

FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
JULY 2, 2023



ST. JOHN UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

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Ushers –

(NCH) New Century Hymnal - CCLI LICENSE #11164431

*Please stand if comfortably able.
Respond with words in bold print.

***RESPONSIVE CALL TO WORSHIP:**

One: O Sing to God a song of joy,

Many: For we have been greeted by our God.

One: O Dance for God a waltz of welcome,

Many: For we have been embraced by our God.

One: O Create for God a portrait of hope,

Many: For we have been inspired by our God.

***PRAYER OF INVOCATION:**

You patiently wait for us on the threshold of your Realm, ready to welcome us as we step across the doorway of your Kin-dom. As we see your inviting lights, we feel the warmth of your love. May we open doors to your Realm. May we be your encouraging embrace and your melodic voice of welcome in a world filled with harsh tones. Amen.

***PRAYER OF REFLECTION AND TRANSFORMATION:**

Holy Prophet, Divine Warmth,
Creating a home for strangers and friends can often take extra effort. From the extra cleaning to food preparations, we spend extra time, talents, and treasures to care for your children. Sometimes, we often do not feel as if we have the energy to go the extra distance – to ensure the drinks are cold and our homes are cozy. Give us an extra boost in our bodies, minds, and souls to be the welcome team in your Realm. May we embrace divine hospitality as we care for the ones struggling the most, the ones caring for your creation, and the ones speaking prophetically for you. Amen.

***WORDS OF GRACE AND LOVE:**

God continues to welcome us into the Divine Realm even when we walk past its doorway. God's magnificent grace will refresh our hearts, inspiring us to return again. Amen.

SCRIPTURE LESSONS: Genesis 22:1-14

Binding of Isaac

22 After these events, God tested Abraham and said to him, “Abraham!”

Abraham answered, “I’m here.”

² God said, “Take your son, your only son whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah. Offer him up as an entirely burned offering there on one of the mountains that I will show you.” ³ Abraham got up early in the morning, harnessed his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, together with his son Isaac. He split the wood for the entirely burned offering, set out, and went to the place God had described to him.

⁴ On the third day, Abraham looked up and saw the place at a distance. ⁵ Abraham said to his servants, “Stay here with the donkey. The boy and I will walk up there, worship, and then come back to you.”

⁶ Abraham took the wood for the entirely burned offering and laid it on his son Isaac. He took the fire and the knife in his hand, and the two of them walked on together. ⁷ Isaac said to his father Abraham, “My father?”

Abraham said, “I’m here, my son.”

Isaac said, “Here is the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the entirely burned offering?”

⁸ Abraham said, “The lamb for the entirely burned offering? God will see to it, my son.” The two of them walked on together. ⁹ They arrived at the place God had described to him. Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He tied up his son Isaac and laid him on the altar on top of the wood. ¹⁰ Then Abraham stretched out his hand

and took the knife to kill his son as a sacrifice. ¹¹ But the LORD’s messenger called out to Abraham from heaven, “Abraham? Abraham?” Abraham said, “I’m here.”

¹² The messenger said, “Don’t stretch out your hand against the young man, and don’t do anything to him. I now know that you revere God and didn’t hold back your son, your only son, from me.” ¹³ Abraham looked up and saw a single ram caught by its horns in the dense underbrush. Abraham went over, took the ram, and offered it as an entirely burned offering instead of his son. ¹⁴ Abraham named that place “the LORD sees.” That is the reason people today say, “On this mountain the LORD is seen.”

EPISTLE LESSON: Romans 6:12-23

The words of the Apostle Paul

¹² So then, don’t let sin rule your body, so that you do what it wants. ¹³ Don’t offer parts of your body to sin, to be used as weapons to do wrong. Instead, present yourselves to God as people who have been brought back to life from the dead, and offer all the parts of your body to God to be used as weapons to do right. ¹⁴ Sin will have no power over you, because you aren’t under Law but under grace.

Freedom from sin

¹⁵ So what? Should we sin because we aren’t under Law but under grace? Absolutely not! ¹⁶ Don’t you know that if you offer yourselves to someone as obedient slaves, that you are slaves of the one whom you obey? That’s true whether you serve as slaves of sin, which leads to death, or as slaves of the kind of obedience that leads to righteousness.

¹⁷ But thank God that although you used to be slaves of sin, you gave wholehearted obedience to the teaching that was handed down to you, which provides a pattern. ¹⁸ Now

that you have been set free from sin, you have become slaves of righteousness. ¹⁹ (I'm speaking with ordinary metaphors because of your limitations.)

Once, you offered the parts of your body to be used as slaves to impurity and to lawless behavior that leads to still more lawless behavior. Now, you should present the parts of your body as slaves to righteousness, which makes your lives holy.

