

# Lakewood Congregational Church

*A Congregation of the United Church of Christ*

Sunday, February 28, 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**

### *A Covenant*

by Ben Malkevitch, based on Genesis 17  
Victoria Peacock, soprano; Ben Malkevitch, piano  
(a remote collaboration)

## **Living Psalm, Psalm 22: 23-31**

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.

Psalm 22 begins as a Lament, "O God why have you forsaken me?" But today's excerpt starts later on in verse 23, as a generational testimony of God's steadfast love yesterday, today, and tomorrow. We'll hear these same themes echoed in our Genesis reading later in the service. Rev. Chris Davies wrote today's Living Psalm, and if you want to dive deeper into it you can look at your Bible for the more traditional version.

So here is Psalm 22: 23-31, a Living Psalm.

Who do you think you are, people of faith!? How do you think we got here? (Spoiler alert: it's God.)  
Our faith survived generations because we adapted and innovated. (and colonized. And killed. Let's be real.)  
But God keeps offering us redemption. So I praise God. (And all that is divine.)  
God is with those who are most and multiply oppressed. So: so am I.  
Because God has been with me through all this...  
So, I will be attentive to how I can help God keep making this world better.

When I cried so hard my body shook, God was with me.  
So I will show up, the best I can:  
For the poor, the hungry, the lonely.  
Those who have not had Choice to live abundantly.  
There IS enough for EVERYONE in this world.  
Enough Food. Love. Care. Meaningful Work. Home. Gardens.  
Earth. Liberation.  
All the world could engage to remember that we have all we need and more...and this is not ours, but God's.  
The creation, the communities, the creatures; and those who care for them? God's.  
To God I offer humble thanks. And a partnership to work towards a better world, until I am but dust.  
Because I want my great-great-great-great- granddaughter to survive. And thrive.  
I want that for yours, too.  
Do you?

Living Psalm 22: 23-31, for Lent 2 B, was written by Reverend Dr. Chris Davies

## **Hymn      *If You Will Trust in God to Guide You***

*If you but trust in God to guide you,  
And place your confidence in Him,  
You'll find Him always there beside you  
To give you hope and strength within;  
For those who trust  
God's changeless love  
Build on the Rock that will not move.*

*Only be still and wait His pleasure  
In cheerful hope, with heart content:  
He fills your needs to fullest measure*

*With what discerning love has sent;  
Doubt not our inmost wants are known  
To Him who chose us for His own.*

*Sing, pray, and keep His ways unswerving,  
Offer your service faithfully,  
And trust His word; though undeserving,  
You'll find His promise true to be;  
God never will forsake in need  
The soul that trusts in Him indeed.*

LCC Virtual Choir

Gwendolyn DeLaney and Victoria Peacock, sopranos;  
Gwendolyn DeLaney, alto; Peter Hampton, Steve Hotchkiss,  
Michael Komperda, Ben Liu, tenors; Noah Hamrick, Tim Hampton,  
Robert Wenz, basses  
Ben Malkevitch, organ

### **Pastoral Prayer**

God of our lives and our concerns, God of this world and the universe beyond our imagination, from generation to generation, help us to be still in these moments, to know that you are here in our midst, to lift our hearts up to you.

We give you thanks for moments of grace—for another day of life, for the rhythmic cycles of the seasons, for the ways our heartbeats connect through your grace to show forth love and light and blessing to this world.

Great God, you are our teacher, and you know the groaning that becomes ever louder in our world—the deep pain of all who have lost loved ones. You know the passion of our youth who so want a world of justice and love of neighbor. You know the deeply held convictions of your people. We pray that through all the anger and grief and courageous testimony and tearful words, your Spirit

will sweep through the hearts of our lawmakers, so that the common good for all becomes paramount in their desires.

Merciful God, you also know the losses in our midst, and so we pray for those who have lost loved ones—parents, spouses, children, grandchildren. Hold out your hope for those who mourn, and hear their pain. We acknowledge our collective grief as we surpass 500,000 Covid deaths in the United States. We pray for those who have received unwelcome diagnoses. We pray for those who are recovering from serious surgery; give them strength and hope. We pray for those who suffer from a depression that won't leave.

As always, we pray for an end to war and a lasting peace brought about by justice. We ask for your help in making us increasingly aware of our own judgments. We pray for forgiveness in our own lives and ask for the ability to forgive others who have hurt us. And, God, we thank you for the gift of Jesus. Help us to keep taking steps in following the path he has set before us. We pray all of this, with gratitude and humility, saying together the prayer Jesus taught: Our Father . . .

