

◆ **MELROSE UNITED CHURCH** ◆

86 Homewood Avenue ◆ Hamilton, Ontario ◆ L8P 2M4

905 522 1323 ◆ melrose@melroseunited.ca

◆ www.melroseunited.ca ◆

◆ www.facebook.com/melroseunitedchurch ◆

◆ Twitter: @melroseunited ◆

◆ Instagram: @melroseuc ◆



Minister:

Rev. Sonia Ireson

Music Director:

Alexander Cann

Family Ministries Coordinator:

Meg Chalmers

Custodian:

Kevin Geluch

Office Administrator:

Michelle Millson

◆ **Sunday, March 29, 2020** ◆
Fifth Sunday in Lent

MELROSE UNITED CHURCH

* indicates a time to stand, if you are able
congregational responses are in **boldface type**

◆ GATHERING ◆

PRELUDE - Pastorella

J.S. Bach

* OPENING HYMN – *Spirit of God, Descend upon My Heart* VU 378

*1 Spirit of God, descend upon my heart;
wean it from earth, through all its pulses move;
stoop to my weakness, strength to me impart,
and make me love you as I ought to love.*

*2 I ask no dream, no prophet ecstasies,
no sudden rending of the veil of clay,
no angel visitant, no opening skies,
but take the dimness of my soul away.*

*3 Hast you not bid me love you, God and King;
all, all your own, soul, heart and strength and mind?
I see your cross: there teach my heart to cling.
O let me seek you and O let me find!*

*4 Teach me to love you as your angels love,
one holy passion filling all my frame,
the baptism of the heaven-descended dove,
my heart an altar and your love the flame.*

LIGHTING OF THE CHRIST CANDLE

One: We are finishing our journey through Lent, following Jesus' stories, his temptation, his encounters with Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman, his miracles of healing the blind,

and raising his friend, Lazarus.

All: We are brought full focus into the compelling life, strength of character, teaching and compassion of this Divine light. Let us open ourselves to be in the beam of the Light of the World.

CALL TO WORSHIP

One: Suspended between life and death, between beginnings and endings is the mystery of the unknowing...

**All: On our Lenten journey, we ask ourselves and we companion those who ask in every age:
"Can these bones live?"**

One: Whispered on the wind, borne on the Spirit's breath comes the question:

All: Can these bones live? Entering into the mystery of unknowing, let us worship together.

PRAYER OF APPROACH (said altogether)

Gracious, Living God, there are times when we feel dry and empty, like the dry bones Ezekiel saw in the valley. Breathe upon us, O God, and revitalize us, reanimate us, reawaken us, rekindle in us the fire of your Spirit, that we may share fully in the grace and the life you give. Amen.

WELCOME AND LIFE AND WORK OF THE CONGREGATION

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

INVITATION

One: During the season of Lent, we focus, in part, on our relationship with God. Confession is one of the ways for turning back to God. Confession is a means by which we

look deeply inside to discover the ways love has been blocked by our self-interests. Confession is our way of opening our heart unreservedly to God. Let us invite God's healing love to soften our hearts, opening the way for wholeness.

CONFESSION (said together)

Most Merciful God, today we come before you to confess to you that we have sinned in thought, word and deed, by what we have done and by what we have not done. Our hope is in you, O God, for in you there is steadfast love, forgiveness, and eternal life. Holy God, hear our prayer and, in your love, answer. Amen.

A Moment for Quiet Reflection...

WORDS OF ASSURANCE

One: We are forgiven. We know that God hears our confessions and forgives us. Our God is a God of new beginnings and a repairer of the broken. God's grace is without end. Praise be to God! Amen.

A TIME FOR CHILDREN AND THE CHILD WITHIN US

◆ SERVICE OF THE WORD ◆

Reader: Ian Brisbin

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

One:

May we come before you, O God, with open lives to receive your words that we may give them new life as we listen to what you

have to say. Open our hearts so that we may feel your love surrounding us as you teach us to journey in your way. Amen.

