

Lakewood Congregational Church

A Congregation of the United Church of Christ

Sunday, February 21, 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.

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

Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace by James MacDermid
Noah Hamrick, bass; Ben Malkevitch, piano
(a remote collaboration)

Living Psalm, Psalm 25

Through Lent, rather than a Call to Worship, I'm going to share the weekly Psalm with you for reflection. The United Church of Christ offers these "Living Psalms" each week, which many of our churches use in worship. They are re-writings, or interpretive writings, of the weekly Psalm. This week is Psalm 25:1-10, a Psalm of Guidance and Deliverance. When you listen, think of the Sacred Trust you hold with God. That even in our impatience and waiting, we might reorient ourselves to remember that we trust in God's abiding presence.

This week's Living Psalm is written by Sonny Graves. If you wish to dive deeper into reflection, you can also look in your Bible and read Psalm 25: 1-10.

Living Psalm 25: 1-10

Prayer for Guidance and for Deliverance
To our Creator

We uplift our souls.

We trust your Love.

Shame is your enemy.

We believe you know all of us.

We need your protection.

It can be hard

To feel

like we're in your waiting room God.

When we long for a sign,

a presence,

a spark of you close.

We ask

Not for the familiar

But for something

Breathtaking

Luminous mountaintop

A bush alight

and resounding.

Or maybe we need the smaller

Grace

A seed

A bird

A well

A small piece

Of your garment

To grasp.

Hymn *Strong, Gentle Children*

LCC Virtual Choir

Gwendolyn DeLaney and Victoria Peacock, sopranos;

Gwendolyn DeLaney, alto; Steve Hotchkiss, Michael Komperda, tenors; Noah Hamrick, Tim Hampton, Robert Wenz, basses

Ben Malkevitch, organ



Strong, gen - tle chil - dren, God made you beau - ti - ful, gave you the wis - dom and
Strong, hurt - ing chil - dren, an - gry and ter - ri - fied, o - pen the se - crets your
Strong, know - ing chil - dren, ut - ter your cry a - loud, hon - or the wis - dom God



pow - er you need; speak in the still - ness all you are long - ing for;
life has con - cealed; though you are wound - ed, know you are not to blame;
gave you at birth; speak to your el - ders till they have heard your voice;



live out your call - ing to love and to lead.
cry out your sto - ry till truth is re - vealed.
sing out your vi - sion of heal - ing on earth.

Pastoral Prayer

“Create in Me a Clean Heart, O Lord” a poem inspired by Psalm 51:10; adapted from a Call to Worship by Reverend Kathryn M. Schreiber (as you read or recite the poem, notice which lines stand out)

When I am soiled by another’s pain and seek revenge,
Create in me a Clean Heart, O Lord.

When I am clouded by accumulating disappointments,
Create in me a Patient Heart, O Lord.

When I am fed by the work of others,
Create in me an Appreciative Heart, O Lord.

When I am in pain and aware of physical limitation,
Create in me a Soulful Heart, O Lord.

When I am unexpectedly smitten with wonder,
Create in me a Joyful Heart, O Lord.

When I am overcome by systemic oppression,
Create in me a Prophet’s Heart, O Lord.

When I am grumpy about my personal relationships,
Create in me a Loving Heart, O Lord.

When I am hiding in the forest of distraction,
Create in me a Curious Heart, O Lord.

When I am resonating with love for Dear Ones,
Create in me a Grateful Heart, O Lord.

When I am rigid and holding court,
Create in me an Open Heart, O Lord.

When I am carrying heavy suitcases filled with hurt,
Create in me a Forgiving Heart, O Lord.

When I am enchanted with the play of colors,
Create in me an Artist’s Heart, O Lord.

When I am sad and swallowed by loss,
Create in me an Eternal Heart, O Lord.

When I am proudly self-important,
Create in me a Humble Heart, O Lord.

When I am hurt and scared, tossed by life,
Create in me a Brave Heart, O Lord.

When I am in the presence of beloved little ones,
Create in me a Playful Heart, O Lord.

When I am surgically dissecting the actions of others,
Create in me a Merciful Heart, O Lord.

When I am isolated by loneliness,
Create in me a Befriended Heart, O Lord.

When I am confused and entertain despair,
Create in me a Strong Heart, O Lord.

When I am anxious and poking the Tempter,

Create in me a Peaceful Heart, O Lord.
When I am exhausted and really need to stop,
Create in me a Sabbath Heart, O Lord.
When I am lost and have forgotten who I am,
Create in me YOUR Heart, O Lord.

We pray all of this, with gratitude and humility, saying together
the prayer Jesus taught: Our Father . . .

