

Preview of Songs to Be Sung Today

Prelude

Song For Joy I've Got That Joy, Joy, Joy

I've got that joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart,
down in my heart, down in my heart,

I've got that joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart,
down in my heart to stay!

Welcome and Notices of Community Life

Passing of the Peace and Friendship Pads

*Invitation to Worship

One: Our souls thirst and long for God.

Many: God is always with us.

One: Our lives have moments of joy.

Many: God is always with us.

One: Our lives have moments of sorrow.

Many: God is always with us.

One: No matter where we go, what we do, good or bad.

Many: God is always with us.

One: Let us rejoice and praise God.

All: Yes, for God is always with us!

*Opening Song This Is My Father's World PH #485

*Opening Prayer (unison)

O God, you are our strength and fortress, our comfort and our sanctuary. We seek your Light and your Truth; let them lead us; let them bring us into your presence.

We come to you with joy, to praise and thank you. We place our hope in you.

Teach us and lead us, so that we can serve you and your people. Empower us so that we might uplift the hearts that sorrow, so that the poor may eat and be satisfied, so that those who seek you shall come to know your love. Shine forth

through us. In the name of Jesus, the Christ we pray. Amen.

Prayers of the People

Sharing our Joys and Concerns

Pastoral Prayer

Silent Prayer

The Lord's Prayer (unison)

Prayer Response in Song O My Soul, Bless God, The Father PH #100, vs 1, 3 & 5

Scripture Isaiah 65:1-2, 8-9, Luke 8:26-39

Musical Meditation Faith of Our Fathers PH #365

Contemporary Parable- Our Fathers

Meditation What God Has Done

The Offering of Our Gifts and Ourselves

*Closing Song God of Our Fathers, Whose Almighty Hand PH #433

*Carrying the Light of God into the World

*Benediction

*Postlude

Isaiah 65:1-2, 8-9

6I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask, to be found by those who did not seek me. I said, "Here I am, here I am," to a nation that did not call on my name. 2I held out my hands all day long to a rebellious people, who walk in a way that is not good, following their own devices...8Thus says the Lord: As the wine is found in the cluster, and they say, "Do not destroy it, for there is a blessing in it," so I will do for my servants' sake, and not destroy them all. 9I will bring forth descendants from Jacob, and from Judah inheritors of my mountains; my chosen shall inherit it, and my servants shall settle there.

Luke 8:26-39

26Then they arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. 27As he stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons met him. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs. 28When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me"— 29for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many times it had seized him; he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds.) 30Jesus then asked him, "What is your name?" He said, "Legion"; for many demons had entered him. 31They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss. 32Now there on the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding; and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these. So he gave them permission. 33Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned. 34When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country. 35Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid. 36Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. 37Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear. So he got into the boat and returned. 38The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, 39"Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you." So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.

Hillcrest Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Dr. Loletta M. Barrett
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What God Has Done
Isaiah 65:1-2, 8-9, Luke 8:26-39

Do not destroy it, there is a blessing in the cluster of grapes. Do not throw the baby out with the bath water. One bad apple doesn't spoil the whole bunch. That is what Isaiah tells us today. It is not over. God has not abandoned us. Do not despair, be faithful and have hope. Things will get better.

The book of Isaiah gave the people guidance and encouragement in the midst of the Babylonian Exile. There are five different "messages." First, repent! Turn back, renew your relationship with God. Second, now you've done it, here comes trouble. Third, as long as we're stuck here in exile, work to be good citizens. Fourth, liberation is coming and everything is going to be wonderful, we're going home! Finally, I know things aren't as wonderful as we hoped but don't despair, we're in this together and God is with us.

When the people finally joyously return after 80 years of exile, with dreams of greatness, their home, the holy city of Jerusalem and the temple are trashed. Their people are only a remnant, a small portion of what they once were. Many of them gave up and abandoned them. They are tired and discouraged, they have no resources, and are ready to despair. But Isaiah calls them to be faithful as God is faithful. Have hope, God is our hope.

Isaiah reminds the people, God is their strength. God is always around, ready to be found. Just look. God reaches out saying, “Here I am, here I am,” even when the people ignore God. God wants a relationship, even when the people “walk in a way that is not good, and follow their own devices.” If God were like humans, God would give up. But God continues to wait on God’s precious children. Like a good father, God loves, provides for, and ensures the future of His children, and walks with them every step. God is waiting on His children to be faithful, to accept relationship, and to live lives, in love, with God. Do not despair.

This is what God has done for us. We are God’s beloved children.

This morning’s reading from the Gospel of Luke tells us the same thing in a different way, a message that is both literal and full of symbolism. This is a story of the victory of hope over despair, where God’s plans for good and love triumph. A story that tells us God is in every place. And we can find that victory ourselves.

