



March 6, 2024
In Community With Our Neighbor, Vespers Service
6:30 p.m.

St. John Ev. Lutheran Church, ELCA

Reverend Maggie Westaby

5304 N 44th Ave

Wausau, Wisconsin 54401

Web Address: stjohnwausau.org

E-mail: pastor.maggie.westaby@gmail.com

Email: stjohnwausau@msn.com

Office: (715) 675-6950

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.

All Praise to Thee, My God, This Night

The musical score is written for voice and piano. It features a treble and bass clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The melody is primarily in the treble clef, with piano accompaniment in the bass clef. The score is divided into two systems, each with a vocal line and a piano accompaniment line. The lyrics are printed below the vocal line. The first system includes a first ending marked with '1*' and a second ending marked with '2'. The second system includes a third ending marked with '3' and a fourth ending marked with '4'. The lyrics are as follows:

1 All praise to thee, my God, this night for all the bless-ings of the light.
2 For - give me, Lord, for thy dear Son, the ill that I this day have done;
3 Teach me to live, that I may dread the grave as lit - tle as my bed.
4 Oh, may my soul in thee re - pose, and may sweet sleep mine eye-lids close,
5 Praise God, from whom all bless-ings flow; praise God, all crea-tures here be - low;

Keep me, oh, keep me, King of kings, be - neath thine own al - might - y wings.
that with the world, my - self, and thee, I, ere I sleep, at peace may be.
Teach me to die, that so I may rise glo - rious at the awe - some day.
sleep that shall me more vig - rous make to serve my God when I a - wake!
praise God a - bove, ye heav' n - ly host; praise Fa - ther, Son, and Ho - ly Ghost.

** May be sung in canon.*

Text: Thomas Ken, 1637–1711, alt.
Music: TALLIS' CANON, Thomas Tallis, 1505–1585

PRAYER

Abiding God,

You call us into human communities to serve and be served by one another. Open our hearts to the needs of all our neighbors, and teach us to recognize the gifts you have given each of us to use in service to others. In Jesus' name we pray.

Amen.

GOSPEL: Mark 2:1-12

The holy gospel according to Mark.

Glory to you, O Lord.

When he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. ² So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door, and he was speaking the word to them. ³ Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. ⁴ And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him, and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay. ⁵ When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Child, your sins are forgiven.” ⁶ Now some of the scribes were sitting there questioning in their hearts, ⁷ “Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?” ⁸ At once Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were discussing these questions among themselves, and he said to them, “Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? ⁹ Which is easier: to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Stand up and take your mat and walk’? ¹⁰ But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—he said to the paralytic— ¹¹ “I say to you, stand up, take your mat, and go to your home.” ¹² And he stood up and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them, so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, “We have never seen anything like this!”
The Gospel of The Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ.

SERMON

All Are Welcome



1 Let us build a house where love can dwell and all can safe - ly
 2 Let us build a house where proph-ets speak, and words are strong and
 3 Let us build a house where love is found in wa - ter, wine and
 4 Let us build a house where hands will reach be - yond the wood and
 5 Let us build a house where all are named, their songs and vi - sions



live, a place where saints and chil - dren tell how
 true, where all God's chil - dren dare to seek to
 wheat: a ban - quet hall on ho - ly ground where
 stone to heal and strength - en, serve and teach, and
 heard and loved and trea - sured, taught and claimed as



hearts learn to for - give. Built of hopes and dreams and
 dream God's reign a - new. Here the cross shall stand as
 peace and jus - tice meet. Here the love of God, through
 live the Word they've known. Here the out - cast and the
 words with - in the Word. Built of tears and cries and



vi - sions, rock of faith and vault of grace; here the love of
 wit - ness and as sym - bol of God's grace; here as one we
 Je - sus, is re - vealed in time and space; as we share in
 strang-er bear the im - age of God's face; let us bring an
 laugh-ter, prayers of faith and songs of grace, let this house pro -



Christ shall end di - vi - sions:
 claim the faith of Je - sus:
 Christ the feast that frees us: All are wel - come,
 end to fear and dan - ger:
 claim from floor to raf - ter:



all are wel - come, all are wel - come in this place.

Text: Marty Haugen, b. 1950
 Music: TWO GAWS, Marty Haugen
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PRAYERS

God is our light and our salvation,

Our refuge and our stronghold.

From the rising of the sun to its setting,

We praise your name, O God.

For with you is the fountain of life,

And in your light, we see light.

Silence is kept for reflection.

Holy God, you are with us both day and night, in twilight, sunrise, and sunset. With your watchful eye and loving heart, comfort all your creation this night. Tend your ailing ones, sooth your suffering ones, hold your grieving ones, guard your little ones. Rest your weary ones, heal afflicted ones, raise your fallen ones, and guide your searching ones. Watchful God,

Hear our prayer.

You fashioned a world in which lands and waterways, plants and animals, together meet the needs of all that you made. We pray that such vitality may blossom around the globe. Bless those who work the soil and who manage animals. Uphold their cities, towns, and villages. Nurture bees and other pollinators. Protect farmlands and ranches from drought and flood. Free children from forced labor in the fields. Grant an economy that can sustain those families who treasure rural life. Teach us how to share with everyone the benefits of each harvest, and accept our gratitude for all the sustenance you provide. Creator God,

Hear our prayer.

You taught your ancient people to seek the welfare of the cities in which they live. We commend our neighborhood to your care, that it might be kept free from social strife and decay. Give us strength of purpose and concern for others, that we may create here a community of justice and peace where your will may be done. Gather us together by the power of your Holy Spirit, 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.

