

Bless God, O my soul! Let us worship his/her/their holy name! Today, we resume in person services back in our sanctuary alongside our friends gathered in different spaces and times, both online with our livestreaming on Facebook right now - "Hello friends!" - as well as watching at a different time on YouTube. God is everywhere and at all time, in God's presence - all are welcome!

Today, we celebrate what we celebrate every time we gather to worship either online and or in person, the presence of God. It is important to remember that it is God who gathers us together, and we are here to witness to that lavish grace of God who loved us first. Our story in the Old Testament for today's lectionary readings reminds us that King David played music and danced as he brought in the Ark of the Covenant, the presence of God into Jerusalem. Every Sabbath and that for us has been on Sundays, but it could be any day of the week that we set apart, make holy is what we traditionally call little Easters. And on little Easters, we as one hymn writer would remind us, "Dance, then, wherever you may be, I am the Lord (God) of the Dance, said he, And I'll lead you all wherever you may be, and I'll lead you all in the dance, said he." In the presence of the One who will lead us in the dance, we are reminded that the dancing goes on. The dancing goes on because God of the Dance is present with and for us and sets us free to dance. Our response is nothing less than to dance in such Presence. And not only dance with thanksgiving, but we are told in today's OT story that David also distributed food to feed all the people. David fed all the people, without any exclusion. David's practice of praising God is reflected both in his praising and dancing and in his thanksgiving acts of distributing food to all the people (2 Samuel 6:19).

As we enter into God's presence today with thanksgiving, and since we are not quite yet at sing congregationally, if like me, you are neither a great singer or a great dancer, then let us in attitude and spirit, swing and sway, sing and dance in our hearts. As we enter this day in the presence of God, I invite us to remember and ask you, how would you share a story of God's lavish grace? Remember King David is bringing in the Ark of the Covenant that had once been captured and taken by the Philistines. What is your/our love story with God? One of the three practices that our Bishop asked of our churches in her letter that came out on March 13, 2020, way before I was appointed here at AUMC, was to "Do no harm. Do good. Stay in love with God." These are adapted from John Wesley's Three Simple Rules. A way of life that applies both to pre and post pandemic and in truth through especially the in-between times. In the midst of an unprecedented pandemic, we found our grounding in the foundations of our faith tradition based, of course, in scripture and centuries of Christian practices which John Wesley methodized. We practice those 3 simple rules here at AUMC, and we have stories to share.

The writer of today's letter to Ephesians also describes love relationships, of God's lavish grace as well, of how from generation to generations we stay in love with God as those who understand who we are and whose we are. The writer of Ephesians claims all people as God's own, as child of God, as chosen, as holy, in love blameless, adopted and wanted, redeemed, spirit marked, forgiven, destined to purpose...and all those claims established before the foundations of the world. Those affirmations are everlasting. It means God would love us through all of the unknowns of this pandemic and the rest of our lives and generations after. In our Wesleyan

theology, we call such an understanding of lavish grace as prevenient grace, grace that IS, is before our understanding of it and grace that goes before us. Lavish Grace that has gone before us before our arrival into this day of rejoicing. As our opening praise we sang together, “10,000 reasons” for our hearts to Bless God, praise God. Bless the Lord O my Soul, bless God’s holy name.

As I look around here today in person and am aware of friends throughout the pandemic being online with us from coast to coast regularly, from Joanne in NJ to Betsy in CA, certainly, there are at least all of our stories here as enough reason for our souls to sing and dance in Spirit with thanksgiving for God’s presence with us. We have more than 10,000 reasons just from all the love stories in our bible. We are inheritors of such love relationships, adopted into that eternal love. In truth, we only have to look to a pine cone to understand 10,000 reasons enough to bless God with our soul. We also have 4 such stories in today’s lectionary readings, not just for this Sunday, but every Sunday that we gather to remember; today’s is of King David dancing and his act of inclusive feeding, the praises of the Psalmist’s trust in receiving blessings from God, and in the Gospel of Mark today, we are blessed by three different loves stories about truth-tellers and their sacrifices, of both John the Baptist and Jesus living out what they believed about God’s lavish grace being for all people. We also have what we call a negative story about leaders, like King Herod that are lead astray and make horrific decisions - so many stories, revelation of grace upon grace.

