

## GATHERING

### **Prelude**

### **Welcome**

Welcome to worship with FPC! We are glad you are here this morning.

If you are new here, we invite you to fill out a welcome card or email [secretary@fpcmissoula.org](mailto:secretary@fpcmissoula.org) with your information so we can get connected with you.

This is the day that the Lord has made: let us rejoice and be glad in it!  
Let us prepare our hearts and minds to worship and encounter our living God.

### **Call to Worship**

One: Our God is a God of power and strength!

**All: God has created each of us with tender care.**

One: Our God is a God of majesty and awe!

**All: God walks with each of us every step of the way.**

One: Our God is a God of glory and wonder!

**All: God loves each of us unconditionally.**

One: Our God calls us each by name.

**All: God calls each of us to unite in worship together!**

**One: So let us worship God together.**

### **Gathering Song: Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing**

Come Thou fount of every blessing, tune my heart to sing Thy praise.  
Streams of mercy, never ceasing, call for songs of loudest praise.  
Teach me some melodious sonnet sung by flaming tongues above!  
Praise the mount, I'm fixed upon it, mount of Thy redeeming love.

Here I raise my Ebenezer, here by Thy great help I've come.  
And I hope by Thy good pleasure safely to arrive at home.  
Jesus sought me when a stranger, wandering from the fold of God.  
He to rescue me from danger, interposed His precious blood.

O to grace how great a debtor, daily I'm constrained to be.  
Let Thy goodness, like a fetter, bind my wandering heart to Thee.  
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it. Prone to leave the God I love!  
Here's my heart, Lord, take and seal it, seal it for Thy courts above.  
Robert Robinson\*\*

## PRAISING

### **Prayer of Adoration**

Holy God,

We long for your peace, and trust in your promise;  
we hear your call to turn toward you,  
to change our lives and welcome you in.

Meet us here and fill our minds with your wisdom  
and our hearts with your peace,  
that our worship together may open us to the challenge  
of your dream of wholeness for all.  
In the Name of the One who is coming, we pray. Amen.

### **Holy Spirit**

There's nothing worth more that will ever come close.  
No thing can compare; You're our living hope. Your Presence.

I've tasted and seen of the sweetest of loves,  
where my heart becomes free and my shame is undone,

in Your Presence, Lord.

*Refrain: Holy Spirit, You are welcome here;  
come flood this place and fill the atmosphere;  
Your glory, God, is what our hearts long for, to be overcome by Your Presence, Lord.*

There's nothing worth more that will ever come close.  
No thing can compare; You're our living hope. Your Presence.

I've tasted and seen of the sweetest of loves,  
where my heart becomes free and my shame is undone,  
in Your Presence, Lord. *Refrain*

Let us become more aware of Your Presence;  
let us experience the glory of Your goodness.  
Let us become more aware of Your Presence;  
let us experience the glory of Your goodness. *Refrain*  
Bryan Torwalt and Katie Torwalt\*\*

## **BELONGING**

### **Kids on the Steps**

#### **Prayer of Confession**

When we gather to praise God, we remember that we are people who have often preferred our wills to his. Accepting God's power to become new persons in Christ, let us confess our sins before God and one another.

Creator of the universe,  
we stand amazed at your power and glory.  
We are eager to worship you and offer our praise,  
but we are often reluctant to answer  
when we hear you calling our name.  
We sometimes shy away from the river,  
in fear of what it really means to be baptized  
with the fire of the Holy Spirit.  
Forgive us when we forget your promise  
to be with us always, O God.  
Renew us with the power of your ever-present love,  
and strengthen us to proclaim your justice  
throughout the world. Amen.

#### **Song: Have Mercy**

Have mercy on me. Have mercy on me. O Lord, have mercy; O Lord, have mercy.  
Oh, help my unbelief. Oh, help my unbelief. O Lord, have mercy; O Lord, have mercy.  
Sandra McCracken\*\*

#### **Assurance of Forgiveness**

Hear the words of our creator,  
spoken through the prophet Isaiah:  
"I have called you by name.  
You are mine. Do not fear,  
for I have redeemed you."

