

Lenten Worship Service for the Fifth Sunday of Lent
at City of Lakes Transitional Care Center
Minneapolis, MN

For my final project, I decided to incorporate creational themes and images that we've been learning, discussing, and reading about in our class into a Sunday morning worship service at City of Lakes Transitional Care Center (COL), where I am currently doing Clinical Pastoral Education. COL is a 145-bed not-for-profit sub-acute and long-term health care facility located on the south edge of downtown Minneapolis. COL has several specialty units: palliative care, rehabilitation, complex medical care, and supportive living (long-term care), and supportive care for those living with chronic mental illnesses. COL primarily serves lower income residents of the urban community surrounding the facility as well as ventilator dependent patients from the greater metro area and the region.

Many of these residents aren't able to be physically outside very much; however, I regularly listen to the residents tell me about all the nature they watch out their windows. Because of the large amount of time many of the residents have to look out their windows, they notice the same group of crows flying at the same late afternoon time each day, or the same squirrel that sits on the same tree branch day after day. It has been my experience that many of the residents mention nature as they describe their own spirituality. They talk about the cycle of seasons they see each year outside their windows or the warm sunbeams that "light up my spirit" in the morning. So, while many of these residents aren't physically "outside" all that much, God's creation is an integral part of their lives.

Therefore, I decided that it would be very appropriate and meaningful to specifically and intentionally incorporate "creational themes" into the Sunday morning worship that I led back in April. I used the appointed gospel text for the Sunday from John 12 and focused on the image of a grain of wheat dying in order to bear much fruit and how that fits in with death (in the image of winter) and new life (in the image of spring). This imagery also worked well because it was the beginning of April, and we were still experiencing the snow of winter in Minnesota this year. So, I focused the sermon, hymns, prayers, and liturgy on these creational images.

We did this service on April 7th, and I felt that it went well. A few of the residents said they liked my sermon, and they also seemed to sing out well on the hymns. Even if they couldn't read, they recognized these hymns and could join in on the choruses. This experience turned out very well both in the planning and the actual doing of it. It encouraged me to continue being intentional about bringing in creation theology and images into the worship services that I will be leading as I serve in parishes. In this process I also realized that even if people aren't physically able to be outside, creation is still an essential part of their lives.

Service of Holy Communion

Invocation: We gather this morning in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Opening Hymn: Children of the Heavenly Father #133

Litany: (from worship service at Shalom Hill Farm)

L: The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it.

C: Praise to you, O Lord.

L: The Lord is our Creator and brings seedtime and harvest, sunshine and rain.

C: Praise to you, O Lord.

L: Were the Lord to withhold these blessings, we would all be lost.

C: Lord, have mercy.

L: But God cares for all that God has made, and shares with us out of the great depths of his abundant goodness.

C: Praise to you, O Lord. Amen.

Prayer of the Day:

O Lord, this winter has been long and hard. The cold, gray days have followed one another with dreary monotony as though the warmth and abundant life of nature were a distant dream we would never taste again. Such are the days when we cannot feel your love, O God, when there seems to be no future for us, when our hearts are as cold as the frozen river and our voices of praise as silent as barren trees. Abide with us, O Lord, as we journey with you to the Holy City together climbing that hill to plant our cross, trusting your promise of new life for us, through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

First Lesson: Job 3:20-26

Gospel: John 12:23-33

Sermon: Our Winters Within

Hymn: For the Beauty of the Earth #146

Prayers of the People

Communion

Benediction: The Lord bless and keep you, the Lord make his face shine upon you, the Lord look upon you with favor and give you peace, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Closing Hymn: Beautiful Savior #171

Dismissal: Go in peace, Serve the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Sermon: Winters Within

Jesus says to us this morning, “Very truly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” If the grain of wheat dies, *that’s* when it bears much fruit. Do you know this about wheat? I didn’t. So, I looked up some information on wheat and found out that wheat is planted in the fall and has to lie dormant until it starts to grow in the spring; and that’s when it’s harvested. It’s not until wheat dies during the winter that it can then grow and be harvested in the spring.

Wheat has to wait through the winter in order to have new life – and we sure know what that’s like, don’t we, waiting through the winter -- we living here in MN, waiting for the winter to end.

