



Introduction

In today's gospel Jesus offers everyday images that reveal to us the reign of God: a tree that becomes a sheltering home, yeast that penetrates and expands, a treasured pearl, a net that gains a great catch. Even as we seek the riches of God's reign, the great surprise is that God's grace finds us first!

Confession and Forgiveness

Blessed be the holy Trinity one God, Father, ✚ Son, and Holy Spirit,
whose steadfast love is everlasting,
whose faithfulness endures from generation to generation. **Amen.**

Trusting in the mercy of God, let us confess our sin.

Silence is kept for reflection.

Reconciling God,

**we confess that we do not trust your abundance,
and we deny your presence in our lives.**

We place our hope in ourselves and rely on our own efforts.

We fail to believe that you provide enough for all.

We abuse your good creation for our own benefit.

We fear difference and do not welcome others as you have welcomed us.

We sin in thought, word, and deed.

**By your grace, forgive us; through your love, renew us;
and in your Spirit, lead us;**

so that we may live and serve you in newness of life. Amen.

Beloved of God,

by the radical abundance of divine mercy

we have peace with God through ✚ Christ Jesus,

- through whom we have obtained grace upon grace.

Our sins are forgiven. Let us live now in hope.

For hope does not disappoint,

because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

Gathering Hymn

Children of the Heavenly Father

Listen and sing along [here](#).

Prayer of the Day

Beloved and sovereign God, through the death and resurrection of your Son you bring us into your kingdom of justice and mercy. By your Spirit, give us your wisdom, that we may treasure the life that comes from Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. **Amen.**

Psalmody: Psalm 119:129-136

- ¹²⁹Your decrees are wonderful;
therefore I obey them with all my heart.
- ¹³⁰**When your word is opened it gives light;
it gives understanding to the simple.**
- ¹³¹I open my mouth and pant
because I long for your commandments.
- ¹³²**Turn to me and be gracious to me,
as you always do to those who love your name.**
- ¹³³Order my footsteps in your word;
let no iniquity have dominion over me.
- ¹³⁴**Rescue me from those who oppress me,
and I will keep your commandments.**
- ¹³⁵Let your face shine upon your servant
and teach me your statutes.
- ¹³⁶**My eyes shed streams of tears,
because people do not keep your teaching.**

Second Reading: Romans 8:26-39

These words celebrate the depth of God's actions for us. Through Christ's death for us and the activity of the Spirit praying for us, we are fused to God's love poured out in Jesus Christ. Nothing, not even death itself, is able to separate us from such incredible divine love.

Read the text [here](#).

Gospel: Matthew 13: 31-33, 44-52

Throughout Matthew's gospel, Jesus and his disciples proclaim the good news that "the kingdom of heaven is near!" Here, Jesus offers several brief parables that explore the implications of this announcement for people's lives.

Read the text [here](#).

Reflection on the Text

This weekend the South Carolina Synod held synod assembly over a video call. They not only held the assembly, but they also voted for their new bishop this way. Before the assembly, Bishop Herman Yoos produced a quick “Frequently Asked Questions” video about the assembly. My favorite question was, “Does the Holy Spirit work through video conferencing?” The Bishop answered with this:

“Yes. We've been experiencing virtual worship services and video conference bible studies over the past three months where countless people have been touched and blessed by the Holy Spirit's presence. We believe the Holy Spirit works in amazing and surprising ways and can certainly work with us through a variety of means, including online technology and to call our next bishop.”

The same thing goes for us. No matter where we hold worship, God meets each and every one of us where we are.

It may feel like when you come to church on Sundays, that is your one and only time and place to meet with God every week. But I know you know that God exists outside these four walls. Every week we are sent out in mission to be the hands and feet of God in the world. God promises to be with us. Now, that doesn't mean that we won't have trials and struggles, but God does promise to accompany us on our journey. Even when we feel alone, we are never truly alone. The Holy Spirit goes with us, and ahead of us, to meet us in every moment. God is outside space and time.