RESPONSIVE PSALM: Psalm 130: 1-14

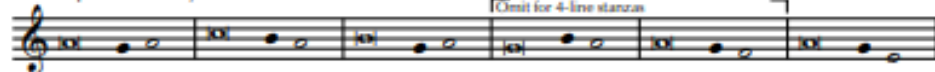
Psalm 130

Antiphon



Text: Lectionary for Mass, © 1969, 1981, 1997, ICEL.
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Conception Abbey Tone



Music: Gregory J. Polan, OSB, © 2010, Conception Abbey, admin. by GIA Publications, Inc.

Gelineau Tone



Music: Joseph Gelineau, SJ, © 1963, The Grail, GIA Publications, Inc., agent

De profundis

1. Out of the dépths I crý to you, O LÓRD;
²Lórd, hear my vóice!
O lét your éars be attentíve
to the sóund of my pléadings.
2. ³If you, O LÓRD, should márk iníquities,
Lórd, who could stánd?
⁴But with yóu is fóund forgíveness,
that yóu may be revéred.
3. ⁵I lóng for yóu, O LÓRD,
my soul lóns for his wórd.
⁶My sóul hópes in the Lórd
more than wátchmen for dáybreak.
4. Móre than wátchmen for dáybreak,
⁷let Israel hópe for the LÓRD.
For with the LÓRD there is mércy,
in him is pléntiful redémption.
⁸It is hé who will redéem Ísrael
from áll its iníquities.
5. To the Fáther Almíghty give glóry,
give glóry to his Són,
to the Spírít most Hóly give práise,
whose réign is for éver.

Text: Psalm 130; The Revised Grail Psalter; © 2010, Conception Abbey and The Grail, admin. by GIA Publications, Inc., agent

THE WISDOM OF ISRAEL: Ezekiel 37: 1-14

The hand of the LORD came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord GOD, you know." Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the LORD." So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. Then he said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.' Therefore prophecy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act," says the LORD.

One: The Word of God.

All: Thanks be to God

REFLECTION: Awakening from Dryness!" - Ezekiel 37:1-14

Like a scene out of a Horror Movie, this Ezekiel passage begins with a very visual description of dry bones strewn about a desert, coming to life, intricately reattached and flushed out with cartilage and flesh and then infused with breath. From the valley of slumber, they dancingly return to life.

The initial intent of this passage was to address the hopelessness of the Israelites fearing that they would never return home from exile. God provides this vision to Ezekiel to metaphorically encourage the Israelites to take heart, hold to the faith and believe that one day their trial would be over.

Any civilization caught in the uncertainties of mass suffering can relate to the hopelessness released by seeing a way out, moving past their current situation into a light somewhere in the distance. Such a time is upon us. We are alarmed daily with rising statistics of individuals contacting Covid-19 and their accompanying death tolls. Figures gallop upward at an alarming rate. News releases changing hourly create much uncertainty and harbor an even greater expectancy of more stringent controls.

Where do we see God in this? There are those who would say that civilization has brought this on themselves - rampant sin, greed, disregard for mother earth, you know all the litany of our foibles, and they are real and extensive. But our God is not a God

of retribution, extracting vengeance and meting out punishment. Our God is a God of distribution. Explanation forthcoming.

I'm reading an exceptionally interesting book called "How to Read the Bible and still be a Christian" by John Dominic Crossan, a former monk and former priest who is regarded as the foremost historical Jesus scholar of our time. He tackles the seemingly God of violence of the Old Testament and how to reconcile it with the nonviolent Jesus of the New.

The New Testament is also not without its conflicts. If we compare the Jesus in the four Gospels with the Book of Revelation, containing John's visions, we move from the nonviolent Jesus to the warmonger on the white horse. Crossan reviews the entire bible cover to cover and extrapolates the God of Creation from the God of Civilization.

The Old Testament God and the New Testament God appear to be a bipolar God. The one portrays a God of wrath and judgment, the other, a God of love and forgiveness.

Crossan finds a way to live with the two portrayals by positing that the radicality of God's non distributive justice is subverted by the normalcy of civilization's violent retributive justice. In the beginning God created, and God declared it was good. God set in place laws and rules that would ensure that people were treated justly and equally and that the vulnerable would not be taken advantage of - within a household all were to be treated equally. This would translate to the world at large. No one would receive less than the other. This clearly indicates God's concern and love for God's people.

