

Bethel Worship Guide – May 10, 2020

Welcome to worship today! I'm glad you're here! In recent weeks, I've been thinking about how humans handle crisis and challenge. In what ways can Christian faith and practices equip and empower people to face times of struggle with resilience? I invite you to think about that with me. Our faith, our confidence in God's generous love and provision gives us hope in the midst of adversity and challenges. In spite of vulnerability and loss, we can choose to act in ways that promote the welfare of our community and the wellbeing of future generations. May the hope of the risen Christ inspire our worship, prayers, and actions! -Rebecca K.

Peace verse – Psalm 37:37

Observe those who have integrity and watch those whose heart is right because the future belongs to persons of peace.

Light a candle in your worship space to represent the peace of Christ in your midst today.

Call to worship:

Let us worship the eternal God, the source of love and life, who creates us.

Let us worship Jesus Christ, the risen one, who lives among us.

Let us worship the Spirit, the Holy Fire who renews and guides us.

To the one true God be praise in all times and places. Alleluia!¹

Prayer of Thanksgiving:

Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob,
whose hope is in the Lord their God, who made heaven and earth,
the sea, and all that is in them;
who keeps faith forever.

(pause to offer your prayers of thanksgiving)

You satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love;
we rejoice and are glad all our days. Amen.

Song: God of our strength – Hymnal Worship Book #36

Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T7RlwZSwgnI>

V.1. God of our strength, enthroned above, the source of life, the fount of love,
O let devotion's sacred flame our souls awake to praise thy name.

Chorus: God of our strength, we wait on thee, our sure defense forever be.

V.2. To thee we lift our joyful eyes, to thee on wings of faith we rise.

Come thou, and let thy courts on earth ring out thy praise in days of mirth.

V.3. God of our strength, from day to day direct our thoughts and guide our way.

Oh, may our hearts united be in sweet communion, Lord, with thee.

V.4. God of our strength, on thee we call. God of our hope, our light, our all,
thy name we praise, thy love adore, our rock, our shield forevermore.

¹ Words for Worship 1, #108

Offering & Prayer: consider what you will offer to God this week.

Great God, give us open hearts and minds and hands.

Grant us a vision of you as you are, and of the world as it might be.

Touch our lips that we would give words of truth and hope to one another.

Then set us free to do what you ask of us. For Jesus' sake, amen.²

Scripture reading: Jeremiah 29:1-10

Questions for Scripture reflection:

Background to Jeremiah 29: About 4 years prior to the event described in ch.29, the Babylonians overtook the region of Judah as part of their expansion campaign. The king of Judah, Jewish leaders and many people had been taken as captives to Babylon. Their lives had been disrupted, turned upside-down. They needed to establish new routines, they could no longer go to their favorite stores, and their economic stability was pulled out from underneath them. (Sound sort of familiar?) They were exiles, displaced people living in a foreign land. A prophet, Hananiah, who claimed to speak for Yahweh, was inciting the Jews in exile to rebel against Babylon, saying 'God says we'll be able to go home soon! Our former life will be restored!' (see Jer. 28:1-4). Jeremiah wrote this letter (chapter 29) to the exiles with a very different message from God: stay put, you are going to be in this situation for a while.

1. What word, phrase, image or event in the passage caught your attention? What question would you like to ask Jeremiah?
2. When the exiles heard Jeremiah's letter, they may have felt like he was dashing their hopes, bearing unwanted news.
 - a. Think of a time when it seemed like God, or a person/messenger, gave you news you didn't want to receive.
 - b. And yet, his letter also contains words of hope. Read Jer. 29:10-14. God has ("*knows*") a long-term, big-picture plan for his people. It is a plan for the people's good (literally "*shalom*", meaning wholeness, harmony, unimpaired relationships). Shalom is likely what Jesus meant when he promised "*abundant life*" (John 10:10). "*The discomfort of the long exile is intended to result in good, namely a close relationship with God.*"³ What are some characteristics of shalom or abundant life that you are longing for these days? What evidence of abundant life are you currently experiencing or noticing around you?
3. The message God conveyed to the people through the prophet Jeremiah was probably not very popular (though there is evidence they listened). The message was: Settle down – build houses, plant gardens, have families. Wait. You are going to be here for a while (see 29:5-6). "*Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, ... and bring you back to*

² Words for Worship 1, #121 (adapted)

³ Martens, Elmer A., *Jeremiah*, Believers Church Bible Commentary. Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1986. 178.