As many of you know, today is my last Sunday in my internship with Saint Stephen's in Gold Hill and Mount Zion in Richfield. Before I even arrived here, I prayed that this year would be a good experience where I could learn and grow and develop into a first call pastor. Well, even with a global pandemic, I couldn't have asked for more. Y'all have embraced me as one of your own. Pastor Ruth Ann has been an excellent supervisor. I also got to learn from other pastors like Pastor Ray and our confirmation collective pastors.

Trusting the Holy Spirit can be scary. It reminds me of the scene in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* where Indiana has to cross what seems to be an empty trench with no bridge. He says, “It's a *leap of faith*, oh wow.” He puts his foot out... and it lands on something solid. He finds himself on a bridge that he could not see earlier.

I had no idea how internship would pan out, but it turned out fine. I'm not saying when you pray your wish list it all comes true. What I *am* saying is that I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in *all creation*, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. I feel like the word “pandemic” should be in there.

But really, no matter where we go, no matter what we do, no matter how long we worship from home, no matter if it takes me a while to find a job, we can trust in the Spirit to lead us there. Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ, and we know this from Romans 5:8, God proves his love for us in that, while we still were sinners, Christ died for us. And for that we can say, “Thanks be to God.” Amen.

Hymn of the Day

On What has Now been Sown

Listen and sing along [here](#).

Apostles' Creed

We profess our faith with the whole church in all times and places:

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.

Prayers of Intercession

Confident of your care and helped by the Holy Spirit, we pray for the church, the world, and all who are in need.

A brief silence.

Merciful God, your reign is revealed to us in common things: a mustard shrub, a woman baking bread, a fishing net. Help your church witness to the surprising yet common ways you encounter us in daily life. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

When your word is opened, it gives light and understanding. Increase our understanding and awe of your creation; guide the work of scientists and researchers – especially those seeking treatment and a vaccine for the COVID-19 virus. Treasuring the earth, may we live as grateful and healing caretakers of our home. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

As the birds of the air nest in branches of trees, gather the nations of the world into the welcoming shade of your merciful reign. Direct leaders of nations to build trust with each other and walk in the way of peace. Heal the divisions among your people. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Your Spirit helps us in our weakness and intercedes for the saints according to your will. Help us when we do not know how to pray. Give comfort to the dying, refuge to the weary, justice to those who are oppressed, and healing to the sick especially those we name now. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

You show steadfast love and direct us to ask of you what we need. Help this congregation ask boldly for what is most needed. Refresh us with new dreams of being your people in this place and time. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Here other intercessions may be offered.

In you our lives are never lost. Strengthen us by the inspiring witness of your people in all times and places. Embolden our witness now and one day gather us with all your saints in light. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

In the certain hope that nothing can separate us from your love, we offer these prayers to you; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Lord's Prayer

Lord, remember us in your kingdom and teach us to pray:

**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 trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.**

For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.

Farewell and Godspeed for Vicar Natalie Cook

As Vicar Natalie leaves our community of faith after her internship year, we wish to bid her farewell.

Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life." (*John 8:12*)

It has been our responsibility and privilege to provide a place of learning and support for her at Mt. Zion and St. Stephen's – and now through this time, that has been extended to Mt. Gilead and St. Martin, too!

When she came to this community we rejoiced to welcome her into the mission we share as the people of God. During this year, we have come to know and to share in God's loving purpose for you and for all creation. God has blessed her in this community, and God has blessed us through her.

Let us pray.

Gracious God, we thank you for the work and witness of your servant Natalie, who has enriched this extended community of faith and shared her gifts with us. Now bless and preserve her at this time of transition. Day by day, guide her and give her what is needed, friends to cheer her way, and a clear vision of the ministry to which you are now calling her. By your Holy Spirit be present in her pilgrimage, that she may always travel with the one who is the way, the truth, and the life, Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Closing Hymn

God Be with You Till We Meet Again

Listen and sing along [here](#).

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Today's reflection was written by Vicar Natalie Cook.