

Lakewood Congregational Church

A Congregation of the United Church of Christ

Sunday, January 24, 2021



An Order of Worship to be followed in your home, along with our
worship video on your own
Preferably at 10:00am

Welcome and Announcements

If you are new among us, welcome. Please know we are glad you're here; you're welcome in our remote community and you're welcome in our physical community when the time is right.

We will have an Annual Meeting at 11:00am, on Sunday, February 7, via Zoom. More information will be coming in the mail and email.

Karamu House Event-please see today's blog (lcc-church.org) for more information.

At Lakewood Congregational Church, we strive to be people of extravagant welcome. Whether you are young or old, gay or straight, single or partnered, happy or sad, confused or inspired, street smart or college-educated, whether you can't pay your bills or you have more than enough to share—no matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here in this place, to worship a loving God who welcomes us all. As I stand in this sanctuary I join my heart with you and I pray that you might feel the refuge of this space.

May the Peace of Christ be with you. Let us worship God.

Prelude

Be Thou My Vision, arr. K. Lee Scott

Victoria Peacock, soprano; Ben Malkevitch, piano
(a remote collaboration)

Call To Worship

One: We gather in this sacred way to respond to the call of God's love.

People: Thankful that someone cared enough to share this good news with us.

One: May we be compassionate enough to share this divine presence with others.

People: Love, when shared, is not divided but multiplied.

One: Love, given away, is not diminished but expanded.

People: May our gathering beckon and welcome those near and far to know the love of this divine presence.

Rock Tumbling Experiment Week 3

(see the video for more detail)

Trust in the Slow Work of God

By Teilard de Chardin

Above all, trust in the slow work of God.

We are quite naturally impatient in everything to reach the end without delay.

We should like to skip the intermediate stages.

We are impatient of being on the way to something unknown, something new.

And yet it is the law of all progress

that it is made by passing through some stages of instability—and that it may take a very long time.

And so I think it is with you;

your ideas mature gradually—let them grow, let them shape themselves, without undue haste.

Don't try to force them on,

as though you could be today what time

(that is to say, grace and circumstances acting on your own good will)

will make of you tomorrow.

Only God could say what this new spirit gradually forming within you will be.

Give Our Lord the benefit of believing

that his hand is leading you,

and accept the anxiety of feeling yourself in suspense and incomplete.

Hymn In Christ There Is No East or West

*In Christ there is no east or west,
in him no south or north,
but one great fellowship of love
throughout the whole wide earth.*

*In Christ shall true hearts everywhere
their high communion find;
his service is the golden cord
close binding humankind.*

*Join hands, companions in the faith,
whate'er your race may be!
Who loves and serves the one in him,
throughout the whole wide earth.*

*In Christ now meet both east and west;
in him meet south and north,
all Christly souls are one in him
throughout the whole wide earth.*

LCC Virtual Choir

Victoria Peacock, soprano; Gwendolyn DeLaney, alto; Steve Hotchkiss, Ben Liu, tenors; Noah Hamrick, Tim Hampton, basses

Pastoral Prayer

Gracious and loving God, we give you thanks for this day, for our lives, and for those who are participating in this worship experience with us. Thank you for the encouragement to carve out this time to worship you, and to find connection to the Body of Christ. We give you thanks for the winter season that unfolds outside, for its reminder to rest, to quiet ourselves, and to recognize the slow work of God that unfolds in every season.

Yes, the gray days and our current stay at home advisory make us restless for sunlight and summer, and an end to this pandemic, but we ask that you would help us to pause. Help us to root ourselves in this moment and all that uniquely defines it. Fill us with patience and presence to fully embrace the life that meets us right here, and help us to remember that every moment, even the ones we are hasty to overcome, is indeed a gift and an opportunity to encounter your grace.

Even as we ask for patience and presence, O God, do not allow us to grow complacent or insular. We ask that you stir us up and turn our hearts outside of ourselves and our own homes. In this spirit, we pray for those beyond our doors.

We pray for the homeless, for those who have nowhere to go against the cold, those who fear for their health and their safety and their future. We ask that they may find some sense of the comfort we so often take for granted. Help us to know when and how we may be the source of that comfort.

We pray for our community, for our citizens and our leaders. Help us to remember that we belong to each other.

We pray for our nation and for our world, that tension, prejudice, injustice, and violence might give way to mutual connection, respect, and community. We pray for the oppressed and

neglected, and we ask that you open our ears to hear the cries of the earth and the cries of the poor as you do.

