



Sunday September 29th, 2024

The Fig Tree Worship Resource

Call to worship & Lighting the Candle

Come, let us gather in the presence of God, who is merciful and just.

We remember the story of Esther, who was raised for such a time as this.

In the midst of uncertainty and danger, Esther trusted in God's provision, and the plans of the enemy were overturned.

God, our Protector, hears the cries of the burdened and brings down the proud.

As the Jews celebrated their deliverance in the days of Esther, so we gather to rejoice in the faithfulness of God.

With joy, we celebrate God's salvation and proclaim the goodness of the Lord.

Let us praise the one who transforms mourning into gladness, sorrow into joy!

We come to worship the God of justice, mercy, and everlasting faithfulness! Amen.

We light this candle to remember that in Christ, God's justice, mercy, and deliverance are made known. Like Esther, Christ brings hope and redemption to all people.

Light the candle - Christ is with us.

May this light remind us of God's faithfulness and call us to shine God's love in the world, as Esther did, and as Christ calls us to do.

Acknowledging



Uniting Aboriginal and Islander
Christian Congress

As we gather, we acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of these unceded land and waters. We pay respect to Elders past, present and emerging. As First and Second Peoples walking together, we commit ourselves to be people of the covenant, listening, truth telling and seeking justice for all.

Singing - All things bright and beautiful

TiS 135

OR: Morning has broken TiS 156

OR: All creatures of our God and King TiS 100



Prayer

Loving God,

We come before you with hearts full of praise, for you are the God who frees, protects, and heals. Just as you saved your people through Esther's courage, and as the psalmist declares, "If the Lord had not been on our side, we would have been swallowed alive," we know that you are always with us. In moments of testing and in danger, you surround us offering refuge and strength.

We thank you, for your protection carrying us through difficult times, flooding us with your healing and restoration wherever needed. Your power is present in our prayers, just as James teaches, and we thank you for hearing us when we cry out to you in joy, in sorrow, and in need.

Here, in your presence we are known, we are secure and loved. So in confidence we come with our prayers of confession:

Merciful God,

We confess that, like Esther, we sometimes hesitate to act in faith and courage when you call us. We are held back by fear and doubt, forgetting that you are with us in every situation.

We hear the warning of James acknowledging our failings to one another and to pray as we ought.

Instead of turning to you and to each other for healing, we try to rely on ourselves. We neglect the power of prayer and the strength of fellowship and community with one another to bring healing, forgiveness, and restoration to our lives and relationships.



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Forgive us for our lack of trust in your protection, for our failure to pray earnestly, and for the times we neglect to care for one another. Amen.

People of God, hear these words of grace to us. Just as God set the people free in Esther's time, we are set free through Jesus Christ. God's healing and restoration is ours to receive when we come to God and one another in prayer.

Be at peace. Know that your prayers are heard and that we are loved, forgiven, renewed and restored. **Thanks be to God. Amen.**

Passing the peace

May the Peace of God dwell with you:
and also with you.

Listening

Read: Esther 7:1-6, 9-10, 9:20-22
James 5:13-20
Mark 9:38-50

For these words of faith and for Jesus the Word
Thanks be to God.

Reflecting - Rev. Jennie Gordon

Going to hell

The gospel of James was written for a marginalised, minority community of the Jewish diaspora, most likely by James the Just, half-brother of Jesus. It's one of our earliest Christian writings and the many imperatives it contains are all to be lived out in community.^[1] Today we hear the final verses of the book, an exhortation to prayer and praise and a blessing for those who bring back the wanderers. James stresses that it's a communal responsibility to notice that some of us have wandered into all kinds of hell, and to go there and bring them back home.

In the reading from the gospel of Mark, Jesus doesn't use the word 'hell', that's a translation decision. He uses the Aramaic name of a place

called *Gehenna*, in the Hinnon Valley just outside the walls of Jerusalem. Will Willimon, theology professor and retired bishop, writes, "Centuries before the time of Jesus, it had been a place of pagan idolatry and thus, got a bad name... by the time of Jesus, Gehenna had become the town dump. Rubbish, bones and decaying carcasses filled this desolate valley."