### **The Lord's Prayer,**

**read by Anneliese and Seth Hampton**

**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**

At this time in our service, we come to a time of offering. A time to offer gifts and our lives as we are able as a sign of our dedication to God through this church. So I invite you to do so knowing that your gifts are for the generations and we will dedicate them together.

## **Dedication Prayer**

Gracious God, multiply these gifts and send them out to those in need and make them for us a sign of hope and peace in your 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 Tim Hampton**

### **The Sign of the Covenant**

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram, and said to him, 'I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.' Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, 'As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their

generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.

God said to Abraham, 'As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.'

## **Message**

- I. I have a number of favorite passages from scripture. Like... so many. Like every time I read one I'm like, "that one is my favorite." But, I dunno, this one might actually be the most relatable. Wait for it... "Then Abram fell on his face." I love it. It's so good. My favorite part is that God doesn't even react. So like, this is what happens: God says, "I'll make a covenant with you." and then Abram falls on his face. And then God is like, "Here's the covenant." I feel like God should ask him if he's okay or something, but God just carries right along.
  - A. So, I just had to highlight that for you so you could get a chuckle out of it. Now, Biblical scholars will probably try to explain the humor away by saying that Abram prostrated himself, like in awe and worship of God, so it was intentional that he fell to his face. And whatever, maybe they're right. But I like this image of a clumsy patriarch. Especially because last week, when we read the story of Noah's Ark and the Covenant God placed in the sky in the form of a rainbow, I said, "Covenant means that God knows us, imperfect as we are, and with committed Grace and Compassion, chose to put up with us." So here I have this image in my head of like, a comic strip or a meme. God is trying to convey an important message and Abram is tripping

over his own feet and God's like "really?! I made them with all of these deliberately placed muscles and joints and they still can't stay upright?"

- B. Okay I spent too long on that.
- C. But is there a more relatable sermon than that? Genesis 17:3: We're all clumsy and awkward and God loves us anyway. Write that on a post-it note and stick it on your mirror.

II. Okay I'm going to start over with this. I just finished reading Howard Thurman's book, "Jesus and the Disinherited" which was originally written in 1949: a foundational book for many civil rights leaders, including Dr. King. There's a part I want to share with you, from his chapter on Fear.

- A. He wrote, "When I was a very small boy, Halley's comet visited our solar system. For a long time I did not see the giant in the sky because I was not permitted to remain up after sundown. My chums had seen it and had told me perfectly amazing things about it. Also I had heard of what were called 'comet pills.' The theory was that if the pills were taken according to directions, then when the tail of the comet struck the earth one would not be consumed. One night I was awakened by my mother, who told me to dress quickly and come with her out into the backyard to see the comet. I shall never forget it if I live forever. My mother stood with me, her hand resting on my shoulder, while I, in utter, speechless awe, beheld the great spectacle with its fan of light spreading across the heavens. The silence was like that of absolute motion. Finally, after what seemed to me an interminable time interval, I found speech. With bated breath I said, 'what will happen to us if that comet falls out of the sky?'"

B. My mother's silence was so long that I looked from the comet to her face...When she spoke, she said, 'Nothing will happen to us, Howard; God will take care of us.'"

C. His writing continued, "O simplehearted mother of mine, in one glorious moment you put your heart on the ultimate affirmation of the human spirit! Many things have I seen since that night. Times without number I have learned that life is hard...but as the years have unfolded, the majestic power of my mother's glowing words has come back again and again...Here are the faith and the awareness that overcome fear and transform it into the power to strive, to achieve, and not to yield."

III. If you were able to listen to last week's message about Noah and God's Covenant hung in the sky in the form of a Rainbow, you'll note there's something wonderfully poetic happening here, as young Howard Thurman looks to the sky at the comet and its tail, a breathtaking bow of light traveling through the night sky, and he wonders if it might fall and cause harm upon the Earth and his mother remembers and passes onto him the everlasting Covenant: *God will take care of us.*

IV. Last week's Covenant story and this week's are different and they are the same. Last week we heard the story of God's covenant with all of Creation in the story of Noah, and that sign and symbol in the sky as a reminder of the Covenant both for Creation and for God. This week, God covenants with the Matriarch and Patriarch whose descendants will become the people of Israel. This isn't God's first Covenant with Abram. God had already told Abram of the Covenant in both Genesis 12 and Genesis 15. Still, this third time, he's so caught off guard by the Covenant that he falls on his face. But really, this time it

felt a little different, because this time it was for Abram and Sarai together.