This weekend, I posted an article that reminded me of 10,000 reasons and more for our souls to sing praise to God. It was written by Rev. Debie Thomas who blogs at “Journey with Jesus” and was reposted by the Christian Century. The article was “Why I stay: A prayer”, and I quoted from that article because she raised up more love stories that connected her to God’s lavish grace. She is an inheritor of such lavish grace. The bible tells us love stories between God, ourselves, our neighbors, strangers and even enemies. I love how she can relate to the saints that has gone before us, and I can add them as part of the 10,000 reasons our souls bless God. She writes as she is claiming her relationships with God and giving reasons why she stays committed and faithful, “Because I love stories, and I cherish the ones I first learned in your book. Because I am Eve and the apple makes sense to me. I’m Rachel and I won’t surrender my sacred objects. I’m Leah and I long to be loved. I’m Hagar, and I will name you in the desert. I’m Miriam and I am ever watchful. I’m the bleeding woman and I need the hem of your robe. I’m Mary Magdalene and I must bear witness by your tomb. I’m Junia and my story aches to be told.” I hope we are inspired to trust we have more than 10,000 reasons, not that we need reasons, but so we recognize what amazing grace, lavish grace by which we experience God’s presence today. God loving us first is actually just one reason, and reason enough. Rev. Debie Thomas’ blog reminded me that we are not alone through our journey and do not arrive here today alone.

Let me share an image from our altar this past month; remember that cross that was woven in rainbow color ribbons during Pride month? - ribbons like threads, stories of the gospel, the good news woven together - the good news of Jesus and us as recipients, adoptees and bearers of God’s grace and good news. All of us woven together. This is who we are in Christ. Each of us

woven through time and space, all of us called, chosen without exclusion - all of us in the inclusive lavish love of God, all blessed and blessing. The lavish grace of God is revealed to us way before our own baptisms, at the creation of the world. We are told the same Spirit that hovered over the waters, as told in the love stories we read in the book of Genesis, that same Spirit is gifted to us. Let us remember the waters of grace, as the epistle writer says in the same letter to the people of Ephesus in a different chapter, chapter 2 verses 8, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that is not your doing; it is the gift of God." We all have love stories to share. We all, by the same Spirit, sing and dance for our souls to bless God and our lives dance to the tune of such lavish grace.

Let me share another image of lavish grace through this pandemic. It's an image of us sharing holy communion online together, yet physically distanced and in our different spaces. I never imagined we would share that love story about God's grace that crosses space and time literally, even though that is in truth what we have been practicing all along when we confess we commune surrounded by all the saints around us as well as with hope of the kingdom of God, the future people of God already lavished with prevenient grace. And I also experienced holy communion as lavish grace very personally during the pandemic. As some of you may know, my Mom is 82 years old and her health went into significant decline during the pandemic. Like some of you, I was not able to fly out and or be present with her in person until almost a year after the lock down began. This past Easter, and because we were able to prerecord Easter Sunday service, I was able to fly out to be with her. We still had to be physically distanced, but it was more than enough just to be able to be with her. And for me, it was the first time since I entered professional ministries to be together with my Mom on Easter Sunday. We were able to share holy communion together with not only my Mom, but also with my brother. Under the shade of a fig tree bearing fruit in LA weather and with an Easter lily, which is one of my Mom's favorite flowers, and with a wonderful NY style pizza, we shared the pre-packaged communion elements that had been consecrated in the same service I participated online with us here at AUMC - what amazing grace. It was indeed like manna in the dessert. We shared the gifts of bread and juice, with renewed understandings that it was a means of grace, a blessing that we cannot take such gifts for granted, and these were gifts that we did not deserve or earn. It always finds us.

As a minister, I'm very aware that not everyone can share holy communion with our families, let alone even share a common meal together sometimes. Our family is not without our own love stories, parts of it with times of separation and brokenness. I'm also aware that not all people are and were able to stay connected to one of the means of grace, like in the sharing of sacraments. My Mom's own church had gone through a separation and physically moved their building, and my Mom had not been able to physically attend the new church, even though she had been a lifelong member of the UMC. I feel the pain of her not receiving any pastoral visits, as well as being now disconnected from the church in part due to her physical illness. The pandemic brought to the surface for our family, not only the limitations of our own faith practices, the limitations of time and space, but also the lavish grace of God that can transcend our own faith, of space and time. I share my personal experience of lavish grace so that as you remember your own experiences of God's lavishness that you too would share your thanksgiving to the glory of God.

