



Birthday Offering ²⁰⁰⁹

PRESBYTERIAN WOMEN

Dedication Service

BY MOLLY CASTEEL

Call to Worship

PSALM 46:1-3, 5

One: God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

All: Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult.

One: God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved;

All: God will help when the morning dawns.

One: Come, let us worship God.

Prayer

Promise-keeping God, we draw near to you as we celebrate health-giving ministries in your global church, ministries that work to bring restoration to your children. We celebrate the lessons we have learned in visiting our sisters and brothers in Ukraine and in El Paso/Ciudad Juárez, extended family members in Christ. We gather as a community to give thanks and praise, confident of your presence. Jobs are lost, employers move away, loved ones die or fail us, but your faithfulness endures forever.

Hymn Suggestions

PH 386: "O for a World"

SF 2177: "Wounded World that Cries for Healing"

SF 2245: "Within the Day-to-Day"

SF 2246: "Word of God in Human Language"

Call to Confession

One: Our sisters and brothers are crying out, "How long, O Lord?" as they lose jobs and livelihoods due to corporate actions taken, often a world away. When corporations seek only the bottom line, communities are abandoned and working families are left to struggle for adequate food and shelter.

All: Forgive us our complacency. Help us to empower depressed communities and work for a living wage for all.

One: We expect plentiful aisles of low-priced goods, but we do not inform ourselves of the cost-cutting production methods, employment practices and occupational safety actions that undergird this bounty. In pursuit of the means to sustain themselves, families are pulled apart across borders.

All: Forgive us our greed, apathy and failure to respond to the suffering of your good creation.

One: Children are orphaned. Some of these children also have disabilities. We may lose a generation if we are not mindful of the least of these.

All: Forgive us for turning a blind eye and a deaf ear to your children.

One: Let us confess our sins.



Prayer of Confession

Liberating God, we confess that we fail to honor the dignity of your children, all of whom you created in your image. We fail to recognize the blessings of your unique creation. We find differences and seek to ascribe meaning to those differences; in the process, we diminish human dignity. We do this as individuals and as communities.

Faithful Savior, when you are silent for a moment, we despair and fall away. We divide the world into “us” and “them,” harming one other, and forgetting that all people are your precious gifts to the world. We are reminded that your time is not our time, yet we lose patience and demand attention. Help us trust in your promises. Help us extend ourselves in faith so we can respond to your hurting world. Amen.

Assurance of Pardon

One: The Living God hears our prayer.

All: Yes, we know this is true.

One: God’s freely given forgiveness embraces us.

All: This is good news for all God’s children.

Scripture and Meditation

Read *Isaiah 54:5–8* (NIV). Read *verse 7* slowly several times and allow some moments for reflection between readings. “For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with deep compassion I will bring you back.”

Many of us will focus on two words as this verse is repeated—“abandoned” and “compassion.” Why does God abandon the Israelites even for a moment? This is a hard question, but one that allows us to connect to the suffering of the Israelites as they struggled to understand why God would abandon them during their exile. Hopefully the question also draws us into the stories of the recipients of this offering—groups who minister to persons abandoned by their communities.

The books of the prophets correct and comfort. *Isaiah* is no different. Throughout *Isaiah 40–55*, scripture addresses Jerusalem and Zion. This portion of *Isaiah* speaks to a community in exile, but is delivered in a message that conveys the promises of God. While not apparent to the Israelites in their situation of exile, God’s silence did not mean they had been forgotten.

We, too, are anxious when silence is all we receive from our beloved, in our closest relationships. When we hear silence we leap to conclusions and label the actions of the other as abandonment. We are no better in our relationships with the Living God; we emotionally react to what we see as God’s absence.

But if this is where our focus lies, we miss the good news. God remains faithful. God’s promises are still intact. In God’s time, the lapse is momentary. God is still in relationship with the community. For Reformed Christians, this is familiar and comforting territory. The promises are sure—God has compassion, deep compassion, for God’s partners in ministry. When we respond to our sisters’ and brothers’ cries of anguish, we become Christ’s assistants in reclaiming and restoring wholeness to the family of God. We claim a Triune God who lives in community, creates us for community, and models community. In this context, it makes sense that we are called to restore, to reconcile, to reach out in love.

Offering

One: As receivers of your abundant love and grace, let us return to you a portion, in offerings, of our treasures, our lives and the gifts of the earth.

Prayer of Dedication

Partnering God, we bring you our gifts to do your work in the world. We give you thanks for the healing touch and assistance given to orphans in the Ukraine and the restorative training and cultural education received by abandoned workers in El Paso/Ciudad Juárez. Communities are made whole in this work. We are reminded how our gifts become a means to fulfill your promises. We thank you for this partnering work.

Hymn Suggestions

PH 377: “Lord, You Have Come to the Lakeshore”

SF 2175: “Together We Serve”

SF 2182: “When God Restored Our Common Life”

SF 2225: “Who Is My Mother, Who Is My Brother?”

Charge and Benediction

Now go and be the hands and feet of God; provide for the fulfillment of God’s promises. Show compassion and connect deeply in whatever ways you are called. Remember the words of Paul, “Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. . . . May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (*Romans 15:7, 13* NRSV).

Molly Casteel is a minister member of Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery.

PH—*The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1990)

SF—*Sing the Faith* (Louisville, Ky.: Geneva, 2003)

Text in bold should be spoken aloud by all.