

◆ **MELROSE UNITED CHURCH** ◆

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◆ **Sunday, March 22, 2020** ◆
Fourth Sunday in Lent

MELROSE UNITED CHURCH

◆ SUNDAY, MARCH 22, 2020 ◆

FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT

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

◆ **GATHERING** ◆

PRELUDE

INTROIT

* OPENING HYMN – *Arise, Your Light has Come*

VU 79

Youtube version:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X_ao8INaVHc

LIGHTING OF THE CHRIST CANDLE

One: Have you ever jumped into water that was way deeper than you expected? As you fought for breath and frantically swam back to the surface for light...

All: You gasp, inhaling the life-giving air; your eyes welcome the light and your panic resides. That is what it feels like to be bathed in the light of Jesus Christ. Darkness of fear expelled, Peace of Christ embraced.

CALL TO WORSHIP

One: As long nights give way to light and winter sleep to fresh beginnings.

All: we come today to be reminded of God's love for us.

One: Like the green shoots of renewed life, stirring beneath the soil.

All: We welcome an awakening of God's word in our lives.

One: In this time of reflection and repentance,

All: We affirm our identity, we claim our security, as children of God. Let us worship this awesome God.

PRAYER OF APPROACH (said together)

In the beauty of this place, we come to pray, to worship, and to receive healing and hope. We come from the struggles and triumphs of the week, needing to feel the soothing presence of God.

Lord God, be with us today. Calm and soothe our souls.

We rejoice in this special place you have provided for us, where we gather to talk of your presence and your love, to sing your praises and to be empowered to go forth to serve our community. Amen.

WELCOME AND LIFE AND WORK OF THE CONGREGATION

★ HYMN - *Precious Lord Take My Hand*

VU 640

Youtube version:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AWFd5ohIW30>

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)

In the silence of our hearts, we open ourselves to you, confess our sins, and ask for your forgiveness.

A Moment for Quiet Reflection...

★ HYMN – *Holy Spirit Come to Us*

MV 75

Youtube version: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zasyz-tJkOg>

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.

◆ **SERVICE OF THE WORD** ◆

★ HYMN – *The King of Love*

VU 273

Youtube version:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bsULX5J3xFA>

Reader: Eric Windhorst

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

PSALM: Psalm 23

VU 747

Youtube version:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3rYnyDcw0a4>

WISDOM OF ISRAEL - 1 Samuel 16: 1-13

The Lord said to Samuel, "How long will you grieve over Saul? I have rejected him from being king over Israel. Fill your horn with oil and set out; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons." Samuel said, "How can I go? If Saul hears of it, he will kill me." And the Lord said, "Take a heifer with you, and say, 'I have come to sacrifice to the Lord.' Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do; and you shall anoint for me the one whom I name to you." Samuel did what the Lord commanded, and came to Bethlehem. The elders of the city came to meet him trembling, and said, "Do you come peaceably?" He said, "Peaceably; I have come to sacrifice to the Lord; sanctify yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice." And he sanctified Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice.

When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, "Surely the Lord's anointed is now before the Lord." But the Lord said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." Then Jesse called Abinadab, and made him pass before Samuel. He said, "Neither has the Lord chosen this one." Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, "Neither has the Lord chosen this one." Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, "The Lord has not chosen any of these." Samuel said to Jesse, "Are all your sons here?" And he said, "There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep." And Samuel said to Jesse, "Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here." He sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. The Lord said, "Rise and anoint him; for this is

the one.” Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward. Samuel then set out and went to Ramah.

One: The Word of God.

All: Thanks be to God.

REFLECTION: “A Faithful Dancing Heart!” - 1 Samuel 16: 1-13

Youthful, handsome and artistic – these are the qualities the Bible presents to the readers in the portrayal of young David.

In the time of Samuel, God’s prophet Saul was the first king anointed by God. Saul has fallen out of favour with God. As is often the case, we enter the reading at a point of fait accompli without any reason given as to how we got there.

Samuel, born to the barren, Hanna was promised to the temple in gratitude for his conception. God seeks his aid in finding a replacement for Saul. It is clear that God has a definitive plan of action. Samuel is sent to the house of Jesse. All seven of the eldest sons are presented to God for his acceptance. None are what God desires. The youngest son, David, is retrieved from the fields where he is tending sheep. It is he that is the chosen and anointed by Samuel to fulfill God’s purpose.

What strikes me as remarkable in this passage is the truism that One does not see as God sees. The outward appearance can be deceptive and it is certainly how we first come to judge one another. But God, looks beyond, deep into the nature of the heart.

