

This short act of worship has been produced for you by Deacon Jacqueline Esama-John. If you are well enough and able, why not spend a few moments with God, perhaps at a time when you would normally be sharing with others in church - pray for them as they pray for you.

### Introduction

So, here we are on the third Sunday of Lent.

I wonder where you would say you are on that path today. But wherever you are, in your praying, in your fasting, and in your almsgiving, I pray that you have an awareness of God's abiding love and presence.

For most of this week, I have been thinking and praying as I believe a lot of us are for the people of Ukraine with the senseless deaths and destruction, with some of their cities being bombed to extinction etc. I have been thinking and praying, for all countries embroiled in war, for leaders of all the nations, for those on the frontlines as well as behind the scenes, working all the hours collecting and distributing relief items for refugees, for those offering hospitality across the world and other places where welcome is being given.

So, as we come together to worship, let us pause and allow our senses to calm. I invite you to take up Jesus' invitation in Mathew 11: 28-30:

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. <sup>29</sup> Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. <sup>30</sup> For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." (NIV)

I would also like to invite you to have a candle or tea light to hand, which we will be using during our prayers of intercession.

### Let us pray

Blessed are you, Lord our God.  
How sweet are your words to the taste,  
sweeter than honey to the mouth.  
How precious are your commands for our life,  
more than the finest gold in our hands.  
How marvellous is your will for the world,  
Unending is your love for the nations.

Loving father you love us so much that you gave your only Son Jesus Christ to die for our sins.

Our voices shall sing of your promises, of your faithfulness and your loving kindness to all that you created.

Take O God, take power and reign for you hate nothing that you have made.

Blessed be God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Blessed be God for ever and ever.

**Amen.**

**Hymn 1: STF 779**

(Sing/Read/pray/proclaim the words or listen to it here.)

<https://youtu.be/BqKUFWnRYrA>

**Verse 1**

Holy, holy, holy,  
my heart, my heart adores you!  
My heart is glad to say the words:  
You are holy, Lord!

Original Spanish

Santo, santo, santo,  
mi corazón te adora!  
Mi corazón te sabe decir:  
santo eres Señor!

Argentinian liturgical text (translated by Maggie Hamilton)

**Prayer of confession**

Let us confess our sins to God.

**Silence**

Lord Jesus, you were called the friend of sinners, be my friend, for I acknowledge that I have sinned. Forgive the wrong that I have done and the right that I have failed to do; my secret and my more open sins; my sins of ignorance and my deliberate sins; sins to please myself and sins to please others; the sins which I remember, and the sins which I have forgotten; forgive all these, for it was for me also that you died. My Lord and Saviour. Amen

*John Wesley 1703 – 179*

**Absolution....**

The almighty and merciful Lord  
Grant, you pardon and forgiveness of all your sins  
Time for amendment of life  
And the grace and strength of the Holy spirit.

**Amen. Thanks be to God**

**1<sup>st</sup> Reading: Isaiah 55: 1-9 New International Version**

Invitation to the Thirsty

**55** “Come, all you who are thirsty,  
come to the waters;  
and you who have no money,  
come, buy and eat!  
Come, buy wine and milk  
without money and without cost.

<sup>2</sup>Why spend money on what is not bread,  
and your labor on what does not satisfy?  
Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good,  
and you will delight in the richest of fare.

<sup>3</sup>Give ear and come to me;  
listen, that you may live.

I will make an everlasting covenant with you,  
my faithful love promised to David.

<sup>4</sup>See, I have made him a witness to the peoples,  
a ruler and commander of the peoples.

<sup>5</sup>Surely you will summon nations you know not,  
and nations you do not know will come running to you,  
because of the LORD your God,  
the Holy One of Israel,  
for he has endowed you with splendor.”

<sup>6</sup>Seek the LORD while he may be found;  
call on him while he is near.

<sup>7</sup>Let the wicked forsake their ways  
and the unrighteous their thoughts.

Let them turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on them,  
and to our God, for he will freely pardon.

<sup>8</sup>“For my thoughts are not your thoughts,  
neither are your ways my ways,”  
declares the LORD.

<sup>9</sup>“As the heavens are higher than the earth,  
so are my ways higher than your ways  
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

**2<sup>nd</sup> Reading: Luke 13: 1-9 New International Version**

Repent or Perish

**13** Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. <sup>2</sup>Jesus answered, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? <sup>3</sup>I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. <sup>4</sup>Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? <sup>5</sup>I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.”

<sup>6</sup>Then he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it but did not find

any. <sup>7</sup> So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, 'For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?'

<sup>8</sup> "'Sir,' the man replied, 'leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. <sup>9</sup> If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.'"