²⁰ When you were slaves of sin, you were free from the control of righteousness. ²¹ What consequences did you get from doing things that you are now ashamed of? The outcome of those things is death. ²² But now that you have been set free from sin and become slaves to God, you have the consequence of a holy life, and the outcome is eternal life. ²³ The wages that sin pays are death, but God's gift is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

MESSAGE: "Trust in God Part 2" Our assigned reading for today is doubtless one of the most intense but dismaying passages in the Old Testament, the story of Abraham's near sacrifice of his son Isaac. Back on June 11 in chapter 12 we heard God's promise of blessings to Abraham. Although at the time of his call back then, the promise was given to Abraham as an act of grace and without qualification. Here it is repeated and strengthened precisely because he has demonstrated his faith in God.

This brief but important narrative is a chapter in the history of salvation, including the Exodus, the covenant on Sinai, the wilderness wandering and the settlement of Israel in Canaan. Awareness of this larger story heightens the drama, as if there wasn't enough already, for it is not only

the life of a single child that is in jeopardy, but the life of the future people of God as well.

Let's analyze this story like we would critique a movie we all saw. This story begins with an explanation of what it is about: "God tested Abraham" (v. 1). Did you notice that we know more about what will happen than the characters do. Abraham, not having been told that he is being tested, hears only the horrifying command to take Isaac and offer him as a burnt offering. The narrator, who knows everything, gives us virtually no description but only action and dialogue, and even that with great restraint. There is no speculation on the emotions or feelings of the characters, but the language and pace lead us on. The repetition in the command "take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love . . ." (v. 2) stresses the deep affection and strong ties between father and son, as does the image of the two headed off on foot to the mountain with the instruments of death in their hands (v.6).

Although we have heard this story many times and know how it turns out, to hear it again is to become engaged in its tenderness and power. Will the angel of the Lord arrive in time? We know that it is a "test," but quickly we also realize that it is a matter of life and death. The question "Will Abraham pass the test?" soon becomes less significant than the other one, "Will Isaac live?" At the climax, both questions are answered at the same time. Abraham, who has never hesitated, is willing to obey, but God will not require the life of Isaac (vv. 10-12).

This story has evoked much serious reflection in the history of the church and the synagogue both because of the seriousness of the issues it considers and because of all

that is left unsaid. When the boy asked the obvious question “Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?”, Abraham’s answer was a foreshadowing of what would happen. But did he know, did he hope, or was the response a ruse to keep Isaac quiet, to end the conversation with a religious platitude? Why, we may ask, but find no satisfying answer, did God need to test Abraham in the first place?

It would be a serious mistake to reduce this rich narrative to a single point or meaning, for it has many points and more than one meaning. At some stage in the oral tradition, the story probably dealt with the question of child sacrifice, which was not unheard of in the surrounding cultures. Early Israelites could well have asked, “Does our God require that we sacrifice our children?” Failure to do so does not mean lack of faith, for our ancestor was willing but God did not – and will not – require it.

Central to the story is the issue of faith. It is Abraham’s faith that is tested and in the process, the biblical tradition leaves us with a profound understanding of what faith is. It is not defined by means of a theological dissertation or a set of propositions, nor are we left with scoldings to be faithful. Rather, the question is answered by means of example, with a story. It is the story of Abraham, who trusted in God even when God appeared to be acting against God’s promise. Faith is like that. Faith is commitment, the directing of one’s trust toward God. It entails the courage and risk of actions. Whether Abraham believed that the God he worshiped would not require the life of his son, we cannot know. However, as we reflect on this passage, we should consider the difference between faith and fanaticism. It is well for us to remember how the

story ended; the biblical God does not require such extreme and severe sacrifices. Instead sacrifice your time, your efforts, your hearts, your love to do good in the world. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER: Creator of us all. Father of us all. Mother of us all. Thank you for creating us and sending us parenting to keep us from going astray. We are tempted every day to turn away from your teachings and your love. We just want to do what we want to do. We think we know best; however in the long run, you dear God, know best. Christ of glory, in your right hand are the stars of the churches. Save your people from having but the name of being alive. Arouse the slothful and confirm the faithful. Give us the zeal to make your church stronger and stronger. God of the old and the young and those of middle years, may our children come to you in faith and lifelong commitment. Sustain those who bear the burden and the heat of the heat of the day, all who must carry another’s burdens as well as their own.

We here at St. John may not be among the bullets and bombs of war, yet each one of us has their own battles needing your guidance and compassion.

Today we lift up all those who struggle for their health and wellbeing. Mari Ella, Carson, Yvonne, Jackie, Marilyn, Beth, Mary, Syd, Ronald, Rosemary, Becky, David, and Urban. May they know your comfort as you stay with them in all their sufferings.

A PRAYER FOR GENERAL SYNOD

God of small sanctuaries and large halls,
We listen and look for your presence immediately

surrounding us, energizing us to serve the world outside. And today we know that many of our neighbors and friends are gathering in Indianapolis for General Synod as they celebrate faith, reflect on your calling, seek justice and kindness, and inhale the invigorating breath of the Spirit.

We pray for their wisdom, Holy One. May your wisdom carry them from one moment to the next as they search for the depths of your love.