One: Receive God's pardon and peace, knowing that all sins are forgiven.

**All: Thanks be to God!**

## **FORMING**

**Sermon: Luke 3:1-22**

(Re)Turning to the One Who Affirms Our Belovedness

Dan Cravy

-Have you ever been confronted and grateful? Have you ever been faced with the truth in a way that caught you up short and forced you to admit to yourself that you were veering off track? But found yourself strangely *glad* to finally admit how broken or empty you

were so that you might find a fresh new beginning and healthy direction? Have you ever felt thankful someone believed in you enough to offer words of tough love in order to affirm the deeper *goodness* of who you are?

This is the kind of renewing message that's at the heart of the prophet and passage we're reading today. I'll read Luke 3.1-22 in two sections:

-From Luke 3.1-18:

**3** In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, ...the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. **3** He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, **4** as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

'Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight.

**5** Every valley shall be filled,  
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,  
...**6** and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

**7** John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? **8** Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. **9** Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

**10** And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" **11** In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." **12** Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" **13** He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." **14** Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

**15** As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, **16** John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

**18** So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God!**

-I am completely intrigued by this scene. Here stands John the Baptizer at the Jordan River in the forlorn desert near the Dead Sea. And the people flock to him there. Not to the religious center of Jerusalem. Not to make some systematized sacrifice at the Temple. No. They're drawn to a wild-eyed prophet by a muddy river in the desert. And to the toughness of his truth.

They're drawn by the one calling for a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Repentance means 'turning.' They're in need of turning to *God*. Of an authentic turning/life-change that discovers renewal in God's mercy.

And John confronts them. He calls them snakes. 'Shed your pretense like deadskin and get naked before God.' 'You can't count yourselves God's people simply because you were born in the Land,' he tells them. 'No. Our people crossed the Jordan to belong wholly to God. No more nominal faith. No more pretending without *turning*. Turn to God. Sink your body in the water. Cross the Jordan in your *heart*. Live changed lives for the Lord. And be made new in God's mercy.'

An inviting recruitment speech, no?

But the people come. Urgently. Gladly. Why? We can only assume John's indictment is on target. That they are sick of selfish and shallow living. That they long to be led to what is soul-deep and profound with hope.

-Eugene Peterson says that John here confronts us with the core of what we all of us need: 'John the Baptist,' he writes, 'cuts through the vast clutter of what we want and think we need and puts his finger on exactly what's essential....' Peterson says we are surrounded by pressures to consume and produce and acquire. We're sold half-baked self-help programs for pursuing happiness. But 'John,' Peterson writes, 'preaches a change of *direction*,' because 'what is essentially wrong with us is that [we turn] our backs on God.' (unquote) What counts is not the pursuit of happiness. Not our pleasure, power, popularity or posturing, but lives turned to God. Lives of goodness, truth and love, fueled from the blazing center of God's mercy.

-John says so. And so the people ask: 'So what should we do?' Do you remember how he responds? What rules of thumb he announces for the authentically faithful life? They're not ethically complex; but they *are* radically recentering.

To the Crowd, he says: No hoarding necessities. Share what you have. Your coats. Your food. / To the Tax collectors, he says: Don't cheat people. Be fair. Collect what's legal. / To the Soldiers, he says: No bullying. No blackmail. No abuse of power to take what you can.

Be content with what you have.

Turning toward God means treating persons across God's earth like God made them. Not like objects that can be neglected or abused. Those coming to be baptized are committing to belong to God's vision, to be the light of the world, to live as the people in whom and through whom God's justice would shine.

-NT Wright tells of a cartoon he saw that pictures a skeptic shouting up to the clouds:

'God! If you're up there, tell us what to do!'