### Reflection

So, I have had all kinds of deep thoughts about both our Bible readings today – the concept of good and evil, of promise and peril, of eternal realities. The world is a risky place in which terrible things happen- most of the time, because of selfish human decisions-just the sort of selfishness, cruelty, and short-sightedness that we are witnessing today in Putin's war against Ukraine.

Isaiah's audience may have spent their money, or their effort, unwisely. "Call upon God", the prophet Isaiah admonishes. "Come all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost". God is near and God will respond. The invitation to share in the life of this new

community is extended to all who "repent and return to the Lord" for they will be pardoned. By the same token, Jesus tells us that death is coming for us all, but it will not have the last word if we repent. Repentance acknowledges that God can redeem, God can set right, God can make whole. The Apostle Paul tells us that God's ways are past finding out (Romans 11: 33). And like grace, this generosity is not confined. It transcends time as an everlasting covenant and crosses borders.

I feel like our scripture readings today give us some helpful perspectives on the nature of God's mercy – the use of images like water, bread, wine, milk, and fruit, all of which are ordinary, everyday food and drink, gives me a blessed assurance to rest in a God who forgives, heals, restores, and makes all things things new.

Over the last few years and in my ministerial role, I have had countless opportunities of meeting all sorts of people including those with various kinds of sickness or diseases, those who are very angry or very sad, and often trying to make sense of the difficult situations they find themselves in. Many a time, people wondered if it might be something that they did in the past and if it was God's way of punishing them for their sin. In the world of Pentecostalism, for example, there is always a call for prayer for "Generational sin"-the idea that the bad things

that are happening to people now is a result of some terrible things that their ancestors have done in the past, so generations yet unborn will suffer the consequences of these things. It is also commonly believed among different cultures and peoples that pain and sickness or premature death are signs of God's adverse judgement. There was even this kind of opinion going around at the onset of the Covid -19 pandemic that this virus has come upon us because of our sinfulness. We find these sorts of assumptions throughout Biblical history too. In John's Gospel, Jesus' disciples asked him about a blind man, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" ([John 9:2](#)). The answer was neither, but that God's works might be revealed in him ([John 9:3](#)). Ananias and Sapphira in (Acts 5:1-11) were struck dead for lying to the apostles about money. Another example is found in (Joshua 7: 10-26) where sin in Israel's camp led to their defeat.

I always find it challenging to try to convince people that human suffering is not due to God's punishment for their sin, that in fact God understands what our suffering is like. That God has promised to redeem all things, including even our suffering. A poignant moment for me was a pastoral visit to a lovely lady who had lost five significant members of her family within a five-year circle including her husband, a parent, a nephew, and a sibling one after the other. The circumstances of the deaths were incomprehensible. The pain was

excruciating, tears flowed like a river. I couldn't make sense of such tragedy. All I could say in that moment as I sat down with her was that God loves her and was not punishing her. The tears started flowing again, but now they were tears of relief. She told me that she felt better for hearing that she was not being punished. We then went on to talk about the ways in which she needed to be gentle with herself, to forgive others as well as herself and so on and so forth. Tears continued to flow- Hopefully tears of relief. Most of them were from this lady. But I must admit that some of them were mine too.

And so, the promise of our gospel story today is that we have all sinned, yes, but suffering is **not** a form of punishment. And if there is anything we can take from the story of the fig tree this morning, or any time of day or night that you might be reading this, it is that suffering, and calamity are not God's punishment for sin. Jesus replied to his audience: "do you really think that because these Galileans suffered in this way, they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?". And just to make sure the crowd listening gets the point, Jesus goes on to offer a second example of people who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them, asking once more, "do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem," again the answer is a definitive **No**.

Jesus' response was to look at these tragic events from another angle. Death, in each case, came suddenly and unexpectedly.

The question is, how could those who died have been prepared for it? So it will be, he said, for those who do not repent while they have time. “As it is recorded in the Bible “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.” (Hebrews 3: 15). So today, was the day to turn to God – tomorrow might be too late.

I like the parable of the barren fig tree. It is both comforting and disturbing. The barren tree is an image of judgment, but there is also a call to repentance. We must acknowledge the fact that just because suffering is not punishment doesn't mean that it is disconnected entirely from sin. Pilate's murderous acts of terror, as well as those horrific actions of today's tyrants that we read about in the news or watch with horror on our television screens, are sinful. The invasion of Ukraine by the Russians is by all accounts sinful. Sin has consequences, and there are all kinds of bad behaviours that contribute to much of the misery in the world, and the more we can confront that sin, the less suffering there will be.

Jesus has said that he will return to judge humankind at an unexpected time. And when Jesus says that those who do not repent or turn away from their sin will perish, he was not saying this in the literal sense that they will be killed by soldiers, for example or have a building fall on them. Rather, he was referring to the apocalypse – the kind of 'last judgement' and the fact that all humanity will face the

judgement of God in the end.

