

# IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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The Reverend Courtnay Veazey  
Sunday, March 10, 2024

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Gracious God,  
our way in the wilderness,  
guide us, by your Word, through these forty days,  
and minister to us with your Holy Spirit,  
so that we may be reformed, restored, and renewed;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen.

## SUNG PRAYER:

*1 Open your ears, O faithful people;  
open your ears and hear God's word.  
Open your hearts, O royal priesthood;  
God has come to you.*

### *Refrain:*

*God has spoken to the people, hallelujah!  
God has spoken words of wisdom, hallelujah!  
God has spoken to the people, hallelujah!  
God has spoken words of wisdom, hallelujah!  
Torah ora, Torah ora, hallelujah!  
Torah ora, Torah ora, hallelujah!  
Torah ora, Torah ora, hallelujah!  
Torah ora, Torah ora, hallelujah!*

*2 They who have ears to hear the message,  
they who have ears, now let them hear;  
they who would learn the way of wisdom,  
let them hear God's word. (Refrain)*

A reading from the Gospel according to Mark.

‘One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well he asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?” Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” Then the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that ‘he is one, and besides him there is no other’; and ‘to love him with all the heart and with all the understanding and with all the strength’ and ‘to love one’s neighbor as oneself’ – this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” After that no one dared to ask him any question.’

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Holy wisdom, holy word.  
**Thanks be to God.**

Before walking into the temple, you hear them.

The loud, energetic voices debating, deliberating, discussing, and disputing as the rapid-fire questioning of the teacher from Nazareth unfolds.

This rising conversation rushes out to meet you and pulls you further into the space.

You come near and see the interruptions, the flushed faces, the pointing fingers, the chaos that often comes when people examine together how to apply Scripture to their daily lives.

You breathe in the temple's incense as you pause and listen closely to the questions being asked – questions intended to trap this carpenter, this son of Mary.

“By what authority are you doing these things?”<sup>1</sup> “Is it lawful to pay taxes to Ceasar or not?”<sup>2</sup> “In the resurrection, whose wife will she be?”<sup>3</sup>

As the questions tumble over one another, you see that Jesus answers them well.

So you come forward with a question of your own.

You come forward not to test nor to trap but to thoughtfully engage by asking a sincere question.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 11:28

<sup>2</sup> Mark 12:14

<sup>3</sup> Mark 12:23

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“Which commandment is the first of all?” Which commandment is above everything else?

As a scribe, you are intimately familiar with the 613 commandments in the Torah – 613 words from God – 613 inky words written to guide, instruct, and teach.

How do we turn all this ink into blood? How do we incarnate our faith? What is “a guiding principle for keeping them all?”<sup>4</sup> What is the heartbeat drumming through these words that you know, love, and deliberate upon?

*Open your ears, O faithful people; open your ears and hear God’s word.*

*Open your hearts, O royal priesthood; God has come to you.*

You open your ears, and Mary’s son speaks a word from Deuteronomy that begins to pulse.

“שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.”

Turning ink into blood requires all of you – the whole of you.

Your thoughts and emotions, your inner being, your understanding, and your faculties.

As you begin processing the weightiness of this word, the carpenter speaks another word – but this time from Leviticus.

“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

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<sup>4</sup> Gilberto A. Ruiz, *Connections*, Year B, Volume 3, 451.

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Turning ink into blood requires action.

Feeding the hungry. Protecting the vulnerable. Caring for the marginalized.

The pulse's drumming grows stronger and louder, and you recognize the heartbeat of God.

Your eyes grow wide, and you respond, "You are right, Teacher."

You repeat back what you heard, express your understanding of these words' transcendence, and Jesus looks into your eyes and says, "You are not far from the kingdom of God."

And the questioning of Jesus ceases as an ancient and elemental truth quiets stirred souls.

Before walking into our day, we hear the loud noises that stir our souls.

The noise of fear and anxiety, of anger and resentment, of hunger and poverty, of war and genocide.

The noise of life's daily demands and responsibilities.

The noise of an upcoming presidential election.

The noise of consumerism and greed, of unfulfilled expectations and unmet needs.

The noise of violence and generational trauma.

The noise of shame and contempt.

The noise of communities' competing preferences.

So much clanging for our attention. So much grasping for power.

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In this deafening swelling that pours over us, can we still hear the heartbeat of God? Can we, like the scribe in this morning's Gospel reading, seek out the word that is first of all? The word that is above everything else?

*Open your ears, O faithful people; open your ears and hear God's word.*

*Open your hearts, O royal priesthood; God has come to you.*

We open our ears and hearts to words that we know well.

Words so well known to us that I fear they have lost their livelihood – their blood force.

Love God. Love neighbor.

We intellectually know these words, and in our knowing, we are not far from the kingdom of God.

However, our embodiment and incarnation of these words is difficult as the first of all commandments becomes lost in the noise of it all.

We are not far from the kingdom, and yet, there is a gap between our knowledge and our faithfulness – between our believing and our doing.

As we will witness on Good Friday in a few weeks, we live in a world that would rather kill God's Word – God's heartbeat – than follow God's Word and carry that heartbeat into the world as the body of Christ.

Actively loving God and neighbor is hard in a world that attempts to kill that love.

No wonder then that turning the ink of our knowledge into the blood of service first requires the whole of our hearts, souls, minds, and strengths.

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The incarnation of our faith – the drawing closer to God’s kingdom – requires the whole of us –

the whole of us coming near...

hearing our community’s noisy disputes...

and courageously asking the question that re-orient us...

the question that ends all questions...the question that causes silence to fill the room, so we may hear once again God’s heartbeat drumming within each of us – pulsing through our veins, causing our body to move along the way of Christ.

Which commandment is the first of all?

Take a moment to breathe deeply, and allow the pew to steady you as it holds you.

In this sacred moment of quiet, hear God’s steady heartbeat begin its siren call yet again.

Love God. Love neighbor.

Can we sense the pulse’s beat breathing new life into these words – instilling fresh oxygen into our souls?

Love God. Love neighbor.

As the pulse’s drumming grows stronger and louder, can we feel its rhythm working its way into our flesh – re-energizing us for the work ahead?

Love God. Love neighbor.

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Can we sense the importance of these words – echoing within us and enveloping us – pulling us to our feet, stirring us to action, shaping us “to become living words in the world for God’s sake,”<sup>5</sup> moving us ever closer to the entrance of God’s kingdom?

Love God. Love neighbor.

And as we continue wandering within the wilderness of Lent, facing adversaries and wild beasts, can we trust that God’s heartbeat remains – beckoning us to live as a faithful people, a royal priesthood?

*Open your ears, O faithful people; open your ears and hear God’s word.*

*Open your hearts, O royal priesthood; God has come to you.*

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<sup>5</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *Leaving Church*, 107.