Hagar, slave to Abraham and Sarah was banished from their home by the jealous Sarah. You will recall that Sarah gave her to Abraham to bear a child when Sarah was unable to do so. Once Sarah was favoured by God and about to bear a son, Isaac, Hagar became excess baggage. She found herself alone and in distress in the wilderness. God came to her rescue and prophesied that the child she was carrying, Ishmael, was destined for great things.. She called God by the name El-roi – the God who sees.

One theologian makes an interesting point. Samuel could not see as God sees. David, who is described as being handsome with beautiful eyes condemns himself through those eyes in his lechery of Bathsheba and the arranged death of her husband. In spite of some serious flaws, David is said to have been “a man after God’s own heart.” If we cannot trust the eyes of a prophet, or one who God favours, then how can we trust anyone who claims to know God’s will. We are cautioned against following those who claim to know God has given them inside information on - who to vote for, or the latest disaster as the will of God.

God sees into the depths of our hearts, hearts that are carefully hidden from others’ view, and God recognizes our spiritual blindness....

In David, God decided that he had a leader with a “heart.” Early peoples understood heart to be the center of the soul – full of wisdom, commitment and character. God found the right combination in his choice of David; knowing he was not perfect and that he would not always make the right choices, nevertheless God understood that David had a faithful heart.

David had a deep love of music, poetry and dance. He was constantly working out the steps of right relationship with God in a dance of to and fro. Sometimes he got it right; other times when he took his eyes off God, it was as if he was dancing to a music that only he could hear.

We, as individuals and in our corporate role as the church, are continually working out our conflicts, our omissions, and our ways to communicate our mission and our love of God.

Donald Olsen says that God believed that it took a giant to slay a giant. But beyond that it took a faithful, dancing heart to carry his message to the people. He suggests that is what the church needs too - a faithful dancing heart, willing to step and sway with the needs of the time.

The time requiring our attention is *now*. It is a time like none other for us, when much is needed that is outside our routine experience. There are many who view this current crisis as a time of Sabbath, a time for healing of the earth. It is certainly going to test all our ingenuity, and our ability to follow instructions meant to protect, isolate and contain the spread of the disease. How we respond has the ability to magnify the outcome for better or worse.

We are embarking on writing a narrative in our life stories that will impact our communities in the days to come. Let us hold fast to faithful hearts, open minds and be ambassadors of Jesus in projecting the love of God to all.

We will exchange touch and closeness for as long as we have to, for encouragement and uplift, through the means of

communication that are open to us. May God be with us all!
Amen.

THE GOSPEL - John 9: 1-41

As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see.

The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?" Some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him." He kept saying, "I am the man." But they kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" He answered, "The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' Then I went and washed and received my sight." They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know."

They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, "He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see." Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath." But

others said, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" And they were divided. So they said again to the blind man, "What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened." He said, "He is a prophet." The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" His parents answered, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself." His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him." So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, "Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner." He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" He answered them, "I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?" Then they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from." The man answered, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." They answered him, "You

were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?" And they drove him out.

Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" He answered, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him." Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." He said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped him.

Jesus said, "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind." Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, "Surely we are not blind, are we?" Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains.

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

All: Praise to you, O Christ.

REFLECTION - "Are we Blinded to Someone Who is Different as a Defining Marker?" - John 9: 1-41

We are never happy when bad things pop up until we can assign blame. Someone always has to be responsible for the consequences. Disfigurement, unsighted eyes, whenever something goes wrong and the results are less than perfect, we have to find a reason, surely it is your own fault, or your parent's fault.

This attitude is rearing its ugly head now in the midst of our pandemic. Desperate Canadians are trying to find their way home before time runs out. The comments posted on Facebook are mostly negative. You should have taken this more seriously; you should not have gone, no sympathy for you. And that is the

mild ones. As if we all haven't made bad decisions at some time in our lives that have adversely impacted us later on.

Why - is a question forever on our lips. If only we could ascertain the mind of God? Then all the answers would come tumbling at us and we could live with the divine knowledge and certainty. Blindness had to be as a result of human sin. There could be no other explanation.

I wonder how many times we listen to another's story and because it evolves outside our frame of reference we discount it. The man himself has no way to explain it. He can only state - Once I was blind, now I can see. Once, this was the state of affairs, now it is this. I can't explain how I got here, I only know that I have.

Something extraordinary happens and our perceptions have changed. Our eyes are opened and here is what I see now. It is a story about conversion, unexplained, yet everything has changed. In the end, there is no need to explain Jesus, it is only necessary to confess him.