Back comes a voice: 'Feed the hungry, house the homeless, establish justice.'

The sceptic looks alarmed. 'Just testing,' he says.

'Me, too,' replies the voice.

-A new year may be a good time for us to be confronted by a wild-eyed, deep-souled prophet. To be exhorted to authenticity of faith. It may be a good time for turning toward God. For renewal of heart. For the simplicity of sharing what we have. For the integrity of refusing to cheat, neglect or abuse. It may be time for stepping into the Jordan. For a baptism of life-change that buoys vitality in God's mercy.

Friends, are you intrigued that people come streaming to the river of tough love and hard truths? Are you grateful someone cares enough to confront us with God's demand that we live like persons with souls? Are you drawn to the renewal John signals?

John's preaching points upward. 'I baptize you with water,' he says. 'The One who comes will baptize you with God's Spirit.'

The renewing power we're looking for? The power to turn to God? The restorative power to live lives of joyous, just integrity? It comes from locating our lives in the affirmation of the Spirit coming from the Father and the Son.

Here is the event John's life and preaching pointed to, from Luke 3.21-22:

<sup>21</sup> Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus *also* had been baptized and was praying, the *heaven* was opened, <sup>22</sup> and the Holy *Spirit* descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a *voice* came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Do you hear this deeply relational word of affirmation? Before Jesus can do anything to merit approval, the Father pours out his affection on the Son. The Spirit of his grace. His heart and pleasure: You are mine, my Beloved.

This, friends, is the beginning point. Ground zero for Jesus' identity and ours. A corrective to a world of identity theft, that would have us value ourselves according to our production, our consumption, and our acquisition. Our power, our pleasures, and our popularity. Here is God's Spirit of love calling Jesus, calling you and me, beloved. Here is the forgiving power of our baptism for life-change.

What did you get for your star word? I heard some great stories about them this week. (And you will have a chance to receive one today if you missed out last week.) Mine was 'affirmation.' Which set me to thinking that the affirmation of my star - and in truth the affirmation behind all of yours - is that I am, you are, Beloved of God. That this is our primary identity.

Which means we can turn to God. Again and again.

Pastor Eric Peterson suggests that our baptism affords us enormous freedom – the freedom of grace - to grow and learn and change. That it seals upon us our primary identity. And that it teaches us a two-step dance lesson of turning to God – always turning again and again to the One who calls us Beloved - so that we might then take a step of faith. Then, of course, fail and change and grow and turn again to take another step. A dance of happy repentance and growth.

I heard someone say this week that John's invitation, that Jesus' invitation at the Jordan, is to live wet. Never to dry off and forget who we are. We are the baptized. Immersed not just once but always wet with the waters of our life-changing Belovedness.

Friends, are you longing to be renewed? To return to God? What if a baptism of live-change means locating our lives in the affirmation of God's unmerited love?

How will you return to the waters? How will you choose to live wet? How will you lodge your life in the glad reality of a baptism that sets you free to dance?//

- I invite you to close your eyes and hear this word of blessing that I heard Pastor Eric Peterson (from Colbert Presbyterian in Washington on a podcast called *Low in the Water*) offer this week. I would invite you then to simply sit for a few minutes in its biblical affirmation of great love:

You have been sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and grafted into Christ forever. There is nothing in heaven or on earth or in hell itself that can separate you from the love that God has for you. You have been adopted as sons and daughters of God. You are his

pride and joy. Your baptism is your passport- identifying you as a forever citizen in the kingdom of heaven. Lodge your life in that glad reality and be at peace. Amen.

### **Song of Response: O Come to the Altar**

Are you hurting and broken within, overwhelmed by the weight of your sin? Jesus is calling.  
Have you come to the end of yourself, do you thirst for a drink from the well? Jesus is calling.