The Lord's Prayer, read by Anya and Evey Lardi

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

Our church's ministries are extensions of God's love and faithfulness made possible through the generous giving of our time, energy, and money. With love let us offer our gifts to God.

Dedication Prayer

God of all bounty and blessing,
receive our lives and our gifts
to be bounty and blessings
to you, our church, and the world. Amen.

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 Patti Komperda

Genesis 9

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, 'As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.' God said, 'This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.' God said to Noah, 'This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.'

Message

- I. Noah's Ark is one of the first Biblical stories we teach our children. It fills nursery walls both in our homes and in our churches. We have this one hanging in Suzie's room, appropriately with a background of Rainbow wallpaper; a whole bedroom wall of reminders of the Covenant God made between God and every living creature, though I'm not sure Suzie would say that's what the rainbow wall represents.

A. So one day, not too long ago, one of my kids asked me, “What’s that story about again? I forget.” So, I tried to explain it. I pointed to each of the pieces in this triptych.

B. First there’s Noah’s Hope. You see God asked Noah to build a giant boat, an ark, and find two animals of every kind and load them up onto it. God warned Noah that a flood would come, and it would wash away and destroy anyone and everyone that wasn’t on that ark. So, I said...in the first one, Noah is hopeful about the future, and he’s loading everyone onto the ark.

1. And the kids are like this: WHAT? Like, they really just heard me say, “And Noah is hopeful because God is about to send a violent catastrophe upon the earth that will destroy all of humanity and creation.”

C. And I maybe said something like, “Yeah this maybe isn’t God’s ummm...shining moment.” But I wanted to keep telling the story so I showed them the second picture. Noah’s Faith. Noah and those animals wait patiently and with faith that this story will end in prosperity, for 40 days and 40 nights on that ark, until they see a sign of the drying of the land. The kids wanted to know like, didn’t they eat each other? What if they had babies on the ark? They wanted to know-- why are there only 2 seahorses because like, couldn’t the rest of the seahorses just stay alive in the flood...cuz they’re already in the water?”

1. Those are legitimate questions, but I reminded them that the Bible, especially the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, isn’t focused on factual details, but on profound truths about God’s relationship with God’s

people. Hebrew stories are not about logistics and literalism, but about what the images, interactions, and responses tell us about who God is.

D. The third piece of the triptych is God’s Love. This dove brings a freshly plucked olive branch, to symbolize that the waters of the flood are retreating enough to release the renewed earth, and God puts this rainbow in the sky as a promise, a covenant, and says, “I will never do that again.”

II. It’s right for us to wrestle with this story. We can look at the smiling animals and the rainbow in the sky and love the joy of illustration. But we can also wrestle with the profound truth this story offers about God’s relationship with God’s people. If you’re unsettled by the depiction of a destructive God you’re not alone, and wrestling with the text might bring you a deeper understanding of who God is in relationship with humanity.

III. So, we’re going to do that for a few moments here. The story about Noah’s Ark is a story about Covenant. I’m really feeling called throughout this Lenten Journey to talk about the theology of Covenant, because we have a few weeks of these Covenant-themed texts and it’s such a powerful element of our faith. A Covenant is a promise, but in the broad arc of the Biblical Narrative, it is the mutual, interconnected, interdependent relationship between God and God’s people. It’s this idea that God didn’t just create the world and then let it float off into the universe to do its own thing detached and unsupported, but instead that God created the world and chose to hold the world in God’s hands, to remain involved, attached, supportive. That is not to say that God is a puppet-master, controlling our every decision. It is also not to say that we get absolutely everything we ask God for. Instead, Covenant means that

God knows us, imperfect as we are, and with committed Grace and Compassion, chose to put up with us.

IV. The Biblical Scholar Celia Sinclair explained the Flood this way: “The flood story is read rightly when it is understood as the story of God’s grief. Too often, and wrongly, it has been told as a tale of punishment. But the narrative should never be used as a model for divine judgment. What is central in the story is the anguish in the heart of God, which moves God to a new reality in relationship to the entire earth.”

A. What just happened here is that God had created the world and was watching it just spiral into the worst possible decisions. As envy, greed, and hatred ruled the hearts of God’s people, our deeply heart-broken Creator considered throwing in the towel. I kind of imagine God shaking God’s head and lamenting, “I never should have made this.” God was in deep anguish to see God’s creation, whom God loved so fully, so clearly choose the wrong direction. So, God said, “I’m gonna try again.” But not, “I’m gonna try again from scratch.” Not, “I’m gonna delete the whole thing and do it again.” But instead, “I’m gonna start over with this beautiful creation I developed, and this faithful, committed Noah.”