I'd like us to also think about the ways that our church interacted and related with our communities, and our world through the pandemic. Some of our remembering will be captured we hope, through our next and last Midweek pause video coming this week. We are reflecting on what it meant to be church without walls during the pandemic. And I invite us to reflect on how we currently practice and how we need and want to practice lavish grace, as we in phases resume in person services more fully back in these walls or brick and mortar of our church. We are not the same people we were pre Covid; we all have changed to some degree, and our experiences are varied. So, I imagine the ways we share the lavish grace of God will also reflect those varieties of experiences as we enter into our future. One of the ways that we are practicing lavish grace is actually, today, as we continue with both in person services as well as online services. This does not feel like either for you and or for me how things felt prior to the pandemic. And as we continue to navigate how best to be in person and stay in love with God and one another, we recognize that we are not returning to all the ways things has always been. We may be able to, in some ways and in some other ways, we will need to be adapt and be adept. This practice of lavish grace is commitment to the presence of God, who calls us to see the new things God is doing.

In today's Epistle readings in the letter to the Ephesians, these words are gifted to us, "In Christ you too were chosen. When you heard the Good News of salvation, the word of truth, and believed in it, you were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the pledge of our inheritance, the deposit paid against the full redemption of a people who are God's own—to the praise of God's glory." (Ephesians 1: 13-14 Inclusive Bible version). For the writer of Ephesians, the meaning of glory or "kabod" (ka bid) in Hebrew, means the weight or gravitas, the presence of God. So as we gather today, in the presence of God, in the gravitas of God, to the praise of God's glory; we are also called to remember where and how we do, did, and will witness to the glory of God, *both* the presence of God in our midst, in our one hour of worship here and online, *and* in our troubled world. As part of this same letter to the people living in Ephesus in the first century, we also read in chapter 3:20-21, "Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work in us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout the generations forever, and ever! Amen." And one of my Episcopalian friends, who was ordained yesterday, had a wonderful witness reminding the church that the form of our churches for this and coming generations may be outside the bounds of what we "can ask or imagine" and that if we believe that God's love for God's people is everlasting, and that God's love for the world is eternal, then the church in whatever shape and form will continue to bear witness to God's lavish love and we can have hope that all things will be made new. She reminded me of the hope I feel when we sing the song, "Draw the circle wide" in which we sing the words, "no one stands alone" and we all inclusively "Stand side by side". As we resume in person services, there are many ways in which we will be called anew to practice God's lavish love that makes possible, "no one stands alone" and for us to "stand side by side". This is what we have tried to embody throughout the pandemic as we practice do no harm, do good, and stay in love with God, and we hope to continue to practice as restrictions are lifted and as we face different kinds of challenges.

As we offer hybrid worship on both online and in person, we also pray that God would help us become transformed people of God for a new generation. The church, in general, and I'm too new here at AUMC to understand for myself what our shared love stories are, and or our common love language and traditions. I do know that our UMC, as a denomination, faces challenges as an established community that is known to be not welcoming by the non church going population. We will have to continue to be transformed as God's people if we are to be experienced as welcoming by the people who identify as "dones," people who consider themselves done with establishment, those who feel excluded and like an outsider, as well as the "nones," those who have no affiliation to any faith tradition. As we resume in person services and are making changes, let's dance with this opening of doors to the Spirit's opening of our hearts to practice what may not feel like how things have always been but are making us all new. In some ways, much of what used to be and has always been, is passing away.

The good news is that Lavish Grace finds us always and everywhere, in person and online, yesterday, today and tomorrow - so how can we keep from dancing? How can we not dance to the song that God made something beautiful, something beautiful of our life? We are inheritors of God's lavish love. God's love is eternal; it is infinite; it is everlasting. It is for generations past; it is for our present generation and for future generations to come. As long as God's lavish love is present, then it will be made manifest in and through us, the body of Christ, in and through the church whether that is in its present form and or being transformed and or in its dying form - it will be made new. We are called to not be anxious or fearful about God's future glory. We are reminded by this gift of Spirit, these inspired words in the letter to the Ephesians, by songs reminding us of having more than 10,000 reasons, our own inheritances of more than 10,000 love stories, for us as the adopted people of God to dance in God's presence with thanksgiving in this present glory. We are called to faithfulness, and I hope that you and I, together with conspirators in our community and world, will continue to love God, ourselves and one another, even strangers and enemies. I pray, trusting in prayer as the presence of God, that we will dance in lavish love "toward redemption as God's own people." All people, all chosen. All beloved, all bless, all blessing. May it be so. Amen.