We are travelers on the road.**

Jesus often went to Jerusalem as a child to celebrate Passover.  
Now he has set his face toward Jerusalem again,  
knowing this time will be different.

**We are pilgrims on a journey.**

**We are travelers on the road.**

Jesus' last journey to Jerusalem is sombre.  
He has no illusions about what is to come.  
Still, he goes ahead, doing God's will.

**We are pilgrims on a journey.**

**We are travelers on the road.**

Let us pray.

**God of light, we want to follow in Jesus' footsteps,  
but we have our fears and doubts.**

**We would rather avoid the pain and darkness on our journey.  
Give us courage and perseverance when the journey is difficult  
and the grace to help others on the road.**

**In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.**

## **WE HEAR GOD'S WORD**

### **SCRIPTURES**

Genesis 17:1-7 and 15-16

Romans 4: 13-25

### **SERMON**

"Just Try Your Best"

When we look at the religions of the world there is something that is common to many of them. Many of them seem to teach—be good and try your best not to harm others and God or Allah or whatever God is called—will be kind and forgive when you fail. Or else the message is like this: You do your very best. You gather up as many brownie points as possible, love your neighbor and then hope for the best. You are told to hope that when you die and God examines the record of your life—the good points will outnumber the negative entries and God will say—you can come on in. You are left to hope that you will receive approval even if it is by the skin of your teeth. So when your time comes to leave this earth, you hold your breath and hope that the scales will tip in your favour. Now there are some religions, however, that allow something like an escape clause or a get out of jail possibility. They teach that there will be a place - a remedial school if you like—a purgatory some

call it—where you can work to make up for the deficits you have accumulated here on earth. I remember well those years ago when there were funerals in our area of New Brunswick. People would be very anxious to donate towards ‘mass’ cards when someone died. The belief was that if enough ‘mass’ cards were purchased, and the priest said lots of masses, the person who had died would get an out of purgatory pass much more quickly. So, if you really loved or cared for that deceased person you would be happy to help him or her get into heaven. You wanted to shorten their stay at the front closet. Other religions have offered a different teaching. These religions teach that there will be reincarnations. You die and then your soul is given to another body and it comes back to earth. Your next visit to earth will add to the merits you can accumulate until eventually after enough tries—heaven will be opened for you. There are lots of other teachings in the world about how we might earn heaven.

The apostle Paul wished to correct the teachings that were going around in his day. Those who were not Christians believed an assortment of things about the life to come. But Paul had an important message about heaven to share with the people. He was aware that the majority of people have always believed in some kind of life after death. There is something in the human heart that says there has to be more to our existence than the years we spend on earth. If there is nothing else to come—then what is the point of it all?

For many, many people the question is likely more troubling than for others. Why would someone go through all that some go through? If almost every day they experience almost every day some sort of pain or struggle—and eventually have to give in to that affliction—what was the point of it all? Why did they live at all? If they simply struggle through their years on earth and then are buried in the ground and forgotten does that have any meaning? I find it so difficult to believe that anyone can be a true atheist. For if you really believe there is no god—nothing more than the seventy or eighty or less years you have here on earth—what in the world do you think it is all about? The true atheist should just commit suicide and get it all over with. For life is pointless without God.

So getting back to St. Paul, he said—“If in this life only we have hope in Christ then we are of all people the most miserable.” If it is true that hope dies when we die, why live at all? If you truly believe that you have to be extra good—follow every law or rule—the ten commandments and all that-- and do so perfectly in order to have any chance of entering heaven—then you might as well give up right now. Consider the heroes of the Bible. Do you think Noah, Moses, David and even the prophets like Elijah and Isaiah were perfect? Read about them in the Old Testament because the Old Testament never whitewashes the leaders of God’s people. Moses and David were murderers. Jacob was one of the worst crafty cheaters who ever lived. And when you turn to the New Testament were Peter, James, John and Paul men who never sinned? Far from it. In fact Paul may not have stoned believers to death—but he at least approved of it and celebrated when the first believers were murdered. He did not help throw the rocks when Stephen was stoned to death but he looked after the garments of those who did. Look at Peter; he swore up and down that he did not know who Jesus was – three times. James and John wanted Jesus to call fire down from heaven in order to cremate the people who would listen to Jesus. All these actions hardly describe devoted followers who lived perfect lives!

None of these leaders of the faith would have made it if entering heaven depended on what they did and how they lived. The truth is that we have all sinned and fallen short of what God has asked of us. Heaven is empty if only the pure are allowed entry. Jesus was the only one who was truly human and truly sinless. So would we believe that God would set up an impossible requirement for human beings to enter heaven? Not if he is a God of mercy who forgives the children he loves.

