

**THE WORD FROM GILEAD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**  
**June 14, 2020; 11<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A**

**OLD TESTAMENT READING**

Genesis 18:1-15

<sup>1</sup> The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. <sup>2</sup> He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. <sup>3</sup> He said, "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. <sup>4</sup> Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. <sup>5</sup> Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on--since you have come to your servant." So they said, "Do as you have said." <sup>6</sup> And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes." <sup>7</sup> Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. <sup>8</sup> Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

<sup>9</sup> They said to him, "Where is your wife Sarah?" And he said, "There, in the tent." <sup>10</sup> Then one said, "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son." And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. <sup>11</sup> Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. <sup>12</sup> So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?" <sup>13</sup> The LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?'" <sup>14</sup> Is anything too wonderful for the LORD? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son." <sup>15</sup> But Sarah denied, saying, "I did not laugh"; for she was afraid. He said, "Oh yes, you did laugh."

**GOSPEL READING**

Matthew 10:1-14

<sup>1</sup> Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness. <sup>2</sup> These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; <sup>3</sup> Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; <sup>4</sup> Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him.

<sup>5</sup> These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, <sup>6</sup> but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. <sup>7</sup> As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' <sup>8</sup> Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment. <sup>9</sup> Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, <sup>10</sup> no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for laborers deserve their food. <sup>11</sup> Whatever town or village you enter, find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave. <sup>12</sup> As you enter the house, greet it. <sup>13</sup> If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. <sup>14</sup> If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town.

You bought a new refrigerator this week; did you know that? Gilead bought a refrigerator for the manse, where I live, and which you own and maintain. The old fridge went on the fritz and I got to shop online in the pandemic, and got a new one. You paid for it. Thank you. I'm very grateful for it.

I didn't get what I wanted. What I wanted was a white fridge with a freezer on top. Two doors, one for the fridge, one for the freezer. Boom. Done. No frills, no fuss. Not a fan of the stainless steel, multi-door gadgets that look like a robot is standing in the corner of the kitchen. I have had a white fridge with a freezer on top in every place I've ever lived, my whole life (except maybe my mom bought an avocado green one briefly in the 70's, but I've blocked that out). White, freezer on top, that is what a refrigerator is to me. But as Miss Othmar said in kindergarten, "You get what you get and you don't get upset." Turns out, today's more efficient refrigerators are bigger than they used to be, and what I wanted wouldn't fit through the manse door. And I went round and round on the phone with the salesman trying to find one that would fit, and I kid you not, my only choice at this moment was, you guessed it, Freezer on the Bottom, Stainless Steel, French Doors that open in the middle... and I love it. Looks great, works better than any I've ever had. Thank you. And that is the lesson for today.

I didn't want it. Couldn't have what I wanted, what I've always had. Today I'm grateful for the blessing of what I have. Today I have a new understanding of what a refrigerator is.

The Gilead Session met last week, and decided that out of an abundance of caution, we won't be opening the building for at least another month. When you've lived thirty minutes from the epicenter of a pandemic, you become careful. Plus, the New York State requirements for reopening require an enormous number of actions to be put in place to keep people safe. When we do come together again, it won't be as we fondly remember it.

March 8 was the last time we were gathered as a congregation in this sanctuary. That's 14 Sundays of socially really distant church, but who's counting? I am! 14 Sundays that have not felt like ordinary time, but you may have noticed that at the top of the bulletin, it says we're on the 11<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time. I generally follow a three-year cycle of Scripture readings to guide our study on Sundays (it's called the Common Lectionary, and many Protestant and Catholic pastors follow this cycle, to provide a discipline and structure for weekly worship) The Lectionary readings are divided up into the Advent season, the Christmas season, Ordinary Time, Lent, the Easter season and Pentecost, and then Ordinary Time again. Today is an Ordinary Sunday, which is not to suggest that it is unimportant or insignificant, but that it is typical of our common weekly worship. In fact, in our order of worship, those elements that we do each week, such as the Lord's Prayer, the Apostles' Creed, and the Gloria Patri, are called "ordinaries." The High Holy Days, as some refer to them, are extraordinary days.