We lift up also all those in our own Body of Christ who are struggling. We pray especially for those who are suffering a loss, those who are lonely, those who are depressed or anxious, and those who face uncertainty. We pray for those who grieve the 400,000 who have lost their lives because of complications of Covid-19. We pray too for those struggling with health issues, those wrestling with financial problems, and those facing estrangement or tension with friends or family.

We know and trust, O God, that you are always with us. In cold and in warmth, in shadow and in light, in every season and every moment of our lives you hold us all in your loving embrace and never let us go.

Trusting indeed that you are always there, we pray to you now as your Son taught us, saying together, Our Father . . .

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy Kingdom come, Thy Will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors, and lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the Kingdom, and the Power, and the Glory forever. Amen.

Invitation to the Offering

Gestures of gratitude are a demonstration that a blessing or benefit has been received. We heard a call, dropped our nets and brought ourselves here to find new life. The gifts we give today are tokens of the blessings we have received. Bring your gifts with joy, for they remind us of just how blessed we are to know this love that flows so generously from the spirit of God.

Dedication Prayer

May these gifts, given to these ministries of grace,
be a blessing to friends and strangers,
those like us and those not,
those deserving and those not,
for in this way the love of God reaches all of God's beloved.

Doxology

Praise God from whom all blessings flow.
Praise God all creatures here below.
Praise God above, ye heavenly hosts:
Creator, Christ and Holy Ghost. Amen.

Scripture Reading, read by Paula Deal

Mark 1:14-20

The Beginning of the Galilean Ministry

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'

Jesus Calls the First Disciples

As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, 'Follow me and I will make you fish for people.' And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

Message

Rev. Joanna: I'm here today with Rev. Michael Howard, who some of you may know but most of you don't. Michael is an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ, and he serves as the Minister for Faith in Action for the Living Water Association. The Living Water Association encompasses all of Northeast Ohio – 150 UCC congregations. Michael's role is fairly new in our Association-- about as long as I've been at LCC. He's responsible for supporting and resourcing congregations for justice-focused ministries and community engagement.

I invited Michael to share with us today because I believe that his role in the Association and our visioning at LCC collide. On Epiphany Sunday, I shared an abbreviated worship service with you in which I said that I think our Star Word for the year, as a church, is "Unlock." Community engagement certainly connects with that word. How is it that we are being unlocked, let loose, to engage our community and put our faith into action?

So welcome, Michael. Thanks for doing this. Is there anything else you want to say by way of introduction?

Rev. Michael: I think you've got it. Thank you so much for inviting me to be with you this morning.

Rev. Joanna: God may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts in this hour be acceptable in your sight, for you are our rock and our redeemer Amen.

I told you about the language I use in my ministry: "If we were to draw a venn diagram between Heaven and Earth, with Earth being full of human brokenness and the full range of human emotions, and heaven being this vision where all are whole, and healed, and free-- then our job as followers of Jesus Christ is to occupy the overlap, to live in the space where Heaven and Earth meet, and

to declare to people that this world is possible-- that a world of Beloved Community with a baseline of Grace and abiding presence is possible.”

You have language for this too, about incarnation, etc. Do you want to share something about that?

Rev. Michael: I think we are called to commit ourselves to seeing heaven and earth intersect in the community around us. I see my calling is to invite us to live incarnationally in our own community.

“Beloved Community” is a language that is central to my own theology and approach to ministry. It comes to us—most of the time—by way of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. It is this notion that all humanity (indeed, all of creation) is the Beloved of God. That all of us are God’s beloved children. That voice that spoke from heaven over the waters of Jesus’ baptism is the same voice that speaks over ours: “This is my beloved child. I am very pleased.”

Rev Joanna: Yes-- I just preached about this two weeks ago!

Rev. Michael: It reminds me of Genesis 1:31: “God looked over all creation and declared it was very good.” Tov Meod—very good. The divine truth about who we fundamentally are, a truth that cannot be taken away, a truth regardless of where we are from, what we have done, what religion we practice — we are all God’s beloved children.

“Incarnation” is almost always spoken of as the fundamental doctrine (dogma) of Christian belief. Rather than a “truth that must be believed,” I think of the Incarnation as a divine mystery. Jesus opened a new way of looking at the world, a new way of thinking about creation. Like you said, where heaven and earth meet.

If you forgive me, I’d like to note some problems in the traditional way incarnation is taught.