We wait through the short days of sunlight, the dreary gray mornings of snow and ice, and the never-ending winds whipping things around outside. Here in MN, we certainly experience winter in nature, but even if we’re in a warm place like Florida, or maybe we can’t ever even get outdoors into nature anymore, but no matter where we are, we still all experience times of winter -- we experience winter within ourselves inside our own hearts and lives, when we feel darkness, ice, cold, and death.

When have you experienced winter inside of you? Maybe when you first arrived at Ebenezer Hall/City of Lakes and everything was new to you and you missed your old surroundings and your former ways of life. Maybe your winter within is missing your family and friends who you wish would call or write more often. Or perhaps your winter moments are each day having to wait for someone else to help you out of bed or go to the bathroom. Your winters within may last for moments, or hours, or days, or weeks, or months. Maybe you are feeling in the midst of winter within yourself right now, wondering when your new life will happen, when hope inside yourself will return, if it will return . . .

We all have our times when we feel like that dying grain of wheat, waiting on winter. See if you can identify some of those winter times for yourself as I read to you a poem entitled “Seed Song,” written by Joyce Rupp, a Catholic sister, and listen as she describes what it might feel like to be this dying grain of wheat in the winter.

I am the seed, so small, so dry. Into the earth I fearfully fall, darkness covers me, silence surrounds me. The terror of my heart is the only sound to keep me company. All that is me huddles together trying desperately not to surrender to any part of self. “Why was I planted?” I cry out. “Why am I here?” “Take me out into the light; I cannot bear the deathly dark.” I weary. I weaken. The day becomes long. I can no longer fight. I surrender in this lonely place of waiting.

Perhaps you’ve had those same sorts of feelings.

So what do we do, how do we endure these lonely winter times of waiting for spring to come?

We rest. We rest and wait in the promise of love that comes from *our* grain of wheat – *our* Bread of Life – Jesus Christ. It's the One describing the wheat to us this morning, the grain of wheat who died himself, Jesus Christ, that brings you and me out of our winters. Christ, too, knows what it's like to have winter moments, winter hours, winter months, and winter years. In his description of wheat, Jesus wasn't just giving us a science lesson; Jesus was describing himself, proclaiming a promise to you and to me. Just like a grain of wheat, Jesus too, died on the cross for you and for me, and was raised again by God from death, from winter, so that we too share in the warmth of spring. After every winter, new life comes for you again, too.

So, what is this springtime like for us beloved people of God? Listen again to the rest of the poem that I began earlier, and think about how you've experienced new life after enduring your own times of winter.

Quietly I sense penetrating warmth; it surrounds me; it fills me and blesses my pain. In a moment of peacefulness I forget my fear. I let go of myself and suddenly the husk that holds me weakens and breaks. It is then that I sense a power deep inside of me, encouraging me: "let go." It is an energy that pushes the husk until it falls away. As it slips aside my eyes behold color. Ah! Can it be? A tiny glimpse of green. "How could that be?" I marvel, "there was never green inside of me." Yet, it is there; each day it slowly stretches upwards to where the warmth seems to be. The pain I once knew is lost in surprise; something wonderful is greening and growing deep within my heart.

That is God's promise of love for you. God's love reaches down surrounding us, holding us, and sustaining us to endure the winter. Through Christ, the ice and cold of our winter within starts to melt. Spring comes when we meet a friend at Ebenezer Hall/City of Lakes and start to feel more at home in our new surroundings. New life happens when we find others to talk to who also know what it's like not to hear from family and friends, and so we instead start to think of our neighbors and staff here as our sisters and brothers -- our family. Spring's warmth melts the cold when we develop more patience and flexibility in waiting for staff people to help us with our daily cares and needs. God strengthens us and gives us hope that new life is coming to our winter moments, days, weeks, and months.

People of God, Spring will come again, and if you doubt that, a little later on in the service, when we come to Holy Communion, all you have to do is close your eyes, listen to the promise, and taste the Bread of Life, the grain of wheat, the body of Christ broken for you, and you too, will share in the gift of new life we all have as blessed children of God.

