



“Committed”
Scripture: Psalm 36:5-10
Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church, Asheville, NC
Sunday January 16, 2022
Amy Kim Kyremes-Parks

Psalm 36:5-10 NRSV

Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends to the heavens,
your faithfulness to the clouds.
Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains,
your judgments are like the great deep;
you save humans and animals alike, O Lord.
How precious is your steadfast love, O God!
All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings.
They feast on the abundance of your house,
and you give them drink from the river of your delights.
For with you is the fountain of life;
in your light we see light.
O continue your steadfast love to those who know you,
and your salvation to the upright of heart!

Thank you Kaola for that beautiful reading of that portion of the Psalm. Most Presbyterian Churches follow the lectionary readings of the Bible each week. When it comes to the Psalms, many times we are reading the praise part of the Psalm, leaving some of the consternation out. On my best days I can read this section and it is in harmony with where I am and my outlook... Let's just say this past week hasn't exactly been examples of my best days So, let's go back to the beginning of this Psalm for some real talk - from the New International Translation:

*I have a message from God in my heart
concerning the sinfulness of the wicked:
There is no fear of God
before their eyes.
In their own eyes they flatter themselves
too much to detect or hate their sin.
The words of their mouths are wicked and deceitful;
they fail to act wisely or do good.*

*Even on their beds they plot evil;
they commit themselves to a sinful course
and do not reject what is wrong.*

That is more like it - see those people.... they are horrible. They are flat out wrong about nearly everything... nothing they are doing could be what you want and is running the world. If those people would just_____fill in the blank. I was commiserating about the state we find ourselves in and a loved-one texted me this quote attributed to Einstein: *"The difference between stupidity and genius is that genius has its limits."*

As soon as I say, "those people" I know that I am "those people" for someone else. The plank is in my eye and deep down I know that the othering of one another ends in oppression and death for all of us but I still do it. I choose to forget the somebodiness of everyone- Can you relate?

How much more can we take? Covid rates are soaring, healthcare workers and spaces maxed out. Teachers and students need to be in school and safe but with the growing cases of Omicron, forcing schools to stay open causes more sickness. BUT where are there safe spaces for our kids if schools are closed while parents work?

The investigation continues on the January 6 Capitol Riot and Insurrection. A detailed report from the University of Chicago has uncovered more demographic information on those who were active in this riot - uncovering the reality that these are our neighbors, not right-wing extremists. There is a growing belief in **The Great Replacement** - the idea that the *"Democratic party is trying to replace the current electorate with new people, more obedient voters from the third world"* - their words- not mine.

The fight for Voting Rights continues to be fought out on capitol hill and in courts and state legislatures which continues to disproportionately affect black and brown communities.

North Korea is sending test missiles while tensions grow between our countries. There is a Tsunami watch on the West Coast, States of Emergency have been declared all across the Country. Winter Weather everywhere is further displacing and even killing our siblings without housing.

The horror of being held hostage in a Holy Space of worship.

And oh yeah, the day to day of waking up, managing the everyday living, working and relationships that have undoubtedly been taxed by many and more of what I just listed.

BREATHING EXERCISE - CLENCHING LETTING GO

Committed-

Merriam Webster's Dictionary has two working definitions for this word. The first is this: placed in confinement (as in a mental institution)

Many of us are living with someone or personally experiencing a spectrum of mental illness. It is not something I say flippantly. Our family has a long history of depressive issues - besides my own journey of depression and anxiety, my earliest memory of witnessing mental illness was my grandmother. Manuelita Archuleta - wife to Juan, the railroad worker, who would be gone for weeks at a time laying railroad in the canyons of Utah, mother of 10 children-born at home with grandma Pia as the midwife. Managing the household and loving her husband was what filled her days. Once the children were out of the house she had some great times with Juan, grandchildren and family gatherings. When I was very young my grandfather passed away suddenly. Leaving Manuelita alone for the first time in her life. It wasn't immediate but over the next few years the grief was too much to bear. The sadness took hold and she was diagnosed as manically depressed. She didn't want much to do with a life without Juan and I can imagine that after a lifetime of absorbing and caring for the whole family she became undone in a way that was irreversible. She spent time in a state mental hospital- she was committed. She was officially placed in confinement though I am sure that space of confinement began long before the state mental hospital.

