



March 13, 2024

In Community, In A Weary World, Vespers Service
6:30 p.m.

St. John Ev. Lutheran Church, ELCA

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WELCOME

CALL TO WORSHIP

Blessed be the Holy Trinity † one God, who journeys with us these forty days, and sustains us with the gift of grace. **Amen.**

OPENING DIALOGUE

Behold, unveiled the vesper skies: the evening has begun.

Let prayer and praise like incense rise as sets the golden sun.

How blest are you, all loving God, who weaves both day and night.

A starry mantle for our road, the shadow and the light.

Stay with us, Christ, our rest prepare as labor ebbs with night.

And holy dreams woven with prayer till dawns the splendid light.

CONFESSION AND FORGIVENESS

God desires truth in our inward being, receiving us as we are, broken and flawed. Seeking God's mercy, let us confess our sins before God.

Silence is kept for reflection.

Gracious God,

Have mercy on us. We confess that we have turned away from you, knowingly and unknowingly. We have wandered from your abundant life. We have strayed from your love for all people. Turn us back to you. Give us new hearts and right spirits, that we may find what is pleasing to you, and dwell in your house forever. Amen.

Receive this good news: God turns to you in love. Your sins are forgiven in the name of † Jesus Christ.

Thanks be to God.

God, Who Made the Earth and Heaven

1 God, who made the earth and heav-en, dark-ness and light:
 2 And when morn a-gain shall call us to run life's way,
 3 Guard us wak-ing, guard us sleep-ing, and, when we die,
 4 Ho-ly Fa-ther, throned in heav-en, all-ho-ly Son,

you the day for work have giv-en, for rest the night.
 may we still, what-e'er be-fall us, your will o-bey,
 may we in your might-y keep-ing all peace-ful lie.
 Ho-ly Spir-it, free-ly giv-en, blest Three in One:

May your an-gel guards de-fend us, slum-ber sweet your mer-cy send us,
 From the pow'r of e-vil hide us, in the nar-row path-way guide us,
 When the last dread call shall wake us, then, O Lord, do not for-sake us,
 grant us grace, we now im-plore you, till we lay our crowns be-fore you

ho-ly dreams and hopes at-tend us all through the night.
 nev-er be your smile de-nied us all through the day.
 but to reign in glo-ry take us with you on high.
 and in wor-thier strains a-dore you while a-ges run.

Text: Reginald Heber, 1783–1826, st. 1, alt.; William Mercer, 1811–1873, sts. 2, 4, alt.; Richard Whately, 1787–1863, st. 3, alt.
 Music: AR HYD Y NOS, Welsh traditional; arr. Ralph Vaughan Williams, 1872–1958
 Outside USA: Arr. from *The English Hymnal*, © Oxford University Press 1906.

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PRAYER

Almighty God,

Your love never fails, and you can turn the shadow of death into daybreak. Help us to receive your word with believing hearts, so that, confident in your promises, we may have hope and be lifted out of sorrow into the joy and peace of your presence; through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

Amen.

READING: Isaiah 40:1, 28-31

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. ²⁸ Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. God does not faint or grow weary; the Creator's understanding is unsearchable.²⁹ God gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless.³⁰ Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted,³¹ but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

SERMON

HYMN OF THE DAY

On Eagle's Wings (ELW 787)... I'm sorry these lyrics are unavailable.

PRAYER

God of the Universe,

We give thanks that your promises are true, and that you are faithful. May we find joy through giving and delight in our offering. Prepare our hearts to give freely and cheerfully. Breathe life into the seeds we sow, allowing them to grow into well-watered, fruitful trees of life. Bless us and keep us, make your face shine upon us. Turn your face towards us and give us peace.

Through Jesus Christ we pray.

Amen.

INVITATION TO THE OFFERING

The God who speaks and summons the earth into being now speaks to us, calling us to offer of ourselves.

Let the Vineyards Be Fruitful

Offering Song



Let the vine-yards be fruit-ful, Lord, and fill to the brim our cup of



bles-sing. Gath-er a har-vest from the seeds that were sown, that



we may be fed with the bread of life. Gath-er the hopes and dreams of



all; u-nite them with the prayers we of-fer. Grace our ta-ble



with your pres-ence, and give us a fore-taste of the feast to come.

Text: John W. Arthur, 1922-1980

Music: Ronald A. Nelson, b. 1927

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OFFERING PRAYER & LORD'S PRAYER

Gracious God,

Our treasures come only from you. It is only through your goodness, that we have received so much. We came into this life with nothing, and we leave the same way. Guide us, and inspire us, to share ourselves and the resources we have. Gather us together and teach us to pray as Jesus taught.