You heard the story. Jesus goes into a place of despair; a man who is possessed is living in tombs. Jesus exorcises the demons. The demons possess pigs that stampede into a lake and drown. The people ask Jesus to leave. The man asks to follow Jesus but is told to return home and tell others what God has done for him. It is a story rich with imagery.

The story is also filled with symbolism. Clean versus unclean, sacred versus profane. The city Gerasa is Gentile- unclean in Jewish standards. The man, naked,

is living in shameful humiliation and ostracism. He is ill with possession, and living in a place of the dead. The pigs the demons are sent into are unclean, the water they plunge into represents chaos that only God can command and control. There is so much here that is unclean and offensive to God, especially for Jesus' society.

There is also a secular challenge God. The name Legion meant not only many demons, it was a unit of the Roman army, that enslaved people of God against the will of God. The pigs also represent the power of the Romans- the army in that region carried a flag with the symbol of a boar! These unclean things, these profane things are powerful and seemingly outside the realm of God. There is an overwhelming pall of despair. This is not a place God would be found!

But Jesus brings God's love into the picture. God's love goes into every place and time and heals despair. God's love brings the man back to sanity and society. God's love not only overwhelms the power of demons, breaks the chains and liberates people from literal and figurative oppression, and captivity; it is not only the demons that are cast out but the pigs, are destroyed. The demons (spiritual bondage) and the pigs (the Roman oppression) plunge into the sea- an abyss over which only God has power. God triumphs over spiritual and physical bondage and despair loses! Look what God has done, God triumphs over it all. God' love triumphs over the power of despair.

And where are we in the story? Perhaps we are the man tortured by the demons of worry, shackled by our past or by the expectations of people around us. Perhaps we are seeking the liberation that God's love can bring. Perhaps we, the church, are the mind of the man with many voices conflicted, confused, swirling around and distracting us from our purpose, our unity, our wholeness in Christ.

But the scripture says that when all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes [saw what happened, they] asked Jesus to leave them; they were afraid. The people saw the healing, saw what the power of God could do. They experienced God's love and they were afraid.

There is a saying: "the luxury of despair." It happens when people who are relatively privileged are faced with enormous challenges. These people experienced freedom and were sucked back into despair. We can imagine that they saw the possibility of hope and liberation but the struggle seemed so overwhelming. What they saw challenged their self-understandings, their religious tradition, and context of their lives. How could God be here? In the midst of despair, they had no structure in which to place this experience of liberation and transformation.

We too can experience the liberating love of God and a relationship with God who is our hope. Yet we can be tempted to despair. There are so many issues we are dealing with in our lives, our work, our homes, our school, our church and

our world. The struggle seems so overwhelming. On a daily basis we worry about paying the bills at home and church, keeping our job, illness, caring for our families. At the global level we worry about racism, sexism, militarism, heterosexism, economic exploitation, on and on it goes. These things challenge our self-understandings, our understanding of our religious tradition. We too struggle with the issues of individual and institutional transformation.¹

But what we must remember is that “Despair is a luxury. If we despair we don’t need to do anything. Despair makes no demand upon us; hope demands everything.” And God is our hope.

Jesus found the man, and the people around him in despair. Despair that healing could ever occur, that liberation was possible, that God could be in their midst. Yet Jesus brought and showed them the overwhelming, unconditional love of God right their in midst. So how do we avoid despair? We immerse ourselves in God. After the man was cured of the demons he wanted to follow Jesus. But Jesus told him, “Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.” Why?

Did Jesus reject him as a disciple? No, Jesus commissioned him to “go and declare what God has done.” This was a man who Jesus found naked, kept under guard, bound with chains and shackles, and living in a tomb, possessed by demons.

¹ http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/custom/portlets/recordDetails/detailmini.jsp?_nfpb=true&_ERICExtSearch_SearchValue_0=EJ850343&ERICExtSearch_SearchType_0=no&accno=EJ850343

Now Jesus has commissioned him to go and declare the good news? One might think that Jesus would have him come and do a little bit of learning with him, first.

But, unlike many of the other people who followed Jesus, this man has already seen and experienced it all. And Jesus sent him to the people to do what he had done, bring the overwhelming, unconditional love of God into their midst. We have already experienced this love. We can experience this love every moment of every day. It is there for us always. Just open yourself up to it right now.

God's love cannot be denied. It goes into every clean and unclean place, every nook and cranny. It is in every place of despair, no matter the reason for the despair, and brings hope and joy and possibilities. God is with us. This is what God has done for us. We are God's beloved children.

Look around you. See this beautiful space. See these beautiful people. Remember the good things you have done together. Remember the lessons you have learned. We are so privileged, so blessed in so many ways. There is no place here for the luxury of despair. Let us live in the hope of God and go and tell the world what God has, what God is, and what God will do for, with and through us here at Hillcrest. Amen.