One of the ironies revealed in this story is that the blind man regains his sight, but at the same time, everyone else in the story loses theirs - not their ability to see, rather their capacity to believe and understand what they have witnessed. The once, blind man is challenged again and again to explain what cannot possibly be.

The struggle in dealing with the horrors and fall out of evil happening around us is not to believe that they are sent from and approved by God, it is to see with the eyes of faith that God uses

these happenings in ways that works to accomplish God's purposes.

At the moment we are in a counter culture of traditional societal values. Observers who study the workings of societies support the idea that we have a need as social beings to live in a community, interactive and immersed in the lives of one another. Today's challenge is to embrace the isolation that is so threatening to loneliness, in order to protect ourselves and others from the spread of a disease that has no respect for boundaries. Our very happiness is tied to our ties with others. Our stability and safety are at stake.

There is a very interesting outcome in the man's healing. People who were always a part of his support system, who crossed paths with him throughout his life fail to recognize him once the spit and mud bath does it work. Could it be that they were so fixated on his identification as an individual who was blind, that the reality of new sight blinds them to the old identity? His lack of sight was his defining marker and anything else camouflages the change in his status.

Do we look upon individuals who are differently-abled and see only the disability instead of their underlying humanity?

We also note the focus of the religious establishment as one who negates the actual happening in a desire to control the outcome of the story. They refuse to believe that this recovery of sight could have been carried out by one who is sanctioned by God. It contradicts their laws of healing on the Sabbath and their prescribed belief of the way things are supposed to happen.

There has to be another explanation because they have already determined that Jesus is not the divine son of God.

The man born blind is shunted aside. No one is willing to advocate for him or acknowledge his extraordinary healing. They fear antagonizing the solidly held opinions of the religious establishment. They will not be ostracized in spite of this miracle. He alone, in the face of rejection, tells the truth and stands up as a witness to Jesus' identity. This holy light in our midst is not a light to be blinded by, it is a light that heals and saves.

The man never asked to have his sight restored. He was the recipient of Jesus' grace. First the sign happened, then, Jesus explains how to interpret the sign. The weight of the passage is not on the miracle itself, rather on the dialogue that follows. The debate that follows without Jesus being present is to determine if he is a demon doing these signs because they are unwilling to accept any other answer.

The truth of who Jesus is, becomes readily available to the man who can now see. He has been transformed beyond gifted sight to gradual and then full-blown belief. He hears, he sees, he believes and then he worships. He has become one of the sheep of Jesus' fold, a disciple under Jesus' protection. Our process of transformation and redemption takes us on much the same path. We hear; we see; we believe; and then we worship. Thanks be to this merciful, life-changing God who lifts us out of where we are in to new life. Amen.

ANTHEM – Brother James’ Air

G. Jacob

Youtube version: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8lrVouFZlMY>

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.*

Youtube version: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HwO-7OAW9nM>

PRAYER OF DEDICATION (said together)

It may or may not surprise us, O God, how large a role money plays in our lives. We live in a money economy. We depend on a wage, a pension, or an income. We buy our food, pay for our recreation, purchase our transportation and pay for our medical treatment. Money, or lack of it plays a large role in our lives. In Christian discipleship, we bind together our money and our actions. Receive and bless what we offer today. Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

One:

Loving God, listen to our cries, hear our prayers and answer in your mighty love.

We pray for healing of the ever-spreading Covid-19 virus. It is foremost on our minds. We can't get relief from it – news

announcements, printed media, empty store shelves, every conversation we undertake.

We have friends and relatives who are attempting to return home from travel abroad; we have friends and loved ones who are required to go out to work every day – to provide essential services to those who are ill. They place their lives in the center of the storm, at great risk to their own health and that of their families. We are grateful to the many professions who are required to keep our world as close to normal as possible. But these are not normal times and we call upon you, O God, to steady us, to fill us with courage, kindness, love and gratitude, to change us into the people you would have us be.

We pray for our world that groans under the pressure, for those who are afraid, lonely and isolated, in fear for their lives, those who are caregivers, who are mourning, who feel without hope. Help us who are on the sidelines, find ways to enrich others lives, to help the vulnerable, to share what we have when others are in need.

Enter our homes and our places of work, and our hearts, that we may be reminded of your perpetual care and eternal oversight. We pray in the powerful, healing name of Jesus Christ....
concluded by the Prayer of Jesus

**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 – *I Heard the Voice of Jesus*

VU 626

Youtube version:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lOrq0uMIQe0>

COMISSIONING

BENEDICTION

CHORAL RESPONSE – May the Grace of Christ

VU 419

*May the grace of Christ our Saviour, and our Maker's boundless love
with the Holy Spirit's favour, rest upon us from above.*

POSTLUDE