Rev. Joanna: Yeah sure, go ahead.

Rev. Michael: I think we need to challenge the “heaven vs earth” paradigm, which I think your “intersecting” approach is trying to get at.

“Earth as Broken”? In simplistic terms, the traditional narrative says heaven is good and earth is bad. God is good but humans are bad. I can’t help but take issue with this way of thinking.

I see Earth differently. Yes, humans are broken. The world is absolutely broken. From the extreme weather caused by climate change to the extreme violence caused by hatred and bigotry, there is a lot of brokenness around us. And perhaps there is a lot of blame we can pass around.

But what if we saw Earth as God’s “very good” creation? For me, I guess I would even take it one step further. I think of Earth as a holy place, profoundly sacred, where the beauty of life swarms all around us. It is our divine calling...all of us, not just me or you or some of us... but all of us, inherent in our very nature as created beings...our divine calling is to care for the earth, rather than treat it as a limitless collection of resources to be used as we want and then disposed of.

If Earth is bad and Heaven is good, then why does it matter how we treat each other, or how we live together in the larger web of life...that profound sacredness I was talking about before...that surrounds us. I think that’s what the word “heaven” is meant to inspire us to see.

Rev. Joanna: Yes- exactly. A world where all are whole, healed, and free.

Rev. Michael: “Occupying the overlap:” I love that language. It reminds me of standing on the streets in NYC during Occupy Wall-Street. I guess for me, that language has a hint of resistance, or

protest to it. I love it. I think that is what we are all called to do, to live into that “overlap,” that intersection between heaven and earth.

And yet, standing in the gap between heaven and earth can sound like a privilege, making us feel like we are somehow over and above the rest of the earth. We can take it to mean that we—“the church”—are somehow operating as the gate-keepers, as border security, deciding who is in and who is out. Like a kind of borderland, a place of violence with walls built to keep some in and keep others out. If that is the case, I guess you would say I feel like we are called to occupy that border space and fight to undo it. And this is messy stuff to talk about...

Rev. Joanna: Yes-- so not only occupy, but increase and bring others into it.

Rev. Michael: But you didn't ask for any of that. We were supposed to be talking about Incarnation — about Jesus, about Mark's Gospel, not National Security and border patrol.

Before we get to Mark's Gospel, let me share a bit more about the Incarnation. I love how John's Gospel does it. Most people read John's Gospel as this radically dualistic text: Earth vs Heaven, flesh vs spirit, dark vs light. It is talked about as having this “high Christology.” Jesus is more God than human, or perhaps super-human, or even not really human at all. But that's what I love the most about it. “In the beginning...” ...the writer of John makes this dichotomy of heaven and earth and smashes them together, “In the beginning was the Word (the Logos). The Word was with God and the Word was God...And yet, the Word came down from heaven...

Rev. Joanna: — I love how you told me that the Message version of the Bible puts it—“moved into the neighborhood.” (John 1:14).

Rev. Michael: Ok, one more thing about the Gospel vision of heaven vs. earth before we get to Mark.

Psalm 1: In the very first Psalm, the psalmist talks about people of justice as being like trees planted by streams, deeply rooted in living water that bear fruit every season.

Rev 21: We get that same imagery at the end of the Book of Revelation. Contrary to popular mythology, Earth isn't destroyed and people aren't taken away to a disembodied heaven. Quite the opposite: Heaven comes down to meet Earth. And the city of God is seen as the place where heaven and earth are one. A river of living water runs through the city, and those justice trees are on either side—and the leaves are for the healing of the nations.

I think that's it. I think that is what that incarnational space looks like. It isn't that Jesus is the Incarnation and we are powerless, standing in line, waiting to cross the border. Instead, I think we are supposed to be followers of Jesus, not gate-keepers attracting people to the church so they can get saved so that their passport can get stamped at the pearly gates. Rather, I think we're all called to follow Jesus and live, like him, incarnationally in the world.

Our Scripture Passage: Now, going back to Mark 1:15, this is one of those passages where I think the different translations deserve our attention. Your version reads, ““The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

“Has Come Near”: The NRSV reads like that. Other versions read “the kingdom is AT Hand.” I think that is more consistent with the rest of the passage.

Rev. Joanna: That's a big difference actually.

