

“This is the Day”

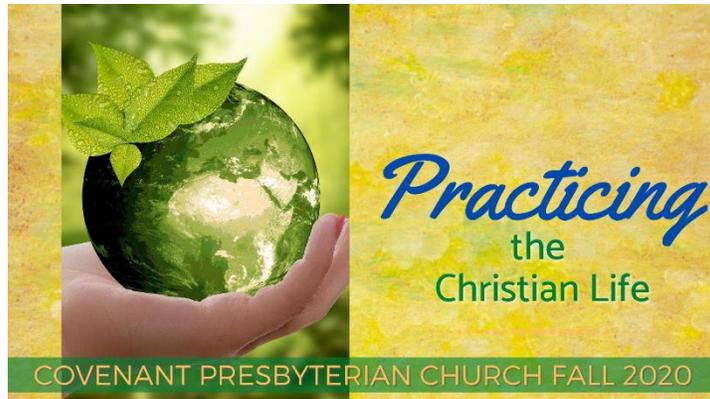
Philippians 4:4-7 and Psalm
118:24

Sunday, October 18, 2020

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Covenant Presbyterian Church

Madison, Wisconsin



Today in worship at Covenant, we are celebrating a baptism, rejoicing in God’s grace and love, and welcoming seven-month old Margot into the church family. Yes, she was born in mid-March, just as the Covid-19 pandemic shutdown began—all the more reason to celebrate God’s grace.

At baptisms, and when people join the church, and when teenagers are confirmed, we ask questions of faith, and the central question is:

Do you turn from the ways of evil and turn to Jesus Christ, accepting him as your Lord and Savior?

The challenge for all of us who have responded “I do” is to figure out what it means to affirm Jesus as our Lord and Savior, how to live an authentic Christian life. How can we serve God in our daily routines? How can we see God more clearly, love God more dearly, follow God more nearly?

One very good way to move toward an authentic Christian life is to make a commitment to Christian practices. That’s why we’re doing this six-week series which we conclude today.

Traditional practices like prayer and scripture and worship are good and necessary.

This series, I hope, has opened our eyes to some non-traditional ways of practicing the faith, of being God’s people, of faithfully following Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior.

In her book *Practicing: Changing Yourself to Change the World*, Pastor Kathy Escobar invites us to practice the Christian faith by doing things like advocating, including, healing, listening, failing, and resting.

Last week Sue Melrose offered a wonderful sermon on the practice of mourning. If you haven't heard, watched, or read it, check out our podcast, Youtube channel, or website.

Today is the last sermon in the series, and we conclude with the practice of **celebrating**.

I'm aware that thinking about celebrating may seem tone deaf in our world today, with a deadly pandemic, a political mess, ongoing racial tension, economic hardship, and more.

But please remember that celebrating is one of many practices, not the only one.

Remember the wisdom of Ecclesiastes:

There is a time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to break down, and a time to build up;
a time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn, and a time to dance....

The apostle Paul, who often is seen to be kind of strict and legalistic, wrote a letter to the church of Philippi from jail, where he encouraged the spirit of celebration:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:4-7)

Paul centered his life around Jesus. And in the gospels, we see that Jesus loved to celebrate. He loved a good party—turning water into wine, multiplying loaves and fishes, welcoming children, enjoying meals with lots of different people.

So I believe we are called to celebrate, even now, even in this challenging time, whenever we can. Obviously, we need to be sensitive to the people around us. Romans 12:15 wisely encourages us: "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep."

Sometimes we rejoice and weep at the same time.

Some of you know that I spent a year of my life in Nicaragua, way back in the 1980s, when the country was at war, and mired in despair. Most people had little more than rice and beans to eat, and too many lived with the constant threat of guns or landmines.

My parents were not exactly thrilled that I chose to go to a war zone after college to work with this church-related human rights group, but it was one of the best things I ever did.

One of the biggest surprises was that in the midst of the fear and despair and mourning, there was incredible joy. I was repeatedly stunned by the laughter and warmth of the Nicaraguan people. We had some great parties together: Singing, dancing, laughing, eating whatever we could find.

In late November 1986, I helped coordinate a visit from a group of North Carolina Presbyterians. We visited a remote rural community in northern Nicaragua, far from paved roads and electricity. We spent a few days together hearing stories of heartache and experiencing the hardship of their daily life.

Our Nicaraguan hosts learned that we would be with them on our Thanksgiving Day, and somehow found and cooked a turkey (*pavo* in Spanish), and with rice and beans, we celebrated the gift of life and friendship together.

Celebrating in the midst of a war might sound crazy, but I think it was an act of faith, a way of practicing Christianity, of trying to let the light shine and live into the world that Jesus came to share.

I treasure that memory of Thanksgiving in war-torn Nicaragua.

I've been blessed to know many joyful and faithful people in my life, and many of them treasure Psalm 118:24, a wonderful affirmation for any morning. Say it with me if you like:

This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.

This is a good refrain to hold on to, especially in a pandemic. Not to ignore our pain and challenge, but to change it and survive it.

So what might you celebrate this week? Are there particular things you are thankful for? If you're part of our Facebook watch party, please add a comment about something you can celebrate.

To encourage us in the practice of celebrating, I asked a few Covenant people what they are celebrating, what they are thankful for. I think you'll enjoy this short video clip.

The video shows Covenant members celebrate:

The beauty of fall Friendship

Good health Family

Dogs Music

Boys sliding down the stairs!

When I see other people celebrating and being thankful, it helps me to do the same.

I hope you can find something, some way to celebrate this week.

As Christians, we need to remember that our faith is all about good news; the word “gospel” means “Good News.”

So we have reason to celebrate every day:

- the good news of God’s love for each and every one of us,
- the good news of forgiveness and of Jesus leading us into new life,
- the good news of the hope that somehow God will redeem us and our world.

Kathy Escobar closes her chapter on celebrating by sharing a similar word: resurrecting.

We usually say resurrection, like it’s a one-and-done deal. But Escobar invites us to think of resurrection as a verb, as an ongoing process. Resurrecting.

She shares various synonyms of resurrecting, which invite us to recognize what may be happening in our personal life and in the situations around us.

Bouncing back Making whole

Overcoming Recovering

Strengthening Waking Up

Friends, God continues resurrecting us and the world. So let’s celebrate wherever we can. Amen.

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Baptism of Margot Eleanor Punt