But when the Bible came to be written many years later, civilization took the standards of normal expectations of society's behavior and integrated them into God's responses. The violent actions by the people that began in the Garden of Eden when Cain took Abel's life were magnified throughout history. The free will, a gift from God, overrode the conscience of the people and violence became prolific. To match human inclination to destroy, they attributed the desire to God as a destroyer and seeker of vengeance and retribution.

Similarly, the gospel stories about Jesus indicate that he portrayed a radical activism but in a non-violent way that does not equate with the violent portrayal of Jesus at the end times.

As Christians, Crossan suggests that we read the bible as a whole, from cover to cover, not just the New Testament informed by the Old Testament, but as one continuing saga. And, If we are willing to accept that Jesus was nonviolent, then the God that Jesus portrayed had to also be nonviolent.

As we journey closer to Easter and we read this passage at this time, we are struck by the notion that God not only gives life, but God restores life, that death will not have the last word, even when all signs of life have been taken away.

Ezekiel watched the soul of his people wither and die as they were crushed by the capture of their city. They were plundered, murdered, raped and defiled and taken as slaves to work in a foreign land. They became as lifeless as a valley of dry bones. Their disillusionment is not unfamiliar to many of the displaced persons of today. Humanity still wreaks havoc on humanity.

Where are the valleys of dry bones today? Where is the valley of death that requires the promises of the living God? We know the answer to that. We are living in the thick of its chaos. A new deadly threat has arisen. It is indiscriminately wiping out vast numbers of the earth's citizens. We are awaiting our awakening from the dryness of our fear and uncertainty, a call from our God with the promises of new breath. While we wait we hold to faith and we cry out in lament. O God, hear our cries, and answer in your love. Amen.

THE GOSPEL: John 11: 1-45

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." But when Jesus heard it, he said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them." After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. For your

sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him,

“Lord, come and see.” Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?” Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, “Take away the stone.” Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.” Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.” When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

One: This is the Good News of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

All: Praise to you, O Christ.

REFLECTION – “Consider the Possibilities – Resurrection as a Now Reality!” -John 11:1-45 – The raising of Lazarus

John gives the only account of the raising of Lazarus. His portrayal of Jesus is from an incarnational perspective. John’s Jesus does not fit the mold of fully human and fully divine. John wants the reader to understand the full presence and power of God exhibited in his signs and wonders and that the raising of Lazarus signifies that God promises are here and now, already

being realized in the midst of ordinary illnesses and deaths and burials like Lazarus.

Jesus appears to have delayed his arrival at the side of Lazarus until after he had already died. His sisters and friends believe that if he had been there, Lazarus would not have died. Those who believe in the one who is the resurrection and the life shall never die. Martha tells Jesus, you are the Christ, the Son of God. Then the raising of Lazarus comes about, not in the end times, but the time that is already present.

We live in the tension of hope of resurrection and the finality of death as we approach the climax of Easter. We dream of a world, that is whole, healthy and prosperous. None of these are a given in this moment of time. We yearn for a resurrection of new life. We live with the reality of the taint of death all around us. Our world is not whole; it is broken. Our world is not healthy; it is on life-support. Our world is not prosperous; it is teetering on the brink of severe economic collapse. We need the promises of resurrection, of new sustaining life. We need God's presence **now** in our midst.

There are ones who suggest that the obstacles that loom largely in our pathway now are keeping us from seeing and discerning the possibilities and the alternatives that exist. We dwell on the situations we encounter and are blinded to the restorative possibilities of resurrection and new life.

Jesus says "I am the resurrection and the life." Jesus is not referring to some far off day in the future when we will be together again. Jesus is present and the resurrection is in the here and now. Resurrection and life are central to the meaning of our

Christian life. We are asked to consider the possibility that the outcasts of our world, those who are spiritually, physically, socially and emotionally dead might live into the power of resurrection out of their world of poverty, disease, systematic abuse and systemic oppression.

The people were commanded to care for Lazarus as he walked out of the tomb, to unbind him and let him go. Likewise, we are encouraged to tear away the wrappings of fear, anxiety, loss and grief so that all may walk with dignity.

Consider the possibilities of resurrection so that we stand in solidarity with Jesus in the suffering and the pain, ready to unbind those whom God delivers into our midst, even now. Amen.