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 trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.

PEACE

The peace of Christ be with you always.

And also with you.

Watch, O Lord

Watch, O Lord, with all those a - wake this night,
 watch, O Lord, with all those who weep; give your
 an - gels and saints charge o - ver all who sleep.

All

1 Tend your	ail - ing ones:	
2 Soothe your	suf - f'ring ones:	in your love, Lord.
3 Hold your	griev - ing ones:	
4 Guard your	lit - tle ones:	

All

Rest your	wea - ry ones:	
Heal af -	flict - ed ones:	in your love, Lord.
Raise your	fall - en ones:	
Guide your	search - ing ones:	

All Refrain

Bless your	dy - ing ones:	
Shield your	joy - ous ones:	in your love, O Lord of all.
Mend your	bro - ken ones:	
Grant us	all your peace:	

Text: Marty Haugen, b. 1950, based on a prayer attributed to Augustine
 Music: WATCH, O LORD, Marty Haugen
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BLESSING

May God wrap you in love each night, providing you peace and rest,
And while you sleep may God weave strength & courage into every breath.
May you meet the morning with resilient vigor, ready for come what may,
And may the light of Christ fill your heart with joy every single day.
May the Spirit shine on you with favor, love, and never-ending grace
And may the Three In † One, bless you on this Lenten journey,
And in every single place.

Amen.

Just a Closer Walk with Thee



Refrain Just a clos - er walk with thee, grant it, Je - sus, is my plea;
1 I am weak but thou art strong: Je - sus, keep me from all wrong;
2 Through this world of toil and snares, if I fal - ter, Lord, who cares?
3 When my fee - ble life is o'er, time for me will be no more;



dai - ly walk - ing close to thee, let it be, dear Lord, let it be.
I'll be sat - is - fied as long as I walk, let me walk close to thee. *Ref.*
Who with me my bur - den shares? None but thee, dear Lord, none but thee. *Ref.*
guide me gent - ly, safe - ly o'er to thy king - dom shore, to thy shore. *Ref.*



Text: North American traditional
Music: CLOSER WALK, North American traditional

DISMISSAL

Go in peace. Serve in love.

Thanks be to God.

Lenten Devotional, from ELCA World Hunger (taken from)

https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/ELCA_World_Hunger_Lent_Study_2024.pdf

Restoration

This week's recommended readings: Numbers 21:4-9; Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22
Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21

The first reading for this fourth week of Lent is from the book of Numbers. The Israelites have been on their exodus from Egypt to the Promised Land for years, and the goal is nigh. They have received the law from God through Moses at Sinai and are now on the final leg of their journey. Yet rather than being hopeful and eager, they "became discouraged" (Numbers 21:4), complaining about Moses' leadership and even their "miserable food" (21:5). God's response is inventive, if not entirely gracious: "poisonous serpents" sent by God "bit the people, so that many Israelites died" (21:6). The people repent, Moses prays, and God grants Moses a staff that will heal all who are bitten. It's not the kindest of stories. Nor is it the easiest story to explore as we continue our study of encounters with God. What exactly is being encountered here, besides a seemingly devious and vengeful God who sends venomous serpents to kill people, then rescues them?

The psalmist gives the story a different spin, omitting any mention of the venomous snakes and lifting up the healing of God, who heard the cries of the people and "saved them from their distress" (107:19). Despite the psalmist's sanitized take, this pattern can be found throughout the story of the exodus. God rescues the people, the people turn on God, God punishes them, they repent, God shows mercy. Over and over and over.

These biblical narratives are often used to extol the merciful nature of God, who repeatedly forgives the people despite their sin. Truly, God does show mercy. But this might be cold comfort to the Israelites killed by snakebites. "Mercy" may not be the only lesson implicit in the people's journey with God. The exodus begins in Egypt, where God's people are enslaved and oppressed. God seeks out Moses to lead the people, lays low the unjust Pharaoh and accompanies the people across the wilderness for generations, providing food, water and safety along the way. The people are often ungrateful and at times even spiteful, turning to idolatry in their frustration and despair. Yet God continues to lead and provide. Why? Simply put, God is invested in this community. God has a vested interest in its future, and this faithfulness to the people the Israelites will become supplies the theme for this week's study. Despite the violence of the story as recorded in Numbers, there is a lesson here about what it means to encounter God in the restoration of relationships.