The parable of the fig tree takes up the theme of judgement and the need to turn to God. In the world of agriculture, trees that show no sign of bearing fruit are seen as wasted land and lost profit and therefore should be cut down. Notice that it is the gardener who pleads for extra time for the fig tree. He takes another perspective and offers a second chance. He will nurture and care for it. He promises to loosen the soil around its roots so they can breathe and add manure for nourishment. Hopefully it will bear fruit and be spared of destruction.

I would like to believe that the parable of the fig tree is about our shared responsibility in the kingdom of God: we need to be watchful. We need to know when to plant, when to tend or when to uproot. It is about making wise choices and being dedicated in our discipleship. We need to get our values in the right place, aligning ourselves with God in times of temptation and trusting God's grace in moments of barrenness and brokenness. God will provide us with the strength and fortitude to begin again.

In this Lenten season of repentance, and as we process our personal and communal hurts with the images streaming in from Ukraine, and other areas of the world, may we turn towards the light of Christ within and around us. That in our

praying, fasting, and giving of alms, we may experience God's peace and comfort. Amen.

**Prayers of Intercessions. (If it is safe to do so, please light your candle or tealight and bring your own prayers to God)**

Holy God,

whose Spirit hovered over the waters at the dawn of creation and brought order out of chaos, hear our prayers for all who live in dry and parched lands, who know what it is to hunger and thirst.

We lift the people of Ukraine to you; we pray for a ceasefire, a withdrawal of Russian forces and for peace to prevail. We pray for the innocent, the women, men, and children who are displaced, whose lives are disrupted, and who live in fear of the atrocities of war. We pray for those with power – that they may make a resolute and public decision to stop the use of weapons of any type, to actively work for peace and seek peaceful solutions to dispute and disagreement.

We pray for other areas in the world where there is war and terrorism, where there is famine and exploitation, we pray for peace and compassion. We pray that there may be a recognition of common and shared humanity and God's promise of flourishing life for all people.

We pray for political and societal leaders around the world, in the face of chaos and uncertainty-that they may work with integrity to bring about peace and a fairer and safer world.

We pray for all who are working to seek a better world, those at the frontlines and those working behind the scenes of the relief agencies and other charitable organisations, those volunteering their time and resources, those offering hospitality and safe passages in order that people might experience life in all its fullness.

We pray for the global church, that through its prayers, actions, and public statements, it may continue to live out the gospel message of hope and trust in God in Jesus, whose love never fails.

We pray for healing and wholeness for those who are sick in body mind and spirit and in all kinds of need. For those who are grieving the loss of a loved one. That they may receive from you in an extraordinary way the joy of your redeeming love.

We pray for ourselves, that we may repent and return to you and enjoy the fullness of your heavenly banquet prepared for all of humanity.

Merciful father: accept these prayers for the sake of your Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ. **Amen**

**Taize Meditative song (If it is safe to do so, please hold your candle or tealight in your hand and Sing/Read/pray/proclaim the words or listen to it here)**

<https://youtu.be/8BWKmahZgLM>

Oh, Lord hear my prayer  
Oh, Lord hear my prayer  
When I call answer me  
Oh, Lord hear my prayer  
Oh, Lord hear my prayer  
Come and listen to me

### **The Lord's Prayer**

**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,  
the power, and the glory,  
for ever and ever. Amen.**

### **Hymn 2: STF 610- Best of all is God is with us**

(Sing/Read/pray/proclaim the words or listen to it here)

<https://youtu.be/zpVfjZ7Pxm>

#### **Verse 1**

Best of all is God is with us,  
God will hold and never fail.  
Keep that truth when storms are raging,  
God remains though faith is frail.

#### **Verse 2**

Best of all is God is with us,  
life goes on and needs are met,  
God is strongest in our weakness.  
Love renews, will not forget.

#### **Verse 3**

Best of all is God is with us,  
hearts are challenged, strangely warmed,

faith is deepened, courage strengthened,  
grace received and hope reformed.

#### **Verse 4**

Best of all is God is with us,  
in our joy and through our pain,  
till that final acclamation:  
'life is Christ, but death is gain'.

#### **Verse 5**

Best of all is God is with us  
as we scale eternal heights,  
love grows stronger, undiminished;  
earth grows dim by heaven's lights.

Andrew E Pratt (born 1948)  
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#### **Benediction and sending out**

We go now from this service of worship to the service of God's people wherever we meet them, refreshed by the living water and bread that money cannot buy and that which only Jesus can provide. May be outward looking and care deeply. May we search out the dry places and the arid souls and become for them an answer to prayer.

And as you go about your daily business  
May the blessings of the God of life, the God of second chances  
The Christ of Love who calls us to repentance  
And the Spirit of grace and courage  
Be upon you and remain with you this day and forevermore.  
Amen.

We go in Peace to love and serve the Lord  
**Thanks be to God. Amen**

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