



Reflections for the 6th Sunday of Easter May 17, 2020

Good morning church and Facebook friends, I am Lisa Williams the pastor of the San Pedro United Methodist Church and we are glad to be worshipping with you today. This is indeed the day that the Lord has made, so let us honor this gift and allow us to be glad in it.

It is with much sadness that I share with you the passing of Doris Doughty. She was a long time member of our church. She passed away peacefully in her home on Friday, May 16 surrounded by her nieces, Sandy and Lee. They will remain at the house getting it ready so if you would like to send a card it may be mailed to: 2208 Mt. Shasta Drive, San Pedro CA 90732

We are grateful for your ongoing gifts so our church can remain in ministry and our mission of helping those in need. Thank you. If you would like to make a donation it can be sent to the church office at 580 W. 6th Street, San Pedro, CA 90731. Please be sure to check out this past week's newsletter about how scripture moved from words spoken from a pulpit to words that were actively living and breathing.

Let's start off the morning with a joke. The scene is nine year old boy named Joey and his mother driving the car. His mother asked him what did you learn in Sunday school today. "Well, mom, our teacher told us how God sent Moses behind enemy lines on a rescue mission to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. When he got to the Red Sea, he had his engineers build a pontoon bridge and all the people walked across safely. Then he used his walkie-talkie to radio headquarters for reinforcements. They sent bombers to blow up the bridge and all the Israelites were saved."

Joey's mother turns to him and says, "Now, Joey is that really what your teacher taught you?"

"Well, no, Mom. But if I told it the way the teacher did, you'd never believe it!"

Let us pray: Gracious and loving God we come to you this morning with many thoughts on our hearts and minds. Maybe we come not believing in the events of our world, maybe we come with sadness for a loss of a loved one, maybe we come full of gratitude for the things God has provided thus far. No matter how or when we come, we come to you O Holy One. You are the one who can give us comfort and peace. Open our hearts and minds to hear your words. Amen.

We are conditioned to think of the Promise Land as a piece of real estate. What if this land of milk and honey is something deeper than a geographical destination? What if the

Promised Land is not only a physical location but also an interior awareness? What if the Promised Land is also understood as an inner spacious place where one experience safety, security and peace?ⁱ

During this time of social distancing, washing our hands and wearing our face coverings we are yearning, probably more than ever before for spacious places where we can experience safety, security and peace.

The Christian contemplative Thomas Merton urges us to read the Psalm as a map of inner experience. “There is no aspect of the interior life, no kind of religious experience, no spiritual need of (human beings) that is not depicted and lived out in the Psalms.”ⁱⁱ

Let’s hear what the psalmist has to say about a community of faith reflecting on God’s present salvation. Psalm 66:8-20

⁸ Bless our God, O peoples,
let the sound of his praise be heard,
⁹ who has kept us among the living,
and has not let our feet slip.
¹⁰ For you, O God, have tested us;
you have tried us as silver is tried.
¹¹ You brought us into the net;
you laid burdens on our backs;
¹² you let people ride over our heads;
we went through fire and through water;
yet you have brought us out to a spacious place.^[a]
¹³ I will come into your house with burnt offerings;
I will pay you my vows,
¹⁴ those that my lips uttered
and my mouth promised when I was in trouble.
¹⁵ I will offer to you burnt offerings of fatlings,
with the smoke of the sacrifice of rams;
I will make an offering of bulls and goats. *Selah*
¹⁶ Come and hear, all you who fear God,
and I will tell what he has done for me.
¹⁷ I cried aloud to him,
and he was extolled with my tongue.

¹⁸If I had cherished iniquity in my heart,
the Lord would not have listened.

¹⁹But truly God has listened;
he has given heed to the words of my prayer.

²⁰Blessed be God,
because he has not rejected my prayer
or removed his steadfast love from me.

Isn't this beautiful? There are a few nuggets that I pulled out from our Psalm today: 1) how do we measure spiritual growth? 2) The reality that we cannot "get out of it" instead we "have to go through it." and finally 3) The importance of sharing our testimony

The psalmist answers that our spiritual growth is measured by the ways we embody prayer. How we pray indicates our maturity level. If when we pray it is done as a monologue where we seek ultimate attention for our own needs that would be considered infantile. Instead we are encouraged to focus our attention on the ultimate need of God. You may remember from last week the words by Margaret Gibb, "We must move away from asking God to take care of the things that are breaking our hearts to praying about the things that are breaking God's heart."