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
bless-ing. 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

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. May these offerings be used for the goodness of your creation.

Amen.

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.

SENDING HYMN

We Are Called (ELW 720)... I'm sorry for the inconvenience, but these lyrics are not available.

DISMISSAL

Go in peace. Serve in love.

Thanks be to God.

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Reflection for today's theme: in community with our neighbor:

- Are there new ways God is calling you to be in community with your neighbor?
- How do you feel cared for by your community?
- What are ways you care for your community?

Lenten Devotional, from ELCA World Hunger (taken from)

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

Crucifixion

This week's recommended readings: Exodus 20:1-17, Psalm 19, 1 Corinthians 1:18-25, John 2:13-22

"We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles." —1 Corinthians 1:23

In this week of Lent, having reflected on encountering God in reconciliation and in transfiguration, we turn toward Paul's message of "Christ crucified" and reflect on what it means to encounter God in crucifixion, to be confronted with our own participation in systemic oppression.

Founded in 1888, Bethlehem Lutheran Church in the Central City neighborhood of New Orleans, La., is the oldest historically Black ELCA congregation in the continental United States. The church has a long legacy of responding to the needs of its members and neighbors. One way Bethlehem carries on that legacy is through the Community Table, a feeding ministry that provides free, no-questions-asked gourmet meals every week. This ministry, which is supported by ELCA World Hunger, helps to meet the need for food in Central City. The median household income in Bethlehem's ZIP code is slightly more than \$26,189, less than one-third of the median household income in the United States (\$69,021 at the time of writing). More than 15% of the people in Orleans Parish are food-insecure.

With so many workers relying on the city's tourism and hospitality industry, Bethlehem Lutheran saw a rapid increase in the number of people needing food during the COVID-19 pandemic. Working with partners, the Community Table was able to expand, and by this spring it was providing a free lunch four times a week, serving over 600 meals weekly. As the need has increased, Bethlehem Lutheran has been able to meet it.

A key leader in helping the Community Table and Bethlehem respond during and after the pandemic was Chef De, who planned, coordinated, supervised, cooked and served hundreds of meals for people who came to the Table. "I don't think Bethlehem would have made it through the pandemic if it were not for Chef De," says the Rev. Ben Groth, pastor of Bethlehem Lutheran. "And I also believe it to be true that many of our neighbors would not have made it without her, too."

As noted by Mike Scott, a writer for the New Orleans Times-Picayune, the Central City neighborhood has a long, rich history: it is home to New Zion Baptist Church, where the Southern Christian Leadership Conference was formally incorporated. Yet, as Scott also writes,

by the early 2000s, Central City had become “defined [by some people] by its crime rate” and its “crushing poverty.”

Some people might easily let the community’s present challenges define its future. We see this often when cities are dealing with statistically high rates of poverty, food insecurity or crime.

Outsiders looking in dismiss such neighborhoods as nothing more than their statistics or decide they must be “saved” by the decisive action of political leaders.

Journeying together through Lent, we are invited to consider what it means for us today that God’s son was crucified 2,000 years ago. Lent has often been a season for us to take stock of our own sinfulness and need for repentance. In many ways the cross is a mirror, reflecting back to us our entanglement in sin. Yet the cross is also a lens, a way of perceiving and apprehending the world. All too frequently during Lent, we lose sight of the latter aspect.

As a lens, the cross shapes how we understand ourselves, our world and our communities. It reminds us that God is present in Jesus’ suffering and death on the cross. This doesn’t mean that suffering or death are God’s work or that there is something redemptive in suffering or death. Quite the contrary: a cross- shaped (cruciform) lens compels us to recognize suffering for what it is, to name it and confront it.

This is the foolishness Paul describes in his letter to the Corinthians. Who would ever recognize God in the broken, pierced and dying body of Christ? Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky, upon seeing a painting of a dead Christ, is reported to have remarked to his wife that such a painting could cause one to lose their faith.

This is what Paul means, in part, by the “foolishness” of the message of the cross (1 Corinthians 1:18). To preach the message of Christ crucified is foolishness to those who cannot fathom the presence of divinity within frailty or weakness, who cannot comprehend God as both actor and victim.

Yet that is precisely what the cross demands of us. To preach Christ crucified, to journey through Lent to the cross, is to bind ourselves to honesty, to the sort of truth-telling that names suffering and injustice for what they are yet still affirms the presence of God. For Central City and Bethlehem Lutheran Church, the message of Christ crucified affirms that stories of poverty or hunger aren’t the only stories being written or told

in the community. It may be foolishness to those on the outside looking in, but it is gospel truth for those who encounter God at a community table where neighbors prepare, provide and share meals.

To encounter God within the crucifixion is to be reminded that we cannot ignore the truth of suffering, hunger, poverty, violence, death and injustice in a world still waiting for the fullness of the reign of God. But to encounter God in this event is to be radically open to God’s presence

in this same as-yet-incomplete world. It is to seek God within our communities and one another, even as the world declares this seeking to be “foolishness.” It is to affirm with faithful certainty that in the stories of our neighbors and neighborhoods, God is being revealed to us in sometimes new and surprising ways.

Reflection questions:

- What do you think Paul means by “foolishness”?
- How does your perception of Central City or your own community change when you look at them through a cross- shaped lens?
- In what new or unexpected ways have you encountered God, especially as you faced your own “crosses”?
- What might it mean to “bind ourselves to honesty, to the sort of truth-telling that names suffering and injustice for what they are yet still affirms the presence of God”?