*Refrain: O come to the altar; the Father's arms are open wide.  
Forgiveness was bought with the precious blood of Jesus Christ.*

Leave behind your regrets and mistakes. Come today; there's no reason to wait. Jesus is calling.  
Bring your sorrows and trade them for joy; from the ashes a new life is born.  
Jesus is calling. *Refrain*

Oh, what a Savior, isn't he wonderful; sing alleluia, Christ is risen.  
Bow down before him, for he is Lord of all; sing alleluia, Christ is risen. *Refrain*

Bear your cross as you wait for the crown; tell the world of the treasure you've found.  
Steven Furtick, Chris Brown, Wade Joye and Mack Brock\*\*

## **STEWARDING**

### **Invitation to Offering**

Friends, as we consider what it is that has been given to us by our God, and how freely, lovingly, and generously he has poured out to us regardless of our position, circumstance, background, affiliation, and orientation, let us also joyfully give of what we have to offer. In response to the gifts of God, let us give of our own gifts, our talents, our time, our finances, and our whole selves, presenting ourselves to the God who loves a cheerful giver. Listen to what God is calling you to during this time of offering.

### **Prayers of the People**

Let us join our hearts together in prayer.

Ever-present God,  
we look around the world and we see places where people cry out to you:  
in places torn by the ravages of war,  
in communities demolished by natural disasters and arctic blasts, in nations characterized by division and disunity.  
Help us bear your light into the places in the world that need illumination and healing.  
God of Wisdom, draw near to us.

God of all mercy and grace,  
give us the courage to seek you out,  
to search our hearts for your truth,  
and to be guided by the stories of scripture.  
Since our hearts do not rest until they rest in you,  
lead us to the pastures of your protection,  
that we might be faithful members of your flock.  
God of Wisdom, draw near to us.

Healing God,  
we pray for those among us this day who need your love:  
for those who struggle with depression's grip,  
for those who journey with physical disabilities,  
for those who are lonely,  
for those who are hopeless,  
for those who are addicted,  
for those who are angry and bitter,  
for those who are broken and battered,  
and for those we lift up to you in silence this day...

God of Wisdom, draw near to us.

Giver of Hope and Truth,  
hear us today as we pray the prayer you taught us to pray, saying together:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Your name.  
 Your kingdom come, Your 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 Yours is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.

**SENDING**

**Sending Song: Establish the Work of Our Hands**

If You don't build it, we la - bor in vain.  
 Teach us to num - ber the length of our days.

With-out Your Spir - it, we stand with no strength.  
 Pour our Your pow - er, we'll pour out Your praise.

I know my life is pass-ing a - way,  
 Teach us to run, to fin-ish the race,

but the works of Your hands are what will re - main.  
 for on - ly what's done in love will re - main.

Let the fa - vor of the Lord rest up - on us:

O - Lord, es - tab - lish the work of our hands,

O - Lord, es - tab - lish the work of our hands.

Aaron Keyes, Sandra McCracken, Orlando Palmer, Madison Cunningham,  
 Elizabeth Vice, Paul Zach and Isaac Wardell\*\*

**Benediction**

Leading in Worship This Morning:  
 Liturgist: Tammi Allison  
 Kids on the Steps: Melinda Hickey  
 Sermon: Dan Cravy  
 Musicians: Allie McAdow, Austin Graef, Elliot Flesch,  
 Emma Thackston, Heather Flesch, Lauren Durrin  
 Slide, Sound and Video Techs: Diane Wells-Cherry,  
 Zane Reneau and Bill Maitland

EPC Ministry Staff:  
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 Church Operations Manager: Becky Kress  
 Program Support Administrator: Jo Ruby  
 Church Secretary: Haleigh Adair  
 Facility Steward: Robert Miller  
 Bell Choir Director: Tomi Kent  
 Parish Associates: Rev. Janet Malone and Rev. Bob Schurr  
 Preaching Pastor, Blackfoot Church of the Potomac: Natalie Mauer

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