We pray for their endurance, Loving Spirit. Throughout the long days of Synod, may they find rest and renewal, moments of hopeful silence and joyous laughter. We pray for their strength, Divine Redeemer. May your courage permeate their hearts as they speak and vote, and may your Holy Curiosity open their souls to new stories. May each of us be willing to open our souls to new words, new sounds, new stories, and new songs.

Your Kingdom can be found from the conversation between two people drinking coffee to the most distant of galaxies across the universe. May we see how to serve the Church and your children within the walls of our individual sanctuaries to the streets surrounding us to the farthest spaces in our world.

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 debts as we forgive our debtors. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.

INVITATION TO GENEROSITY:

The Realm of God asks for us to care for our neighbors:

from the children who are thirsty to the prophets and other caregivers who need a place to rest. This is our opportunity to use our treasures, talents, and time to ensure all have what they need. May we reflect on the ways we can share and give as we are able.

***UNISON BLESSING OF THE GIFTS:**

Spirit of God, when we share from our souls, we open our hearts to your works in this world. When we tend to our neighbors who struggle, we care for the Christ in our midst. When we welcome the prophet who shares your love through their advocacy, we care for the Spirit moving throughout our world. When we share with a stranger, we experience Divine joy as our reward for giving. Bless all gifts as they build your Realm here on earth. Amen.

HOLY COMMUNION

***INVITATION:**

One: The Spirit of Creation is with you!

Many: And the Spirit of Creation walks next to you.

One: Open wide your souls.

Many: We open them to the Creator's love.

One: Let us give thanks to the God of Earth and Rain.

Many: With joyous voices, hearts, and hands, we exclaim to God our praise.

***PRAYER OF COMMUNION:**

We delight with our Holy God on this earth, and we rejoice forever in what God has created, is creating, and will be created. The Spirit of Creation built this vast universe, including our beautiful, strong, and fragile planet. The earth

held the plants and animals in the Garden of Eden. Later, the earth carried the Israelites on their wilderness journey and while they danced joyously in the promised land. The earth absorbed the tears of Job, supported the steps of the prophesying Elijah, and carried David in the shadow-filled valleys. Jesus taught on mountains and plains, walked throughout the land healing the aching, and prayed in gardens late at night. In times of exile and times of return, the land held the stories of our ancestors in faith.

Today, we abide on this earth in houses of worship, in homes, and in halls. We know this land we share today is sacred. It bears much fruit. It holds the flora of friendships. And deep within its cells are the stories of its ancestors – parents, guardians, and leaders of the faith. We know their footprints are still felt by the earth.

And we remember the ones who held this land as their own centuries ago. They were the first to tend to the land, to nurture it as a parent would nurture their child. The winds of occupation seared the land and crushed the hearts and lives of its first inhabitants. Through the hydrating tears of our God, the land remembered its strength from its ancestors. In our spaces today, we remember their place on the land and their care for creation.

From the strength of those who have gone before comes the seeds for grains and grapes. The land has given birth to the fruits of our sacrament.

With glory to our God, we praise the Spirit of Creation:

**All: Holy, Holy, Holy, Spirit of Earth, Air, Fire, and Water,
Heaven and Earth delights in your glory,
Hosanna, Hosanna.**

**Blessed is the one who brings love and light to our world.
Hosanna to our God. Alleluia!**

On the night before Jesus walked the ground carrying the tree to Golgotha, he gathered with faithful friends. From the grain in the ground came the bread that Jesus took and broke in his hand. He blessed the bread and said to his friends “This is my body broken for you. When you eat this bread, remember me.”

And then after supper, Jesus took a cup filled with the fruit of the vine. Knowing they were all connected like the vine and branches, Jesus said to them “This cup is the new covenant (in my blood). As you drink from the cup, remember me.”

Spirit of God, just as you hovered over creation and renewed your church at Pentecost, surround these elements. Encircle us, energize our souls, and connect us with each living being here on earth. Just as you have delighted in humans since creation, may your presence create joy in our spirits, transforming us into new beings. Bless the soil that birthed the grains and grapes that we share today. May these elements be transformed into a meal that connects us all. Like the lion and ox, like the lamb and wolf, we eat together – whether near or far, whether well or ill, whether marginalized or privileged. May this meal be one in which we embrace the power we have and strengthen the world with justice and peace, kindness and love. Amen.

SHARINGTHE ELEMENTS

***UNISON PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING:**

Holy God, Divine Designer- With gentle compassion, you unite us as vine and branches, whether near or far. For your meal we share our gratitude. With thanksgiving we voice our joy for our siblings in faith who shared the table with the Christ and with us. Our souls are rejuvenated with your Holy Refreshment. Send us into the world today with joy in our hearts and excited to proclaim your radical love in this world. Amen.

***BENEDICTION:**

May the Spirit of God lead us to build God's realm on this earth so all will have the most refreshing water to drink,
So all will have a warm space to rest at the end of long days,
So all will know the joy of your Kingdom. Amen.