

## IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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The Reverend Mary Newberg Gale  
Sunday, April 6, 2025

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Friends, I invite you to join me in the spirit of prayer. Let us pray.

God of mercy, you promised never to break your covenant with us. Amid all the changing worlds of our generation speak your eternal word that does not change. Then may we respond to your gracious promises with faithful and obedient lives, through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our scripture this morning finds us again in our Seven Last Words sermon series, and we turn once again to the Gospel of John, chapter 19, the 28th and 29th verses. Hear these words from the early Church.

*After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfill the scripture), "I am thirsty." A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth.*

Friends, these are the words of our Lord. Thanks be to God.

Last spring in Woven Wednesdays we spent some time talking about the four Gospels, the four different perspectives on the life and ministry of Jesus. I likened it to four different lenses with which writers and communities understood Jesus, and I think as we've walked through our Lenten sermon series so far, we've gotten a glimpse, a little glimpse, at each of these different lenses that the writers of the Gospels used. We have seen Matthew's Jesus, a Jesus that is tied deeply to the Hebrew scriptures, a priestly Jesus. We've seen a little bit of Mark's Jesus, Jesus who was barreling full speed toward Jerusalem knowing what was to come. We've seen some of Luke's Jesus, a Jesus deeply concerned with the pain and the suffering of others around him; and we have seen, including this morning, some of the Gospel of John's Jesus, the lens through which the Gospel of John sees Jesus. Now John's Gospel has a very high Christology. I think I have shared this with you before. Christology is a big old fancy word to mean an understanding of Jesus's divinity. If we claim that Jesus is fully human, fully divine, with no separation, division, or confusion, each of the Gospels depicts Jesus as being in a different place in that continuum. The Gospel of John leans fairly heavily toward the divine side of that fully human, fully God. If you're familiar with the language of the Nicene Creed, the Gospel of John sees Jesus as "very God of very God, begotten not made." Now as we see these different lenses with which to experience Jesus, it in turns delights and frustrates us a little bit, because Jesus is human. Jesus is close and knowable, and Jesus is also divine, just beyond our reach. And when we try and make sense of the doctrines of our faith, doctrines like the Incarnation and the Trinity, we get a little antsy. But it's important for us to remember that at their very core these doctrines are trying to put language to an experience that we and generations of faithful Christians and faithful Hebrews

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have had of God. I am fond of saying that these doctrines are descriptive not proscriptive, meaning they describe what we know and claim about God. They do not box God in and say how God is forced to behave. Priest and scholar Rowan Williams says this about our doctrines. “We’re tempted to make them explanations because we want to believe in something external to us in order to forget what profound and frightening differences in the human world they actually refer to. We must remember that the purpose of a doctrine is to pause us, to hold us still for a moment, to create a depth in us, a space for radical change in how we think of ourselves and how we act now.” Now looking out at all of you, I promise there’s more than a handful of you that are thinking “What does this have to do with Jesus saying “I am thirsty” as he hangs on the cross? Our wrestling with who we understand Jesus to be is unavoidable when we look at the cross, our wrestling with how we understand Jesus’s humanity and divinity intermingled. We can’t turn away from it when we gather here. Now this series, this sermon series has been so powerful because it has required that we spend time at the foot of the cross, and let’s be real, we don’t like doing that. We have a tendency to skip straight from the parade and hosanna of Palm Sunday to the joy of the empty tomb, spending very little time, attention, or energy on those very complicated moments in between, those human and divine moments. We tell ourselves it’s because we’re busy, and we are busy. We say we are too busy to attend a noon worship service or go down to the Lenten waffle series at Calvary Episcopal, or we are too busy, it’s too much to come to a Thursday night service and a Friday night service. There’s so much going on, and we indeed are busy, but I truly believe that that’s not always the real reason that we skip out on Holy Week. We don’t like pain. Not a single one of us, no one does. We don’t like looking at pain. We blind ourselves to the pain of others. We numb ourselves to the pain of the world, even our own pain, so we especially don’t like looking at Jesus’s pain. We don’t like looking at the cross, not for long, because we believe that that pain is for us, that it is our pain. Last week David pointed us to Psalm 22, when he referenced Jesus’s cry from the cross, “My God my God why have you forsaken me?” that Jesus was quoting Psalm 22. This week again Jesus is pointing back to that foundational text just like last week, but he’s looking particularly at verses 14 and 15. They say “I am poured out like water and all of my bones are out of joint. My heart is like wax. It is melted within my breast. My mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws. You lay me in the dust of death.” This week I shared with our Friday morning parents prayer breakfast that the first time I heard these words of Psalm 22, I had heard verse one, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” But the first time I heard these words, it stopped me in my tracks, because it was viscerally describing something that I had felt. “I am poured out like water and all of my bones are out of joint. My heart is like wax. It is melted within my breast.” We know that pain. We might not have described it that way and not necessarily to the depth that Jesus experiences it on the Cross, but we know the humanness of that pain. And we experience Jesus carrying that pain, and we want to turn away. We’ve built walls for protection around ourselves.