this place." (Jer. 29:10). In contrast, some prophets were saying, don't worry, God will rescue us, this will all be over soon. But God said: don't listen to those voices; *"it is a lie ... I did not send them"* (29:8-9). Discerning what is the true word of God seems to be a perpetual challenge, in Jeremiah's day and ours. In his commentary on Jeremiah, Elmer Martens made this comment and asked: 'False prophets did not distinguish between God's message and their own wishful thinking. When a person so strongly desires a certain result, how can he/she remain sufficiently detached [or objective] to hear from God?'⁴ How would you answer Martens' question? What helps you discern between "wishful thinking" (your own, or that of other people) and what is true or God's will?

4. Facing challenges often makes us more aware of our vulnerability and limitations. Although we may not want to admit it, there is a lot that we cannot control. A resilient faith is important in at least two ways:
 - a. Resilient faith helps us admit our helplessness and our dependence on God and on one another. We learn to rely more fully on God. Like the apostle Paul, we see that God's power is demonstrated in our weakness (II Corinthians 12:9-10). Has the reality of the novel coronavirus made you become more aware of your vulnerabilities? How has your heart &/or mind reacted to being less in control, and/or more dependent on God or others? Feel free to apply these questions to other situations of challenge.
 - b. At the same time, a resilient faith enables us to see what strength and choices we DO have, and use our power to act in positive ways. We have the choice to 'look for the silver lining' even in adversity. In the case of the Israelites in exile, Jeremiah encouraged them to choose to settle down and create community; to invest themselves and use their power, energy and gifts to contribute to their new surroundings. What choices have you or others made recently to act in positive ways in the midst of challenges? Are there ways you are using your strengths or spiritual gifts to be a blessing to your neighbors?

5. Sometimes in times of crisis, people become more self-focused. We've seen this in recent months, for example, when toilet paper and other products were hoarded due to fear and desire to 'make sure I have enough.' God wants us to practice good self-care, but he also calls us to be mindful of the needs of others and to care for our community. God says through Jeremiah, *"seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare."*
 - a. How would you write that message (verse 7) in your own words?
 - b. Since the pandemic began, there has been more awareness of our collective welfare. The actions of each individual have an effect on the health of the community. We can practice love for our neighbor by physical distancing, wearing a mask, practicing good hygiene, etc. What are other ways Bethel church does or could work for the welfare of the city / country / world in which God has planted us?

⁴ Martens, Elmer A., Jeremiah. 181.

6. Does your paraphrase above change if you remember or emphasize that God is essentially telling them to live among and pray for their enemies? Do you think Jesus may have had this scripture and its radical counsel in his mind when he taught “Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt. 5:44)?
7. Times of struggle or challenge can spark creativity, adaptation and innovation. Can you think of biblical, historical, or modern examples to illustrate that?

Song: I bind my heart this tide – Hymnal Worship Book #411

Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rAeZk7e22gw>

- V.1. I bind my heart this tide to the Galilean’s side,
to the wounds of Calvary, to the Christ who died for me.
- V.2. I bind my soul this day to the neighbor far away,
and the stranger near at hand, in this town and in this land.
- V.3. I bind my heart in thrall to the God, the Lord of all,
to the God, the poor one’s friend, and the Christ whom he did send.
- V.4. I bind myself to peace, to make strife and envy cease.
God, knit thou sure the cord of my thralldom to my Lord! Amen.

Intercessory Prayer: you are invited to offer your own prayers now, and/or join the Bethel group sharing and prayer time at 11:00 am by calling or logging in to GoToMeeting.

Song: My life flows on – Hymnal Worship Book #580

Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Av06Axs-Qwg>

- V.1. My life flows on in endless song, above earth’s lamentation.
I catch the sweet, though far-off hymn that hails a new creation.
Chorus: No storm can shake my inmost calm while to that Rock I’m clinging.
Since Love is Lord of heav’n and earth, how can I keep from singing?
- V.2. Through all the tumult and the strife, I hear that music ringing.
It finds an echo in my soul. How can I keep from singing?
- V.3. What though my joys and comforts die? The Lord my Savior liveth.
What though the darkness gather ‘round? Songs in the night he giveth.
- V. 4. The peace of Christ makes fresh my heart, a fountain ever springing!
All things are mine since I am his! How can I keep from singing?

Benediction – I Corinthians 15:58

Therefore, brothers and sisters, be steadfast, immovable,
always excelling in the work of the Lord,
because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.