- A. Abram was giving up. It had been decades since God first promised him that he would produce offspring and be a blessing from generation to generation. Abram and Sarai even gave up and Abram took a second wife, Hagar, to have his child. Abram began to feel as if the Covenant would not be fulfilled; that God would not follow through. That perhaps he misunderstood.
- B. But this time is different. Abram and Sarai together - Abraham and Sarah; name changes symbolize transformation and newness. Something grand is happening here.
- C. Abram, which means “High Father,” becomes Abraham, “Father of Multitudes; Father of Nations; Father of Many yet to come.”
- D. Sarai’s name shift is subtle yet significant, from Sarai which means “my princess” to Sarah, which means “Princess,” no longer belonging to someone else, but now she is her own person.
- E. God says, to Abram who is probably still flat on his face, “I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.” Again, this isn’t the first time Abraham had heard this, but this time was different because...
- F. God offers a message to share with Sarah, a Princess. She is blessed by God for herself, for God’s purposes, and for the generations that will come from her. God says, “I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.”

V. These Covenants are not separate from each other and they are not separate from the Rainbow. They are not isolated covenants, but instead extensions of one another, unfolding as the story of the generations unfolds, endlessly. This everlasting covenant unfolds and blooms through Abraham and Sarah, and will continue to do so through Moses, through the Prophets, through Jesus, through the early Christians, and through us.

VI. This time, though, the Covenant also has something to tell us about patience and about trust. God, who lives from generation to generation across past, present, and future, knows something about the fullness of time, and it would behoove us to trust patiently in the sometimes slow work of God.

VII. Last week you heard me introduce the concept of Functional Atheism. It’s the idea that we believe in God, but we don’t act as though God has the ability to enter into our obstacles and provide for us. So we say we believe in God, but we function in our lives as if we don’t trust in that belief. I don’t know why this idea is resonating with me so much lately. I’m still working it out. But I think, in part, it has to do with that patience piece.

- A. As we approach a year of Pandemic-Life, it’s hard sometimes to trust that God will come through on that Covenant. As we surpass 500,000 deaths in the US alone, it feels at times as if the comet is coming towards the earth and God will not protect us. It feels at times as if we should seek another way to fulfill the generational promise, like Abram did with Hagar. Because we just want so badly to get out of this mess as quickly as possible, rather than trusting that in the fullness of time and in ways we did not expect, God never forgets God’s promises. So, I know that at times I live as a functional atheist,

seeking the Comet pill, young Howard Thurman referred to.

- B. In the meantime, I've also realized the Functional Atheism piece comes into play when we forget, as our Genesis passage reminds us, that the Covenant is from generation to generation. We belong not to ourselves, but to those who came before us and those who will come after us. It is a reminder that because of our belief in God, because of our commitment to the Covenant, the decisions we make today will impact "a people yet unborn." On the contrary, if we say we are committed to God's Covenant and then act as if our behavior today does not matter for God's people tomorrow, then we are yet again Functional Atheists, cutting ourselves off from the generational promise.
- C. My good friend the Rev. Dr. Cheryl Lyndsay wrote this week, "The Covenant allows us to identify with those before us and future generations. We can consider how our actions responding to pandemic, climate, immigration, social inequities, and economic disparities, among other conditions we face communally will impact "a people yet unborn." Sarah reminds us that although covenants may be made with individuals, they are actually made for communities. God's covenant with Abram could not work without God's covenant with Sarai. God's covenant with Sarah and Abraham could not be fulfilled without the covenant extending from generation to generation. Again, to make it explicit, God clarifies, "I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you." (v. 7)

VIII. So, that is to say, we're all clumsy and awkward and God loves us anyway. But maybe more than that. We've been clumsy from generation to generation, and yet we are united in an everlasting covenant. Bound together as a human community.

IX. Let us be reminded that the everlasting covenant is of connection. We are bound together, as a human community, in relationship with one another with the promise of God at the center.

Thanks be to God. 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**

Beloved go forth from this place, even if you stay right where you are trusting that God will take care of us. Just as God took care of the clumsy people before us and just as God will take care of the clumsy people after us. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One God, Mother of us all. Amen.

### **Postlude**

*Passacaglia in G minor* by George F. Handel  
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](http://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.*