Rev. Michael: I think this is what Mark 1:15 was getting at—the Kingdom is AT HAND, imminent. Heaven came down and smashed into Earth. In Christ, not only do we get “God with skin on”, we get the revelation that heaven and earth can exist at the same time, in the same space. That’s incarnational thinking. That’s your “occupying the overlap.”

Basileia: The Dream: As you know, Joanna, I think we need to wrestle a bit more with how we think of the word “kingdom.” That’s an old word that doesn’t mean much to us anymore. Who among us has ever lived in a kingdom? Instead, I like to use the word “dream.”

Place and Time: So I might read Mark 1:15 as saying something like this: “The time has finally come”—this moment, this opportune time – to live in the midst of the dream of God.” The time has finally come when we realize our ability to live into the dream of God, in our own context, in our own communities.

So I think the gospel challenges us to ask ourselves: What does the dream of God look like in our context? What does God dream look like in America, in Northeast Ohio, in Greater Cleveland, in Lakewood?

Rev. Joanna: Yeah-- that’s an awesome question. Where do you see the church heading now... how do we pursue that contextual dream of God? How can we be Disciples both now and post-Covid.

Rev. Michael: Not everyone’s dreams get to come true. If COVID has taught us anything, I hope it is this. Seeing our own dreams come true takes power and resources. That’s why so many people just get left out, bulldozed over! I think that’s where our calling as the church comes in: What do the people in our neighborhood dream for it to look like? What do the struggling, the disenfranchised, the dispossessed dream for their world to be? Do they even believe they have the right to dream? Do they have the

energy...power and resources...to dream for things to be different?

Rev. Joanna: So you’re saying our task might be to organize and build the kind of power where our community can dream, right?

Rev. Michael: Yeah. Exactly! And not just to dream, but to work to see those dreams become reality. I believe that when our churches work to empower the people in our surrounding communities, I think that’s what incarnation looks like.

Rev. Joanna: I love that. And I think that’s what’s on my heart when I’m talking about Unlocking. What’s the Good News?

Rev. Michael: I think the good news is that we don’t have to wait for another world to experience what God dreams for the world to be. I think the Good News is more of a question of our convictions than a set of beliefs. Can we be more invested in the wellbeing of our neighborhoods, of the people who live in and around us?

I think if we can fully commit ourselves to that, to seeing the dream of God come about in our neighborhood...not just for the wealthy and the able but especially for the poor, the disenfranchised, those who have been told their dreams don’t matter...that’s when we find the invitation to participate in seeing the dream of God become a reality.

Incarnation... occupying the intersection...the overlap. That’s the Gospel.

Rev. Joanna: Yeah, I love it. And I always end my sermons, with these words: Thanks be to God. So? Amen?

Thanks be to God.

***We've included this transcript for the benefit of people who do not have audio access on their computer. Please keep in mind that it is written in a way it's spoken, so the grammar/sentence structure may feel a bit awkward to read. Even so, this feels like the best way to communicate to as many people as possible.

Benediction

Now may the One who is faithful to all
be with us all as we depart this blessed place.
May we be a blessing to every place we go,
until we gather again. In the name of the Father, the Son, and
the Holy Spirit. One God, Mother of us all. Amen.

Postlude

I Have Decided to Follow Jesus, arr. Mark Hayes
Ben Malkevitch, piano

Offering and Contribution Collection

Please consider fulfilling your pledges during this time. Financial gifts are always welcome, and our church feels the call to respond to the needs around us as they arise. Financial stability allows us to do so more effectively. So, let us give generously of our time, talent, treasure to further the work of God in our community. You can do so in the following ways:

- Writing and mailing a check to Lakewood Congregational Church, 1375 W. Clifton Blvd., Lakewood, OH 44107
- Texting STEWARD to 44-321
- Sending a gift through your bank's online bill pay
- By using the donate button on the church's website www.lcc-church.org
- Call the church office at (216) 221-9555 to discuss other options

Our Mission Statement proclaims our common goal.

*We strive to be a welcoming,
worshipping community of faith,
helping people discover and deepen
their relationship with God, growing as
disciples of Christ, and reaching out in
faith and loving service.*

In keeping with the spirit of our Mission Statement,

Lakewood Congregational Church,

United Church of Christ,

is an Open and Affirming congregation.

*We welcome people of all sexual orientation,
ages, differing abilities, and ethnic, economic,
and racial backgrounds into
the full life and ministry of our church.*

*We declare this in the name of the Still Speaking God,
whose Son, Jesus Christ, welcomed
all people into God's circle of grace.*