Personally, and as a Society, where are we feeling committed? Placed in confinement where there is seemingly no way out?

I see it in me, I feel it in my body - in my shoulders, in the way some areas of my life feel foggy or even like they have disappeared. I pray, Petitioning God for wisdom, for guidance, for healing and restoration - for radical change.

You are not alone. All of us at some point struggle with depression of some sort. These past few years have been more than we can manage on our own - and the truth is you don't have to do it on your own. This is part of why we gather.

The bookend of this Psalm is as follows - again more real talk from someone, a people struggling to live in this world:

*May the foot of the proud not come against me,
nor the hand of the wicked drive me away.
See how the evildoers lie fallen—
thrown down, not able to rise!*

Merriam's second definition: having made a pledge or commitment to someone (such as a romantic partner) or something (such as a cause)

You and I - we are committed - your presence in this space, whether you are experiencing this live streamed or watching this online later. You have made the choice to be in this space with fellow imperfect sojourners on the journey figuring out how to untangle what has been done, how to be present and prepare for what's next.

Evidence of God's steadfast love has been present in our lives, sometimes very obviously and many times discovered in retrospect. No matter the experience we sense God's commitment to us and are invested in and praying for this commitment God has to us to remain.

Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends to the heavens,
your faithfulness to the clouds.
Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains,
your judgments are like the great deep;
you save humans and animals alike, O Lord.
How precious is your steadfast love, O God!
All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings.
They feast on the abundance of your house,
and you give them drink from the river of your delights.

For with you is the fountain of life;
in your light we see light.

Just over a week ago I was honored to gather with young adults at the College Conference at Montreat. My leadership role was as a Critical Conversation Leader charged with unpacking the theme of “What’s Next?” through worship and keynote messages. Each group was about 150-ish youth and adults... Simple enough. Help young adults whose college years have been marked by isolation, pandemic and more uncertainty than previous generations, navigate the dreaded question asked by many **loving**, well-intentioned friends and family to anyone between the ages of 18 and into their twenties “What’s next?”.

Worship spoke to our understanding of faith, of learning how to practice not knowing the answers. That transformation is a full-bodied experience. The image of a caterpillar going through the transformation to a butterfly literally changes to goop before forming as a butterfly and that even as they are fully formed emerging from the chrysalis, they have to push themselves out without the aid of anyone. Transformation is hard work and the environment can help and hinder this transformation.

So much of the past two years for all of us has been full of letting things go and taking new things up in an attempt to live, so answering the question is more challenging than ever before.

In talking with these groups of emerging adults and their leaders it struck me that we are asking the wrong questions. So, I asked them. What is a better question than “What’s Next?” You see, I am convinced that the only way to change our collective narrative is to start literally changing how we communicate with one another. How are we creating space for transformation, for life, for abundance?

They came up with alternate questions like; “What are you most proud of from the past year? What is bringing you joy? How can I support you? What are you curious about? What makes you feel most alive? What inspires you?”

This gathered group encouraged one another to become committed to a new narrative - a new way of investment in one another that is not measured in grades, success or perceived progressions in life.

Grace Covenant - I am learning this way of being from you: The way you are committed to God' steadfast love, to the mutual liberation of community and the care of self and one another. Choosing commitment in spite of our confinement.

You are providing meals for those going through health challenges and life's hardships.

You are organizing around the Code Purple Shelter. You are sharing resources, time and energy because you know it is necessary.

Committed to humanity

You are making sure homebound members have access to the community and that their homes are safe spaces.