We are given an answer in the reading from Romans chapter four. And the example is Abraham. Why did God choose this man? If you read about him he was a man who had his weaknesses. True, it was to save his own skin that he lied. He was afraid that he would be killed by someone who wanted

to take Sarah as a wife. Then later, he doubted God and committed adultery when God did not provide him with a promised son. They thought they had to give God some help in keeping the promise about having offspring. So Abraham, Paul says, was not chosen because he was so good and pure.

Abraham was chosen because he believed in God. Here is what we are told : It was not through the law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes **by faith**. Wow! What a relief! What blessed good news! We are made right in the sight of God not because of what appears in the record of our lives—what we did and didn't do—but because we have believed in God and received his free gift of righteousness. Now that is an old truth, a very old truth—this has been preached and believed for centuries after centuries. It is puzzling how so many have failed to embrace it and believe it.

When we do believe this—that being right with God is God's gift to us—we are set free. We are liberated. What we could never do for ourselves—Jesus did for us. What we could never earn on our own merits— is ours when we accept the righteousness that Jesus has provided. So the hymn writer has declared: "Clothed in his righteousness alone, faultless to stand before His throne".

Now I must share some sadness with you. I have observed over my fifty seven years in the ministry that there has been a unbelievable reluctance to accept this truth. Something in the makeup of people tells them – "you don't get something for nothing". You have to earn everything you get. And there is also the feeling that we will not and cannot accept charity. We feel we have to earn what we get. If we persist in those beliefs as far as our relationship with God goes then we will certainly not make it. For it is ever so clear that what we could not earn God has offered to us if we will accept it. What we could never deserve has been provided by God at a tremendous cost. With humility and thankfulness we are asked to accept the forgiveness and the righteousness that Jesus is able to offer because he went to the cross. We can be sure. We do not have to wait. The gift of God is life eternal through Jesus Christ. That eternal life begins when we stop trying to earn it and by faith accept it. "The wages of sin is death but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." Praise God the doubts are settled and the uncertainty is gone. It is true not because of what we have earned but what God has provided by his marvelous grace. This is what faithful servants of the Lord have been trying to impart down through the ages. Thanks be to God!

**HYMN 570**

I have decided to follow Jesus

## **WE RESPOND TO GOD'S WORD**

### **DOXOLOGY**

Praise God from whom all blessings flow.  
Praise Him all creatures here below.  
Praise Him above, ye heavenly host.  
Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost.

### **PRAYER**

Our loving Father we depend so much on you and your attentive care day by day. We know you never forget us even though we often forget about you over and over again. We are grateful that we can share our concerns and make our requests at any time and you will hear us.

We thank you again for the good news we have shared. Our hearts are comforted when we realize that our eternal home is provided not because of our deserving but because you were willing to give your only Son to do what we could not do for ourselves.

We hardly know where to begin because there are so many things we should bring to you in prayer. We pray for a very troubled world. We pray for the millions who have no place to call home. We pray for the multitudes of people of all languages and nations who will go hungry today. We pray for those who are ruled by hatred and are involved in causing suffering and death to people they see as enemies.

And we pray for our own country, our province, our city and our homes. Place your comforting arms around those who are sorrowing this day. May their hope rest in you and in the risen Saviour who conquered death. Bless all who are struggling with illness. Especially grant your healing and comfort to those in long term care homes. Give them the assurance of your presence with them. In their lonely hours, may they know that you are there and no virus can keep you away. We also commend to you and your love the young people who are trying to continue their studies after so many upheavals. Enable them to concentrate and to do well. We pray that their young lives may soon return to normal.

And, O Lord, we pray for your Church. Bless all the church families that are questioning what will happen next. May your faithful sons and daughters receive the assurance that you will not leave them on their own as they go forward. Guide them in decisions that will have to be made. Strengthen our resolve to continue the tasks you have committed to your church until that day when you come again to take your children home.

All these prayers and the desires of our hearts we leave in your care knowing that you will do what is best for your church family. In Jesus' name. Amen.

**HYMN 349**

My Hope Is Built On Nothing Less

**BENEDICTION**

And now may the peace of God fill your hearts; may the love of God give you comfort and may the fellowship of the Holy Spirit give you strength to be a faithful follower of our Saviour, this day and even for ever more.

**CHORAL AMEN**

**POSTLUDE**

“Allegro”

W. Walond



**In Our Prayers:**

Edith Cowper  
Bruce Wheatley