There is theological significance to Ordinary Time. Celebrating “the good news of Christ’s death and resurrection, and the unfolding presence of the new creation,” hardly insignificant, is the norm, the ordinary business of the church. We are in the business of ordinarily seeking the extraordinary news of Christ. (Liturgical Year: The Worship of God. Supplemental Liturgical Resource 7. Prepared by the Ministry Unit on Theology and Worship, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the Cumberland Presbyterian Church. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992, p. 50)

<sup>13</sup> Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John and realized that they were uneducated and ordinary men, they were amazed and recognized them as companions of Jesus. (Acts 4:13)

So here we are in Ordinary Time, and many of us are thinking, I don’t like this Ordinary. Surely pandemics and disease and protests and the drastic need for change in our systems and in our hearts is not our ordinary time. Except it is. Has always been. This is a very hard time. But hard times have always been. Disease, death, protests and violence have always been. Always will be. Ordinary. But you know what else is ordinary? The extraordinary things that God can do with our times.

In our reading from the Gospel, the disciples are given miraculous powers to cast out unclean spirits and to cure every disease. Wow, right? You’d think they’d be superheroes, curing sickness, healing the lame, making the world perfect, but Jesus doesn’t pass out capes and magic wands. He says, walk from town to town, and rely on them to feed you, and guess what—with all your power, some will refuse to be healed. The power of the holy spirit to bring healing and joy requires a willing spirit. Don’t waste your time on negative, angry, people of darkness. Move on to more fruitful fields. They have their reward—the darkness they’ve chosen. So Jesus prophesies when he says, <sup>15</sup> **Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town.** (Matthew 10:15) And, he adds, you will have persecution, challenge, and horrific circumstance, even with the promise of the fruit of the covenant (Remember Abraham and Sarah, our elderly foreparents, overjoyed with the news of the fruit of their covenant, but talk about challenge! It’s hard enough to keep up with a toddler when you’re 25; imagine you’re 100). **When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next; for truly I tell you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.** (10:23) The message is to keep going. Keep spreading love, justice and the kingdom of grace. We still have work to do, and we will not finish our work until the time when Christ comes to redeem all things. **As you enter the house, greet it.** <sup>13</sup> **If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you.** (10:12-13) If you spread the Peace, you will in turn receive it. That’s how you survive the hard times. Give what you need to get. If it falls on deaf ears, don’t accept their negativity, just move on. (“Sorry, my friend, I don’t choose to be a supporting character in your drama today.”)

Our miraculous, extraordinary work of faith comes in Ordinarily challenging times. Abraham and Sarah, although prosperous, were old folks who couldn’t have kids, living out of a tent in the hot desert. That’s their ordinary, years after the Covenant of God was made with them. And visitors show up out of nowhere. Abraham didn’t know they were angels. In desert nomad culture, taking care of random travelers is ordinary

behavior. The cultural law of hospitality might keep you alive the next time you're traveling in between watering holes. Abe's immediate reaction? Set a place, we have guests. (As my friend Brother Ron from North Carolina used to call out when we talked about unexpected visitors, "Getch'er pants on, Paw, we got comp'ny!") The whole setting of this Old Testament appearance of God is miraculously ordinary. In the midst of your ordinary time, you will bear miraculous fruit, though it may seem laughable, or maybe cry-able, now.

It's a hard trial for us not to be able to worship and sing together, but even when we do come back together, with social distancing and safety measures, it won't be the ordinary we remember. We can't go back. We don't want to go back. Whatever trauma we go through in our lives, let's look for the new blessings. May our time in the wilderness never be wasted; find the new blessings. Years from now, when we look back on 2020, there are many wonderful things that will have resulted from this pain which we can't see now, but already we know our live-streaming worship is reaching greater numbers than we ever saw in church, with old friends and family tuning in from all over the country. That will continue even when we come back into the building. More meetings will be done online, which will be able to include folks who can't travel. And as hard as it is to see videos of our Black brothers and sisters being mistreated, we can't avert our eyes, because now we're seeing the unjust reality they live every day, and it's time to face what we didn't have the vision to see before.