You continue to show up for worship online even though you desperately miss the togetherness of physically being together and yet in order to protect one another you are navigating this isolation from one another and you keep showing up.

Committed to the Beloved Community

Just this week I was honored to be a part of our Wednesday online Bible Study full of curiosity and new perspectives shared. I attended my first Power and Race Team meeting where we voiced our fears following the report on the insurrection while practicing how to listen without immediate territory grabs or political stances. All in hopes to build our muscles around what it really means to embody the work of obliterating white supremacy.

Committed to the Holy work of systematic change

Staff and congregants from GCPC attended the monthly Faith for Justice meeting. We connected with the wider community to be in conversation around the words of Dr. King and what he defined as the Three Evils. . . reminding ourselves that our work is not bound up in being right, but to understand and live into being what Dr King called the importance of being creatively maladjusted in this culture of these evils - the Evil of Racism, the Evil of Poverty and the Evil of War.

Committed to honoring the wisdom of our Ancestors and investing in the future for generations to come

Yesterday morning after framing why outreach to our community is essential to honoring one another as humans, our youth learned about Working Wheels of Asheville and ruminated on the words from our call to worship. Then they bundled up, stayed masked up and went outside to serve by cleaning up trash by the river and helping Working Wheels organize and clean.

Committed to learning from our youth and taking them seriously.

You are attending meetings - continuing to discern how God is calling us to be faith filled participants in the work of restoring humanity.

You are praying for one another - dropping messages in cards, texts and on social media.

You have pledged your financial support of this community to continue the work of being a church without walls.

This is just a snapshot of what happens when the Spirit shows up and we choose commitment over confinement. Grace Covenant, individually and collectively we are committed - not bound by confinement but committed to a liberating love beyond ourselves.

Lest you think this list is giving us a big gold star for being amazing . . . Well, friends, it is amazing and – **And** - you and I know there is still more to commit to together. Maybe some of these opportunities to commit are unfamiliar or something you have never done, maybe this is the Spirit calling out to your curiosity. Either way, you may not see one another every week but you are being church and showing up - Committed.

Our call to worship beckoned us through the words of Dr King to trust in God's Holy presence even when the end is not in sight. This is the work of faith. Holding on to God and to one another - all in the shelter of the wings of the Divine.

I need you church - the community of faith reminds me over and over again that I am not alone.

I want to share two of the ways the wider church community has encouraged me lately. The first is a prayer from a dear friend the Rev. Shawna Bowman serving in Chicago. After that I invite you to find a place to be free of things from your hands or movement and listen to another friend, Rev. Carlton Johnson serving in Atlanta, sing us all a song of encouragement.

Let us make a place to share the truth of our fatigue.

For all our labor,

For all the heavy things you're carrying in your arms,

For generations of pain, you're carrying on your back,

For the worry and fear weighing in your heart,

For the grief sitting deep within you,

For the anxiety pressing in on your brain (that might feel like it's eating itself).

For your heavy heart.

For your weary bones.

For your foggy mind.

For your draining spirit.

For those disrupted and displaced with short term covid and those who are carrying long term covid like a fellow commuter you would never choose, that sits uncomfortably close, and that won't stop talking – making it impossible to breathe.

For those navigating untold loss, layers of stigma, isolation, vulnerability due to disabilities that don't feel seen, let alone like they matter to those with the power to decide our fate and access.

For powerlessness.

For burnout and collapse.

for e x h a u s t i o n.

for the frazzled and afraid for good reason.

Let this blessing meet you between the waves of fatigue.

Let it be a place of rest – even if there is no time for restoration.

Let it be enough to gather yourself in a moment and remember, this isn't forever.

This. Isn't. Forever.

And the truth is we're tired.

And that's ok.

Together let us stay committed - beyond the confinement of our current situations and into the ways the Holy is calling us into these shifts - big and small.

And when that fear rises as the shifts arise, let us work on naming it so we are not confined by it. Grace Covenant - we are committed together and indeed it is Holy. Amen.