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We tell ourselves that we cannot possibly bear witness to all of the pain in the world. We cannot take it in, not and stay in one piece, not and maintain control. Friends, we like feeling like we're in control even when we know deep down in our guts that we are not. We are afraid of breaking, afraid of the pain and the unknown and the judgment and the overwhelm of it, and and and; but the longer we have spent in Lent this year, the longer we have stood at the foot of the Cross, the more it has become clear to me that maybe, just maybe, the point of standing there is that we need to break a little bit. We have to break a little bit. It's overwhelming, it is heartbreaking to see the Savior of the world, God Incarnate, dying before us. It is painful to see him say goodbye to his mother and his friends, to cry out for God, to thirst at the very deepest human level at the end of his life. But standing before the Cross and bearing witness to it lets us see that even the God who created the heavens and the earth, the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, God breaks under the weight of the world's pain. And so should we.

David spoke a couple weeks ago about the reemergence of a Christian attack on empathy, describing empathy as a sin and empathy as a weakness in us. That sits heavy with me because I do not believe that the Jesus we bear witness to in the New Testament and the God of our Hebrew scriptures believes empathy is a sin. There's a story told in justice circles.

Once upon a time there was a town that was built just beyond the bend of a large river, and one day some children were playing next to the river and they noticed some bodies floating in the water. They called for help, and the town's people pulled all of these bodies out of the water. One body was dead, so they took care to wash and clean and provide the death rituals of their community for him and buried him. One was alive but was very ill, so they took him to the healer in town, and the third turned out to be a healthy child, whom they placed in a family who cared for it and adopted it as part of their own. Now, from that day on, every day, a couple of bodies came floating down the river, and every day the good people of the town would pull them out and tend to them, taking the sick to be healed, taking the children to families and burying those who were dead with dignity and care. This went on in this little community for years. Each day brought bodies, and the town's folk came not only to expect the bodies in the river but they developed more elaborate systems for picking them out and tending to them. Some became generous in taking care of the bodies, and a few people even gave up their jobs so that their vocation became caring for those who floated down the river. And the town itself felt a certain healthy pride in its generosity. However during all of those years and despite all of that effort, no one thought to go up the river around the bend that hid from sight what was above them and to find out why, daily, bodies came floating down the river. You could call that a parable, in that it points us to the difference between sympathy and mercy and empathy and justice. We can feel pity for those who are thirsty. We feel pity on those who are ill and lost and wounded and coming down the river to us. But Jesus didn't stop with sympathy. The difference between sympathy and

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empathy is the willingness to go upstream and find the cause of the problem. That's what Jesus did. He healed the sick and spoke kind words to the brokenhearted and condemned the people and the systems that treated them as less than human. That combined work of mercy and justice is what Christ models for us. That, friends, is our calling. That thirst for God and love of God is what drove Jesus along the paths which led him to the Cross.

Stanley Hauerwas says this about Christ. "His obedience matters, and Christ's obedience has a cost. He has a cup to drink, but it is the cup of death. We know the costs from Jesus's struggle with the Devil in the wilderness as well as his prayer in Gethsemane that this cup be removed, but this cup cannot be removed if we are to be saved from the dryness that is our lives. Jesus's love pulled him toward the Cross. What pulls us forward? What do we thirst for?" Hauerwas goes on to say "Through the waters of baptism we have been made God's body for the world. We thirst for one another so that this world might know that the world has been redeemed, and this redemption is as real as the water that we need to survive. That redemption is found in the body and blood of our Lord that forever slakes our thirst. So, refreshed, we become for the world the reminder that God has not abandoned us, and we can therefore trust in God's promise that just to the extent that we take the time in a world that believes it has no time, to the extent that we take the time to care for those who thirst, God's kingdom will be present."

Amen and amen.