I'm told that Jesus could see Gehenna from the cross, literally. As the Creed reminds us, he descended into hell, to bring them back, because you can't do that from the outside. As the gospels remind us, he walked into the hell of others constantly, drawing them back from isolation, humiliation, degradation and exclusion, restoring them to the healing company of hope.

We're not very good at going into difficult places for the sake of the lost. Our selfish self-preservation says things like, "it's not your business," and "what if you get hurt." Both of which may be true and may not. When someone leaves the church because their faith has failed or left them, what do we do? Do we keep them on the rosters in the hope that they will be guilted back? Do we cross them off the rosters because we need people to be reliable? Do we keep in touch and make time and space to engage when they are ready or, do we leave them alone to sort it out?

We're not very good at going into unpleasant places, frightening places or unpredictable places for the sake of the lost. We avoid the one who is the source of the unpleasant odour on the tram. We look away from the face of the one who is clothed in the dirt of their dwelling place. We fail to hear or see the people behind the walls of their own *Gehenna*, wailing and waiting for release. When it's us who are wandering, we tend to lock the door behind us when we leave, for fear that we may be found, or found out.

I knew a man whose father was a violent alcoholic, as a child he had known the full force of it. He never drank alcohol, so that he would not stumble into that hell.



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I knew a woman who was dying, but her husband wouldn't accept it, wouldn't talk about it, wouldn't go there. She drifted along in the hell of denial and doom. When it was near the end, he was forced to see where she had wandered, and together we walked with her to her last horizon.

As members of the community of Christ we will refuse to give in to despair, we will be people who treasure life and orientate ourselves towards it. It is in the strength and company of this community that we can walk into whatever hell has engulfed others and try to bring them back into life and, if the time comes, to allow them to do the same for us. We will pray together through the hard days, and we sing praises together when we are joyous. May it be so, Amen.

[1] *The New Testament in Color*, McCaulley, Ok, Padilla, Peeler. Intervarsity Press, Illinois, USA, 2024.

Singing - God of grace TiS 611

OR: Be still my soul TiS 123

OR: Lord hear my praying TiS 689

Offering

Bless these offerings, God of salt and light. As we offer ourselves to walk in the way of Christ, enable us to live as people of salt and light in your name. Amen.

Notices

October 1 is the *International Day for Older Persons*. October 2 is the *International Day of Non-Violence*.

Prayers for World & Community

Loving God,
we come now with humble hearts, asking for your help. You remind us to accept everyone who does good in your name, even if they are different from us. Teach us to put aside our

differences and to embrace those who seek to serve you.

Help us to be careful with our words and actions so we don't lead others astray. Guide us to choose kindness and understanding, showing your love in everything we do.

In times of trouble, let us remember to pray for each other and for those who are sick or suffering. Give us the strength to support one another, and may our prayers bring comfort and healing.

For those who have lost their way, we ask for your guiding light and love. Help us to reach out and bring them back with compassion and kindness. Encourage us to live our faith boldly and to serve others without fear. Let our actions reflect your grace, bringing hope and peace to our world.

As we bring our prayers together this day we offer you prayers of our hearts and minds knowing you hear all which are spoken aloud and spoken in silence...

Hear us O God we pray. Joining with hearts and voices together in the prayer you have given to us:

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done, on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins,
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power, and the glory
are yours, now and forever. Amen.

Singing - There's a spirit in the air TiS 414

OR: Guide me o thou great Redeemer TiS 569

OR: What a friend we have in Jesus TiS 590



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Blessing

May God bless you with the sheltering of their love and protection in times of trouble and joy.

As you carry each other's burdens, may you become instruments of healing and grace, bringing back those who wander, serving those in need, embracing all who strive to serve the Kingdom, welcoming all in Christ's name.

May you be salt and light in the world, illuminating paths of love and peace.

Go in peace, empowered to share God's blessings. Amen.

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