The psalmist has laid out a beautiful invitation, one that all of us I am sure want to accept. Let me be honest – any invitation right now during this pandemic is one I want to RSVP to. Yes, I miss seeing all of you and the simple things like sharing in a cup of coffee or a meal together! This invitation that Psalmist is referring to is how we can work on our spiritual maturity. The caveat in tiny small print is that we must work hard at it. Work hard (whinny voice), this sounds like a marketing tool like when they try to get me to exercise daily. But when we do we all recognize the rewards – could we see results and rewards from prayer also? The psalmist has this to say "Truly God has listened; he has given heed to the words of my prayer." (v.9)

The second nugget addresses the reality that we cannot "get out of it" instead we "have to go through it." "For you, O God, have tested us; you have tried us as silver is tried... We went through fire and through water; yet you have brought us out to a spacious place." Can the Promised Land be an inner spacious place where one experiences safety, security and peace? Walking in the wilderness can be difficult. Many of us feel like that is what is happening to our world right now. Walking, wondering, taking steps forward and then retreating and taking 3 steps back. For me, this is one of the most devastating experiences I have encountered.

Our Bishop Grant Hagya did a worship service that you can listen to on the UMCSanPedro.org website. He addressed our pandemic and the changes that the church is experiencing and will experience in the years to come. He says, "we will not be back to worshipping together for a long time." There are many steps that will need to take place before that can happen. Know that your church leadership is already in conversation about what that

might look like. Interestingly the Bishop quoted a statistic that said 40% of the mainstream churches will not exist in 30 years. “What about the next 30 months, he says?” He continued that this will have nothing to do with the size of the church but everything to do with the churches ability to be innovative and reimagine what it means to be disciples in our world. How can we move beyond ourselves to help those in need? While walking in the wilderness we can work on the inner space so when the time is right we are ready to cross over to the Promise Land and reunite in worship.

This week I did a short video from the steps of our church. I used sidewalk chalk and made a big heart and wrote the words “LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR.” As we hear of restaurants and business slowly opening we ask “when can we worship together?” We feel helpless during this time of isolation; we desperately want to be together in worship. Yet, right now we are being called to live out one of Jesus’ greatest commandments and that is to LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR which for the church right now means safer at home.

The final nugget is the beauty of sharing our testimony. Some people say, “I don’t like to talk about my faith I will let my deeds speak for me.” That may be good for some, but the psalmist challenges us, “Come and hear, all you who fear God, and I will tell you what he has done for me.” (v.16)

On Easter Sunday we talked about God’s steadfast love enduring in our lives. I invited you to think about your life and write after each thought “God’s steadfast love endures forever.” I received this letter in the mail from Yvonne Shelton, this is her testimony of God’s love and endurance. I would like to share it with you today.

Remembering My Youth, by Yvonne Shelton – May, 2020

The day my father, an ordained minister, baptized me a 7 years old.

“God’s steadfast love endures forever.”

Living 7 miles in the country with no electricity, no running water, and the evenings were very dark. The only light was from the heavens above, so full of stars that you couldn’t put a pin between them. My mother and father would sit on the front porch, while my sister and I were in the yard catching lighting bugs putting them in a fruit jar. My dad would play hymns on his cornet. We would hear from our neighbors who lived a mile away that they heard the hymns that he played.

“God’s steadfast love endures forever.”

When 10 years old that sad day was when my Daddy’s life was ended in a train wreck leaving my Mother with no income to raise my sister and me.

“God’s steadfast love endures forever.”

I remember the wonderful times I had at the Christian Service camps.

“God’s steadfast love endures forever.”

I was 15 years old when World War II started in December 1941. I was babysitting. My employer entertained a soldier from Texas who was in the Army Air Force. All leaves were canceled because of December 7th. I got to see him three times before he was sent on the first trip The Queen Mary made to Australia. He then was sent to the jungles in New Guinea for 4 years. We corresponded for 6 months then the letters stopped coming. I prayed each night for three years that I would hear from him again. Each week I could call home to my Mother to see if I received a letter. Then one day in March 1945 the letter came. My mother said “What a thrill, I read it.” Then she read it to me over the phone.

We started corresponding again and he was sent back to the states (California) in May and we married in September that year and had 51 happy years together.

“God’s steadfast love endures forever.”

GOD IS GOOD

God he has not rejected our prayer nor has God removed his steadfast love from our lives. God is patient, God is listening and God is holding each of us exactly where we need to be for this day making room for those spacious places where we can experience safety, security and peace. Amen.

ⁱ Robert V. Thompson, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 2, (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky), 79.

ⁱⁱ Thomas Merton, *Praying the Psalms* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press 1956), 44.