

Prayer: Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in us the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit and we shall be created, and you shall renew the face of the earth.

O God, who by the light of the Holy Spirit did instruct the hearts of the faithful, grant that by the same Holy Spirit, we may be truly wise and ever enjoy your consolations... (Peace of drawing close to you)

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing in your sight, you who are rock and redeemer of us all. Amen.

Good Morning! Peace be with you! How is it with your soul? It is well with my soul.

The ministry of Jesus drew all kinds of people to him during his short time on earth, drawing no boundaries for who was invited into that love. As his hour to die drew nearer, Jesus' message was that all things would be enveloped in his love even after he was gone. The question for us is: What uplifting message will we pass on to others?

Let's begin with prayer. *Radically inclusive God, you offer each one of us a life-changing love that leaves no one out. Sometimes our hearts feel so heavy that we struggle to rise up and claim it. As we continue to be aware of your presence on this Lenten journey, keep nudging us to listen carefully for what's up. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing in your sight, you who are rock, redeemer, and Renewer of us all. Amen.*

Some of the most powerful and hopeful words in scripture and in our hymns come from a surprising place: hardship. This is evident in many of the African American Spirituals, several of which were sung in the past 6 weeks. Looking through our United Methodist Hymnal, many hymns in the gospel tradition and those in the social gospel period of the 20th century speak of trials, tribulation and salvation.

One particular hymn, 'Love Lifted Me', (which is NOT in the 1989 hymnal), is a clear example of self-reflection and following a better way.

The lyricist, James Rowe (1865-1933) was born in England, the son of a copper miner. He immigrated to the United States from Ireland in 1889. He worked on railroads and also as an inspector for the Hudson River Humane Society. He later worked for several music publishers before retiring to Vermont to assist his daughter writing greeting card verses.

Fun fact Alert: "Love Lifted Me" was written and published in 1912. It gained popularity among United Methodists as one of the frequently sung songs in The Cokesbury Hymnal. (The original stanza two was omitted in Worship & Song 3101):

*I was sinking deep in sin,
Far from the peaceful shore,
Very deeply stained within,
Sinking to rise no more...*

And **from that expression of hardship**, he turns to hope:

*But the Master of the sea
Heard my despairing cry,
From the waters lifted me,
Now safe am I.
...Love lifted me!*

Verse 2: *All my heart to Him I give, ever to Him I'll cling,
In His blessed presence live, ever His praises sing.
Love so mighty and so true merits my soul's best songs;
Faithful, loving service, too, to Him belongs.*

The church-wide research conducted by Discipleship Ministries showed "Love Lifted Me" as the number one hymn requested to be included in a new hymnal that was not already in The United Methodist Hymnal (1989) or The Faith We Sing (2000).

Rowe's text uses images from two biblical stories in Matthew. He draws on both stories, first using sinking or being swamped into the sea as an image for "sinking deep in sin...sinking to rise no more." Rowe then claims Jesus as, "Master of the sea", who hears our cry for help, reaches out to us in love, and lifts us up into the safety of salvation.

What is it that lifts the songwriter from his errant ways? What is it that someone so focused on greed, lust, & self-interest would seek to change the direction of their life? LOVE lifts up the sinner... love lifts the doubter...love lifts us up.

In the moment of confession, the psalmist seeks the same... Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy, blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.

For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me... Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.

Seeking a new and right spirit within is a total transformation, don't you think? Whatever is causing the sinking, swamping and death must be released to take the hand of the one who saves.

But wait, there's more... this is not about 'going to heaven'. This matter of salvation is about bringing heaven to earth. It's about changing hearts and lives so that those who are 'lifted up' share the good news!

The people are gathering from all over because of the Feast of the Passover. Jesus has recently raised Lazarus and the religious leaders are feeling threatened by Jesus and plot to kill him. Jesus leaves Jerusalem for a place nearby in the wilderness. We read (12:1-8) that six days before Passover Jesus comes to Bethany and has dinner. Mary anoints Jesus' feet and Judas Iscariot gets upset. The next day Jesus enters Jerusalem and the religious authorities declare 'the whole world is following him!'

That's where Austin picked up the story and read today's passage. Jesus receives the sign that the nations are gathering...represented as the Greeks wanting to see Jesus. Did you notice who the disciples are that are approached? It's the very first disciples Jesus called (in John's gospel). So When the (potential) Greek disciples approach the first Jewish disciples in John 12:20, it confirms that the news of Jesus had spread across the sea to other countries, just as the Pharisees had unknowingly predicted (John 12:19).

Then Jesus begins his commentary on what time it is... his final phase of the mission.

Last week we were reminded of Moses lifting the snake to heal. Today, Jesus reminds the disciples that he will be lifted up so that the world will be saved. Jesus came to offer a new covenant of salvation that was for "all nations," not just the Hebrew people. Now "the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified" Jesus' first words about his death were determined and hopeful. Jesus teaches about his love and compassion through the parable of the seed. In this Jesus is interpreting his own death, focusing on the way the sacrifice of one individual seed can produce much "fruit."

The Disciples of Jesus will continue to follow in Jesus’ footsteps through a life of sacrifice, love, and compassion. To bear fruit, one must sacrifice for the sake of the community, for the sake of sharing God’s love with others. The fruit only grows after the seed gives it life. And it all starts with Christ—Jesus came to earth so that we “may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10). But it is a fullness of life that does not exist without sacrifice—Jesus’ and our own. The sacrifice is turning away from the old to new life lifted by love and compassion.

Hardship in our lives, (hardships every single one of us faces) can also be opportunities to experience the very hope that can bring us through or out of that hardship.

What if the hardships we experience can give us opportunities to really experience the hope that lifts us up?

What uplifting message will we pass on to others?

Let me offer two things. First, Hear again these words of writer Anne Lamott: **It’s in the encounter with God where change begins, where grace begins to find its way into the depths of all that we are; right where we are. “That’s transformation ...that grace meets us exactly where we are. And it doesn’t leave us where it found us.”**

Second, here is a Lenten Blessing for More Compassion by Kate Bowler.

May it be so. Amen.

Now, Let us look **to AUSTIN MORSE** who will lead us in the prayer for God’s people.

Response to the Word –

Pastor Pat

Let’s join together in a response to the Word – **Kate Bowler shares a blessing for this day.**

“A Lenten Blessing for More Compassion”

This Lent, you have shown us more about who we really are.

But because of who you are,

what we’ve learned is not so much what has been but what will be.

And we have an inkling this is only the beginning, a mere taste of what is to come.

O God, would you make us able to live as if all this truth were really true?

Remind us of your infinite grace,

your infinite compassion.

Give us the courage to live for others,

as you have so courageously given your life for us. Amen.