

Prelude

Welcome and Announcements

\*Call to Worship

Come and worship, you who love the Lord with all your heart,

**and with all our souls, and all our minds, and all our strength.**

Come into the community of God's people and worship with the neighbor you do not know:

**the stranger seeking welcome,**

**the hungry, the homeless, the hurting.**

Come, and worship, you who love the spirit of the law,

**and the One who showed us how to live in kin-dom.**

\*Hymn 336 We Gather Together to Ask the Lord's Blessing

Prayer of Confession

**O God, Rock of our salvation,**

**you give children to the barren,**

**and strength to the feeble.**

**You exalt the poor and lift up the needy.**

**We praise you from morning to night,**

**yet we build walls that separate us from you,**

**from one another,**

**and from the world.**

**We place stumbling blocks in the way of goodness and truth.**

**We are led astray by promises of earthly desires.**

**We confess our failings,**

**and seek solace in the source of our joy, Jesus Christ our Lord.**

**Guide us in our efforts**

**to encourage one another,**

**to work together for good in the world you made,**

**and to prepare for the coming day of the Lord. Amen.**

Hymn 698 Take, O Take Me as I Am

Assurance of Forgiveness

Our hearts are sprinkled clean with the water of God's love.

Through salvation won for us by Jesus Christ, God assures us that we are forgiven,

absolved, and released from the sin that binds us. Alleluia! Amen.

First Reading

Time With Our Young Disciples

Second Reading

Morning Message

The Rev. Janet Hunt was leading a confirmation class. For one of their meetings, the class left the building for awhile as they engaged in a service project. Some of the kids returned

ahead of the others and gathered in their classroom where they would be dismissed for the day.

One of the adult volunteers, Jim, asked Janet if she would like to test the telepathic ability of one of the students, Joe.

She was game.

She was sent to the whiteboard where they had drawn a square which had been marked off in nine smaller squares, kind of like Tic-Tac-Toe.

Joe left the room and Jim told Janet to choose a square. She pointed to one.

They called Joe back into the room. Janet watched him closely as he stood and pondered the board. Then with only a smidgeon of hesitation, he pointed to the exact square Janet had chosen.

They tried again. And again and again. Joe always chose the square Janet had pointed to while he was out of the room.

It wasn't long until others wanted to try their skill at this test.

One by one the students would try. They would try to interpret the way Joe stood, whether he cleared his throat or tapped his pants leg. But none could match Joe's skill.

Janet was almost convinced they had another David Copperfield in the making.

After the closing blessing, and the students having gone on their way, one of the adult leaders explained the trick to Janet.

Apparently, Jim had been the first to arrive. He taught Joe some signals he would use and Joe was a quick study. Every time Joe returned to the room, Jim threw him the signals.

The problem was, Janet was not looking at Jim, but at Joe. She was looking in the wrong direction and failed to see what was right before her eyes.

The gospel passage before us today is classified as "eschatological," or literature referring to what we refer to as the "end times."

I never know how to approach these texts. We Presbyterians believe in the second coming of Christ, when the whole creation will be redeemed. We affirm that every time we recite the Apostles' Creed.

But, we do not espouse dispensationalism, theology popularized in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and adhered to by many fundamentalist traditions. We usually hear it referred to as the "Rapture," which is believed to be the event whereby Jesus descends to earth and takes the saved to heaven and leaving the rest for a "time of trial."

Janet says she wonders at times if her experience with the confirmation class doesn't begin to get at why we struggle with these "end times" texts. It is true that you and I don't live in the same context as the people who first heard these words shortly after Jesus' death and resurrection.

But like those who first heard these texts, it may be completely understandable that we could find ourselves looking in the wrong direction.

It is impossible these days to miss reports of war and rumors of war and other catastrophes. We hear and see them in graphic and unforgettable detail all too often. But even so, do these reports turn our thoughts to Christ's return or does it even register? Is it possible we have turned our attention away from the foundational truth that we are moving toward a larger future?

Janet Hunt says bad things have happened to the world and its people for as long as she has been paying attention, and yet, it would seem, Jesus is no closer to returning.

She suggests, that, part of the message from a passage like this is that, from generation to generation, under this one's rule and that one's tyranny, through feast, famine, plague and plenty, God was, is, and ever shall be, active among us, working his purpose out.

Maybe these words urge us to simply live in the certainty that we are always called to keep our focus on Jesus, to respond as he did. And how did Jesus respond to hardship, or injustice, or disease or ignorance?

He did what God requires, of his Son and of us: to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.

Whether he comes today or a million todays in the future, we can be the body of Christ-head, heart, hands and feet, until he comes again. And in this season, we have many opportunities to live this out.

When I was in high school, most of my friends were made in the music department. Considering rehearsals and performances, during school hours and outside of them, we probably spent more time with fellow choir students than with our families.

Some of us planned to study music in college, or at least sing in a choir, but, there was one startling exception. The student with the best skills, in piano as well as voice, failed to apply to college or make any plans whatsoever beyond graduation day. When he broke this news to us, we were all shocked. Why? What has happened? What's wrong? He had a promising future ahead of him.

His response was that nothing was wrong. He believed Jesus would come before he had need of college or anything else.

We were stunned and troubled by his answer and his resolve. The kids in our small, close-knit group were all Christians, even though we came from a variety of traditions. And we

were all obviously looking in different directions, or maybe we weren't reading the signs right.

And, to this day, I am confounded by this experience.

We lost touch after graduation. At our twentieth reunion, he was listed as deceased. And, I have to think that, though the "rapture" didn't occur, he did see Jesus ahead of the rest of us.

I love all the seasons of the year. Each one is my favorite when it unfolds. And so right now I'm loving this season: the beginning of school, fall sports, warm sweaters, spiced cider, the brilliant colors that bathe our landscapes. Thanksgiving, Advent, Christmas. God's blessings are everywhere.

We choose this season to focus on stewardship. In one of the churches I served, the pastor would post signs all over the church that read "Gratitude for grace given." You'd find them taped above the water fountains, beside the coat rack, taped to the coffee urn, on the restroom mirrors. Simple reminders that life is gift and it is defined by God's grace.

A message that compelling demands a response. It calls us to a stewardship of life...to examine what is the best use of our time, our talents and our resources.

One of our more recent confessions, *A Brief Statement of Faith*, concludes with this affirmation:

In gratitude to God,  
empowered by the Spirit,  
we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks  
and to live holy and joyful lives,  
even as we watch for a new heaven and new earth,  
praying, "Come, Lord Jesus!"

Then the Church Triumphant come,  
raise the song of harvest home!  
All be safely gathered in,  
free from sorrow, free from sin.  
There forever purified,  
in God's garner to abide.  
Come, ten thousand angels, come.  
Raise the song of harvest home!

\*Affirmation of Faith      The Apostles' Creed

\*Hymn 581      Gloria Patri

Sharing Our Joys and Concerns  
Prayers of the People and the Lord's Prayer

Presenting Our Tithes and Offerings

Offertory

\*Hymn 606 Doxology

\*Prayer of Dedication

\*Hymn 634 To God Be the Glory

\*Blessing

Go out in peace, for the Lord has heard your prayers.

Do not allow anyone to lead you astray.

Hold fast to the hope you have claimed.

Continue to meet together, encouraging one another and provoking one another to put love into action.

And may God be your rock of strength.

May Christ Jesus usher you into God's presence.

And may the Holy Spirit write the laws of love and life upon your hearts. Amen.

(from Laughingbird.net)

\*Postlude