

BETHEL MURDOCH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
9602 Murdoch-Goshen Road, Loveland, OH 45140
October 31, 2021, 10:30 a.m.
Celebrating 207 years of Faithful Service to Our God
The Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost
Reformation Sunday

We Enter Into God's Presence

WELCOME

L: This is the day that the Lord has made.

P: Let us rejoice and be glad in it!

THE PEACE

L: Since God has forgiven us in Christ, let us forgive one another.
The peace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

P: And also with you.

“SURELY THE PRESENCE”

Surely the presence of the LORD is in this place.

I can feel His mighty power and His grace.

I can hear the brush of angel's wings, I see glory on each face.

Surely the presence of the LORD is in this place.

CALL TO WORSHIP

L: Jesus said: Those who love me will keep my word,

P: and my Father will love them,

L: and we will come to them,

P: and make our home with them.

OPENING PRAYER

God of peace, you taught us that in returning and rest we shall be saved, in quietness and in confidence shall be our strength. By the power of your Spirit lift us to your presence, where we may be still and know that you are God; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. **Amen.**

HYMN: B- 260 “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God”

1 A mighty fortress is our God, A bulwark never failing;
Our helper He, amid the flood Of mortal ills prevailing.
For still our ancient foe Doth seek to work us woe; His craft and

power are great, And armed with cruel hate, On earth is not his equal.

2 Did we in our own strength confide, Our striving would be losing,
Were not the right Man on our side, The Man of God's own choosing.
Dost ask who that may be? Christ Jesus, it is He; Lord Sabaoth
His name, From age to age the same; And He must win the battle.

3 And though this world, with devils filled, Should threaten to undo us,
We will not fear, for God has willed His truth to triumph through us.
The prince of darkness grim, We tremble not for him; His rage we
can endure, For lo! his doom is sure; One little word shall fell him.

4 That Word above all earthly powers No thanks to them abideth;
The Spirit and the gifts are ours Through Him who with us sideth.
Let goods and kindred go, This mortal life also; The body
they may kill: God's truth abideth still; His kingdom is forever!

CALL TO CONFESSION:

Remember that our Lord Jesus can sympathize with us in our weaknesses, since in every respect he was tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with boldness approach the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. Let us confess our sin before God and one another as we pray together saying,

PRAYER OF CONFESSION:

Eternal God, our judge and redeemer, we confess that we have tried to hide from you, for we have done wrong. We have lived for ourselves, and apart from you. We have turned from our neighbors, and refused to bear the burdens of others. We have ignored the pain of the world, and passed by the hungry, the poor, and the oppressed. In your great mercy forgive our sins and free us from selfishness, that we may choose your will and obey your commandments; through Jesus Christ our Savior.

SILENT PRAYER OF CONFESSION

ASSURANCE OF PARDON

L: Hear the good news! The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, that we might be dead to sin and alive to all that is good. I declare to you in the name of Jesus Christ, we are forgiven.

29 Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; 30 you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’

31 The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”

32 Then the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that ‘he is one, and besides him there is no other’; 33 and ‘to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,’ and ‘to love one’s neighbor as oneself,’—this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.”

34 When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” After that no one dared to ask him any question.

MESSAGE: *How Far Away Is Close Enough?*

Rev. Jim Brazell

When Jesus saw that the Scribe answered wisely, Jesus said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” After that no one dared to ask him any question.

Almost every reader and listener to that text interprets the crowd's response as, “*After that, no one dared to ask Jesus any question.*” But what if Mark had meant, “No one dared ask the Scribe any question?”

We directly face that grammatical error known as the indefinite antecedent, in which it is unclear what/or who is being modified by the description. The joke, I once knew a man with a wooden leg named Smith. The response – What was the name of the other leg? – demonstrates the power of indefiniteness, of uncertainty, to make our lives even more confused than they are already.

But what if we were able to question that Scribe, “*How do you feel to be not far from the kingdom of God?*” What might be the Scribe's responses? Most likely, the Scribe would quote further from the book of Deuteronomy 30:

Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. 12 It is not in heaven, that you should say, “Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?”