I often hear people nostalgically speaking of a golden time gone by, and I think of my work with our Presbytery helping struggling churches look for a new minister. Frequently, they'll say they want to hire a young fella with energy who can attract the young people back to the church, and what they mean is, a white male pastor who will do all the things that worked in the 1950's, the good old days of church. Friends, the 1950's are long gone, as is the church of those days, and the people it served. I'm glad there are those who have fond memories of those days, but church is never going to look like that again, because we aren't those people. Church experts have been saying for decades that the 21<sup>st</sup> century church would be radically different, but 20 years in, no one knew quite how. Maybe in 2020 we get to find out, and while I definitely want to worship in the same space with you again, I don't want to go back to the last century. The good old days weren't. Not if you were a woman who felt called into ministry; you got to teach Sunday School. The good old days weren't good for people of color, people who weren't heterosexual, or the poor or disabled. If you go down the list that Gilead publishes at the top of our weekly bulletin, which says, "We welcome all regardless of race, ethnic heritage, national origin, age, ability, gender, marital status, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic standing;" each of those categories is specified because they are frequently NOT welcomed to churches, not in the good old days of the 1950's nor the good old days of pre-COVID 2020.

"Behold, I am about to do a new thing," says the Lord in Isaiah 43:19. That's not a promise of restoring what was lost. It's a new thing, not a better version of the old. It may bring things that are better, but there will be loss. 2 Corinthians, promising that we are made new in Christ, says, "Everything old has passed away; everything has become

new.” (5:17) “I once was lost, but now I’m found; was blind, but now I see” isn’t about how terrible my life was and God fixed it. “Amazing Grace” is a universal hymn we all know, to which we can all relate, whether we’re in prison or the country club; whatever our circumstance, we realize that we have been lost in our poverty, lost in our wealth, lost somewhere in the middle, and now we see, now we get it. Through many dangers, toils and snares, we have come, and there will be more toils and snares yet, but grace will lead us home.

When an addict loses home and family, but finally stumbles into recovery, there will be regret always for the damages of the past, but also a new sense of what life is, a new chance to live happy, joyous and free, or as the Bible says, “abundantly.”

New blessings spring forth like fruit blossoming from the trees, but they don’t erase the pain of loss. What they bring is light to the darkness. This week in Louisville, the city unanimously passed “Breonna’s Law, named in honor of police-shooting victim Breonna Taylor. The new law outlaws the “no-knock” warrants that resulted in her death last March, and it will save lives. But her family will go on without Breonna.

This is Pride Month, which celebrates the inclusion of LGBTQ+ members, and we are proud at Gilead to be a church that is Welcoming. June is Pride Month because it was in June of 1969 that a police raid at the Stonewall Inn in Manhattan’s Greenwich Village started protests and riots as the gay community fought back at the violence of the police. Today that fearful and painful moment in time is considered to be one of the beginnings of the gay liberation movement. May the fear and pain of today give birth to greater freedom in the future.

As I’ve listened to friends and colleagues discussing the Black Lives Matter demonstrations this month, it’s frustrating to hear people say that because there have been marches and rallies for racism and civil rights in the past, and promises of change, that the cries for justice these last weeks are somehow fruitless and wasted. “Nothing has changed,” they say. I don’t believe it. Our Civil Rights heroes, allies, and unremembered martyrs have brought enormous change that has brought us to this moment. That there’s enormous work still to do is just what Jesus promised. **“Truly I tell you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.”** But make no mistake; he’s with us in the work. Behold, the Lord is about to do a new thing. The thing of the thing is, we’re the Body of Christ, and the Lord has given us the Spirit of God on Pentecost, and told us to go and change the world. The New Thing is us. The only thing that can stop the movement towards equality and righteousness is our belief that it can’t be done, so that we stop trying. Believe it can be done; it is being done. I feel it. There’s a new thing happening right now that is going to remake ordinary. It starts here, with me, you, us.

Let’s make speaking out for justice an ordinary part of who we are. Let’s make changing unjust systems our norm. Let’s make loving our police with support and accountability just what we do. Let’s make times of upheaval the opportunities we’ve been looking for to turn the world upside down with grace. Let’s not try to make

America great again, like that's an either/or state based on circumstance, but embrace the greatness of our country that has always been, willing to cherish the best of us, and challenge the worst of us, always willing to shift to live into our ideals of freedom and equality for all. Let's make a once-in-a-century pandemic just the latest call for healing in the world that the ordinary disciples of Christ have been given the power to create for two millennia. Let's make choosing faith, even with exhaustion and frayed nerves, how we get out of bed in the morning.

Let us go proclaim the good news to all the nations, saying, "The kingdom of heaven has come near," for lo, it is just a Tuesday around here. Miracles, grace, hope, light and love? Ordinary time.

Amen.