INVITATION TO THE OFFERING

OFFERING

- ★ OFFERING HYMN - *Praise God from Whom All Blessings Flow*
VU 541

*Praise God from whom all blessings flow;
praise God, all creatures high and low;
give thanks to God in love made known:
Creator, Word and Spirit, One.*

PRAYER OF DEDICATION (said together)

Ezekiel saw a vision of new life transforming death. Take the gifts that we receive, O God - bits of lifeless metal and dead paper - and transform them for our life-giving work in the world. Bless us with the same kind of transformation, that we may become your hands and feet for new life in this world. Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

concluded by the Prayer of Jesus

One: Dearest Lord of Humankind...

It is easy to stay focused on the worst aspects of our world, particularly at this time when Covid-19 has consumed our waking moments. There are huge numbers of people who have been displaced from their meaningful work, unable to congregate, chat with friends and fill their days. Their thoughts go to how will they feed themselves, or pay their rent, or their bills?

It is easy to see large groups of people in Nursing and Retirement Homes, in Hospitals and Prisons, in Refugee Camps, and Institutions, in Cruise Ships, and foreign soil, or people trapped, alone, lonely and afraid, unsure of what tomorrow will bring in the spread of the Covid-19.

All: Sometimes it seems that death and destruction will get their way. Yet Jesus saw that life was present in the darkness, and so can we.

One: It is easy to stay focused on the worst aspects of the suffering, for some it robs their sleep. It is more difficult to get the drugs; and treatment they need. Parents are challenged with children at home, how to keep them entertained and safely confined; Families worry about the elderly in their homes or apart, keeping them virus free, getting treatment for them when they are ill, not being able to be with them even when they are dying, because of lockdowns.

All: Sometimes it seems that death and destruction will get their way. Yet Jesus saw that life was present in the darkness, and so can we.

One: It is easy to stay focused on the worst aspects of society: to be aware of conflict, division and the lack of leadership and planning, to hear conflicting messages, and messages of doom and gloom, to know that our people in charge are facing something they have never had to deal with before, unlike any other pandemic. Their projections and ability to respond is hampered by its ability to transmit before anyone is aware it is present.

All: Sometimes it seems that death and destruction will get their way. Yet Jesus saw that life was present in the darkness and so can we.

One: It is easy to stay focused on the worst aspects of ourselves. To see ourselves as selfish and uncaring, our greed and our disregard for the safety and comfort of others. To see with limited vision when our government blocks gatherings of friendship and celebration and to feel they are more important than the potential for passing on the disease.

All: Sometimes it seems we dwell on the negative parts of our character, yet the life of Jesus calls us to accentuate the positive and find the life that is fulfilling and good in whatever circumstances we find ourselves.

**All: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come, your will be done,
on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sin as we forgive those who sin against us.**

Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now
for for ever. Amen.

* CLOSING HYMN – *O God, How We Have Wandered* VU 112

*1 O God, how we have wandered
and hidden from your face'
in foolishness have squandered
your legacy of grace.
But how, in exile dwelling,
we turn with fear and shame,
as distant but compelling,
you call us each by name.*

*2 And now at length discerning
the evil that we do,
by faith we are returning
with hope d trust in you.
In haste you come to meet us,
and home rejoice bring,
in gladness there to greet us
with calf and robe and ring.*

*3 O God of all the living,
both banished and restored,
compassionate, forgiving,
our peace and hope assured.
Grant now that our transgressing,
our faithlessness may cease.
Stretch out your hand in blessing,
in pardon, and in peace.*

COMMISSIONING

BENEDICTION – *The Day You Gave Us, Lord, Is Ended* VU 437

*1 The day you gave us, God, is ended,
the sun is sinking in the west;
to you our morning hymns ascended,
your praise shall sanctify our rest.*

*2 We thank you that your church unsleeping,
while earth rolls onward into light,
through all the world a watch is keeping
and rests not now by day or night.*

*3 As o'er each continent and island
the dawn leads on another day,
the voice of prayer is never silent,
nor dies the strain of praise away.*

*4 The sun that bids us rest is waking
your church beneath the western sky,
and hour by hour fresh lips are making
your wondrous doings heard on high.*

*5 So be it, God! Your throne shall never,
like earth's proud empires, pass away;
your rule remains and grows forever,
until there dawns that glorious day.*

POSTLUDE - Adagio, from Sonata #18, K 576

W. A. Mozart