1. (Okay it’s still a little unsettling. We can still wrestle with the idea of a God who wiped off the vast majority of God’s creation, even if God didn’t destroy the whole thing).
2. But then God did this. And this is really cool. Rodney Sadler says it this way: “hanging the ‘rainbow’ in the sky was like a warrior who hangs up his... “war bow,” symbolizing the cessation of hostilities.” When I read this I envision the Yoga Position, Peaceful Warrior.

But then God made it colorful. So, so awesomely beautiful. So that it wasn’t just an end to conflict, but also a reflection of God’s grace and mercy; the turning of God’s grief into compassion.

3. And this is the Covenant part again, because you see the Rainbow is not just a reminder to us of God’s grace and mercy. The Rainbow is also a reminder to God, that God promised to never do that again. Celia Sinclair says that after the flood, “The newness is not in the created order. The new thing is in the heart of God. God has decided to put up with the world, and not just to put up with it but to stand with it. The bow, a weapon of war, is at rest. God’s creation is forever protected from God’s impatience. God is committed to finding another way to deal with unruly, hostile humanity.”

B. For me the most powerful thing about Covenant is that it is relational. It’s not transactional. It’s not “I’ll do this for you and you do this for me.” It’s not “on demand; when I want it.” It’s relational. God has promised to not let us go, and we in turn hold that same covenant, to trust in God’s abiding presence, and to turn our faces towards God to recognize God’s compassionate movement in our lives.

V. Okay so. On the topic of Covenant, I want to introduce one more thought. And prepare to hold this one, because I’ll probably bring it up again during Lent. This is kind of a heady message this week, but that’s okay right? You can listen to it twice if you need to. It feels really important right now. I want to talk to you about a concept called Functional Atheism. The term, I think, was coined by

Parker Palmer, but for me really hit home through the voice of Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber. Functional Atheism is when we claim to believe in God, but then act as if everything depends on us, on our efforts, our wisdom, our control. This is what prompts me to say to myself in the mirror a few times a day, “The earth is God’s and I am on it; not the other way around.”

- A. Functional Atheism is praying, “God, I have faith in your ability to work in and through the trials of my life” but then quickly turning to say “I’ll do this on my own.” It is saying, “God I need you to be present with me in my grief, in my despair, in the redemption of my failures,” but then refusing to reach out to ask for help, isolating yourself from community, or otherwise closing your heart from hearing the surprising ways in which God breaks into our lives. Functional Atheism is asking God to send a sign, and then brushing away the “sign” when it’s not the one you wanted.
- B. Functional Atheism is proclaiming God’s power and glory in Word, but counting on our human strength, money, intelligence, pride, charm, heavy-lifting, to get us out of whatever mess we’ve found ourselves in.
- C. And here’s the thing. This is the part you might need to hear again. Functional Atheism is a breach of the Covenant. Because God is holding us with compassion and grace, and a powerful Spirit that calls us towards wholeness, and rather than leaning into God’s relational promise, we are saying, “Sorry God, can you be quiet? I’m trying to dig myself out of this hole I’m in.”
- D. Can you imagine if Noah had said, “Okay I hear you about the Ark. Thank you for the building plans and suggestions. I think I’m gonna take a different

approach.” But instead we have this: Noah’s Hope, Noah’s Faith; Noah’s Love. Because Noah trusted the promise... that through God’s grief and lament about the behavior of Creation, God would enter into the brokenness and redeem us, reorient us, and with abiding compassion, never let us go.

- VI. I wanted to talk about functional atheism because I see it happening a lot right now. I’m no exception. In our season of communal grief and confusion, we find ourselves searching for ways to dig ourselves out of our own holes; saying to God, “Thanks for the advice; I’m gonna try a different approach.” This happens when we look for any and every possible answer about how we can get out of this pandemic faster and return to “normal” as quickly as we can. Now--don’t get me wrong, I very much think we should be looking to scientific developments and strategies to get us out of this sooner, and I too yearn for the next season. But it is a breach of our Covenant with God when we seek to overcome our adversities alone, rather than opening our hearts and minds to God to notice the ways in which God is leaning into God’s covenant right here with us right now.
- VII. The earth is God and we are on it. Thanks be to God it’s not the other way around. Amen.

***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

Mindful of your mercy, forgiveness, and covenant with us. Go into the world renewed, refreshed, and full of courage to be your people. We go in peace to work for justice. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, one God, mother of us all. Amen.

Postlude

Cornet Voluntary by George Berg
Ben Malkevitch, organ

(N.B. For Lent, we'll be forgoing some of the frills of the Sanctuary organ and hearing some from the simpler, Jaeckel-manufactured Baroque organ in the Chapel, which has a simpler, austere beauty of its own.)

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.