The covenant between God and the people leaves both parties vulnerable to the other. By leading them from Egypt and forging a covenant with them, God has tied their futures together.

God has a plan and has invested much to ensure that the people will be part of it. This people, this nation, is God's future. The provisions God grants are not mere merciful gifts but further investments toward a future shared by God and the people who will become Israel.

Of course, the church is not God; we are spiritual descendants of the wandering Hebrews, dependent still on God's promise of this future. Yet there may be something we can learn here about what it means to pursue a promise of hope and restoration.

Often we see the virtues of mercy and grace in the church's work to end hunger. Food, clothing, shelter and cash donations are often interpreted as mercies showered on suffering people or as gifts offered to neighbors in need. But in reality our response to hunger surpasses a desire to meet immediate needs. In our Lutheran faith, meeting others' needs is a response to the grace we have received from God, the grace that restores our relationship with our Creator. We are set free from worrying about our relationship with God, from feeling as if we aren't good enough or loved enough. The grace of Jesus Christ sets us free from focusing on ourselves so that we can freely focus on others. In other words, God restores our relationship with God so that we can restore our right relationships with one another.

Yet, in true Lutheran fashion, we aren't really the ones doing the restoring; God is working within and through us, restoring our relationships with each other and all creation. That's what makes grace so complex. Grace is the "stuff" that restores our relationships with God or our neighbors.

Serving the neighbor is one step toward that restoration. In its most authentic form, service is a foretaste of the full restoration we will experience when the promise of God is fulfilled. Today we dine together as neighbors at the table of a community meal. Tomorrow we shall dine together as the beloved of God at the banquet.

There is something to be learned here about the shape service ought to take. When we understand serving our neighbor as an obligation commanded by God or as something we do because it is "right," we miss what service is really about. Responding to hunger is not about fulfilling God's law (as Lutherans, we know we can't do that anyway). Responding to hunger is about restoring our community and world.

It is as much about the future God is building through us as it is about the present needs we are meeting through each other today. At just 14, Lalistu knows the importance of restoring community. Lalistu's family was one of the poorest in their town in Ethiopia. Both her parents are HIV-positive, and the stigma surrounding HIV and AIDS isolated Lalistu's family from their community and kept them from earning enough money to feed themselves. The Central Synod Development Department of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY) provided food for the family and school supplies for Lalistu and her brother. Funded in part by ELCA World Hunger, the project supports 80 orphans and vulnerable children in the Oromia region of Ethiopia, providing them with school supplies, food, clothing and other basic

needs for survival. In addition, the project leaders work with communities to help them better understand the needs of people living with HIV and AIDS.

With this support Lalistu and her brother have excelled in school. Their mother has found work selling and trading goods, and the family has gotten support to start building their own home. Instead of relying on relatives for their survival, Lalistu and her family can look ahead to a time when they will have access to the things they need. The program has not only inspired their hope for a brighter economic and educational future; it has helped to change the perceptions and attitudes of people in their community. Instead of feeling isolated, Lalistu and her family now feel accepted by their neighbors.

This restoration of community relationships is critically important. The stigma surrounding HIV and AIDS, like the stigma that often accompanies hunger and poverty, can create huge obstacles for those who are stigmatized. They may be less likely to seek medical treatment or acquire nutritional support, and more likely to face hunger or poverty in the future. We experience this over and over again, whether it is the stigma faced by Lalistu's parents and other people living with HIV in countries around the world or the stigma experienced by the clients of food pantries. Feeding someone or helping them find work can go only so far if the community in which they are fed or employed continually excludes, marginalizes or discriminates against them.

Simply put, we cannot end hunger if our communities remain places of exclusion, fear or stigma. If the ministries we support and participate in are to be meaningful and authentic, they must be what God calls them to be: sites where God is encountered through the experience of restoration. Ministry in response to hunger is ministry in response to the promise that God is drawing us all together toward a reconciled and restored future. Every meal served, every neighbor heard and every new relationship built in the context of service gives us a foretaste of the fullness of life to which God will restore us and our world. When this happens, our service will change. We will change. And our communities will change. God makes that ongoing restoration possible by investing in a future when hunger will be no more. How might our work as church together change when we see it as not merely a "good thing" but also an investment in this shared future?

Reflection questions:

- How might stigma or exclusion make it more difficult for a family such as Lalistu's to overcome hunger and poverty?
- What does it mean to believe that God is invested in our future?
- How might our understanding of hunger ministries change when we view them as a restoration of community?
- How are people experiencing hunger or poverty stigmatized in your community? What has the church done or what could it do to change this?