13 Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?" 14 No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe."

Jesus and the Scribe both seem to understand, the commandments, the Law, the Word of God, not as an external rule and requirement, Obey, or else. But an internal sense of connection and direction with and among the People of the Living God. Where God leads, they will follow, What God gives, they will steward, What God loves, the people return salvation with service to others.

So when the Scribe hears, "*You are not far from the kingdom of God,*" how does the Scribe hear these words? Does the Scribe hear it as a runner nearing the finish line; already close and getting closer with every stride?

Does the Scribe hear "*You are not far from the kingdom of God,*" as another way of saying, "Close but no cigar," Loser, Lost Soul for Eternity? Will the fate of the People of the Living God be remembered as Psalm 95 puts it, *Forty years I loathed that generation and said, "They are a people whose hearts go astray, and they do not regard my ways." Therefore in my anger I swore, "They shall not enter my rest."*

And even after Scribe ascertains his emotional response to Jesus' comment: Condemnation or invitation, how's he going to grasp that word, that commandment within his heart? How will he avoid the plight of his ancestors and enter into God's dominion, rule, and rest?

How to get close, closer, to God has been a question of faith since there have been believers. Limited mortals that we are, we keep telling ourselves that, if we try hard enough, our minds will be able to understand *and manipulate God to do our will*.

Or our hearts and souls will strive and succeed to unify ourselves with God. Again, God who goes to the Cross and returns, exceeds our greatest capacities for spirituality, mercy, justice, and love.

One historic way the Church attempted to draw nearer to the grace of God, historians call the Reformation. On this very day, October 31, 1517, German monk Martin Luther nailed his Ninety-five Theses on the door of the All Saints' Church in Wittenberg, Electorate of Saxony in the Holy Roman Empire.

His 95 Theses, Or Debating Points were intended to stir up the population and the church hierarchy to seek a closer walk with God, who saves us by grace and not by our works, which are, at best, human responses to the divine mercy we have already received.

It is worth noting that no one ever came to Wittenberg to debate 95 Theses with Martin Luther. But he was summoned to give account of himself. He refused to take back his statements, and thereby hangs the tale of the Reformation.

Luther lit the match that set a gospel fire through the church all over the world. Regional distinctions and national prides were already tugging against the Pope's authority over daily life and demanded offerings.

The 30 Years' War 1618-1648, a century after the Reformation's beginning, finally settled the questions of religion and civic rule stating how ever the prince worshiped, that's how the people worshiped.

The history and causes of this long conflict influenced the Founding Fathers and Mothers of the American Experiment to advocate separation of church and state, to promote freedom of religion, and to forbid a religious test for holding elected office.

Still, how does one church, one congregation, one soul come closer to Christ? When I entertain the question, I first ask, "How much of my life to I have to give up?" What are the pleasures and resources and benefits of my living that I must rip out of my way of life, in order to be a better Christian? Will it cost me a hand or an eye, or a treasure possession, or close family ties?

We set ourselves up to fail as Christians because we hear Jesus' words to the Scribe as if he were drawing a boundary, building a wall between Heaven and Earth, between speaker and listener.

What if we heard those words as invitation? Over the years, I have taken counsel and found comfort in the Shaker hymn, *'Tis the gift to be simple, 'tis the gift to be free, 'Tis the gift to come down where we ought to be, And when we find ourselves in the place just right, 'Twill be in the valley of love and delight.*

*When true simplicity is gain'd, To bow and to bend we shan't
be asham'd,
To turn, turn will be our delight, 'Till by turning, turning we come round right.*

When Joseph Brackett, Jr wrote the words and tune to this song in 1848, he claimed that God had inspired him to compose those lyrics and music. The song was largely unknown until Aaron Copland used it as a foundation for his 1944 piece *Appalachian Spring*, for choreographer Agnes De Mille.

Whenever I find myself in a jam, usually daily, I look and learn that most often, what I need to do is not work harder, That may be necessary, but what is more important is relaxing the pressures I place on myself.

The day before I wrote this sermon, I was extremely anxious about a zoom meeting for some coursework I'm taking. I was so anxious that I kept writing and ripping up, discarding page after page of sermon introduction paragraphs.

Nothing was good enough, and most were horrible. Finally, grace informed me that as long as I was worried, that sermon was not going to happen. So I continued to worry and figured that the next day, after the meeting, I would be free to turn again to this sermon. And got it done in one long sitting, before 2 PM.

Relaxing our hearts, hands and souls before God, to make small changes, one degree at a time is how we grow more closely to God. We keep facing and approaching the Living God, and one day will enjoy God forever. Amen.

We Respond with Thanksgiving

HYMN:B- 443 “O Christ, the Great Foundation”

1 O Christ, the great foundation On which your people stand
To preach Your true salvation In every age and land:
Pour out Your Holy Spirit To make us strong and pure,
To keep the faith unbroken As long as worlds endure.

2 Baptized in one confession, One church in all the earth.
We bear our Lord's impression, The sign of second birth:

One holy people gathered In love beyond our own,
By grace we were invited, By grace we make You known.

3 Where tyrants' hold is tightened, Where strong devour the weak,
Where innocents are frightened, The righteous fear to speak,
There let Your church awaking Attack the powers of sin
And, all their ramparts breaking, With You the victory win.

4 This is the moment glorious When He who once was dead
Shall lead His church victorious, Their champion and their head.
The Lord of all creation His heavenly kingdom brings,
The final consummation, The glory of all things.

AFFIRMATION OF FAITH

I believe in God the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the Father, and he will come again to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit; the holy catholic Church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. Amen. (*The Apostles' Creed-Ecumenical*)

OFFERING (Please remember to mail your offering to Bethel Murdoch Presbyterian Church, 9602 Murdoch Goshen Road, Loveland, Ohio 45140)

JOYS & CONCERNS OF THE CONGREGATION – (Please send your joys and concerns to the church email and we will publish them in the weekly ENews)

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Sovereign One, you live outside the constraints of space and time. You are infinite and we are deeply finite and mortal. Christ Jesus comes proclaiming your dominion that will not reach perfection until the age to come. Hear the prayers of this people, Holy Spirit, resolve and fulfill their cares until fear and care are no more.

We pray for the church, the personal witness to Jesus Christ on Earth. Bless this congregation and all groups and gatherings who call upon your name by whichever name they speak. Keep our hearts and faces

turned toward you, so that we need not look for a short cut or be tempted by selfish paths that turn only to our benefit.

Mighty Fortress, Strong Bulwark, protect all the people of this nation from assault by fists or falsehoods. Silence social media and human lips that spread false truth among us. Lift up leaders who hold themselves and ourselves accountable for the common good. Help us reach across aisles and turn handshakes into bridges that convey the common good.

Merciful Saviour, be with those who have lost more than they could ever replace, whether by fire or by flood, their lives have been forever changed. Fill them by your mercy that, through community, you shall supply what they lack. Fill them with hope and may each person be a source of help for another, and their neighborhood.

We give thanks for the communion of saints, that cloud of witnesses on earth and in heaven who witness to your glory in personal works of grace. Keep them close to us, so that we are won in Christ, until that day we are one in heaven.

Hear the particular prayers of our hearts O Lord, as you taught us to pray saying.

THE LORD'S PRAYER

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.

We are Sent Out to Love and Serve

HYMN: B- 261 “God of Compassion, in Mercy Befriend Us”

1 God of compassion, in mercy befriend us,
Giver of grace for our needs all-availing.
Wisdom and strength for each day Thou send us,
Patience untiring and courage unailing.

2 Wondering and lost, Thou has sought us and found us
Stilled our rude hearts with Thy word of consoling.
Wrap now Thy peace, like a mantle, around us,
Guarding our thoughts and our passions controlling.

3 How shall we stray, with Thy hand to direct us,
Thou who the stars in their courses are guiding?
What shall we fear, with Thy power to protect us,
We who walk forth in your greatness confiding?

Charge and Benediction

From ghosties and ghoulies and long-leggedybeasties, and things that go bump in the night.

P: *Good Lord, deliver us.*

Choral Amen

Postlude