

Weekly Devotions
South Holburn Church
2nd February 2021

READINGS

This morning we woke up in Stonehaven to a beautiful white blanket of snow all over the trees, grass and houses. It looked like a winter wonderland sparkling as the sun rose above the sea. It was particularly nice because I did not have to drive in it nor worry about slipping all over the road! Lydia was able to go out and play in it, and we all joined her for the making of a tiny snowman (not enough snow for a larger one) and a few snowballs gently thrown at one another (that snow was icy and could have done some damage if we weren't careful!). I am not sure if you were able to see any of the snow where you are since it can be tricky along the shoreline, but it was definitely worth an early morning rise.

The best part was in the quiet before anyone else was up and there were few cars on the road. The animal and people footprints weren't all over it yet. The snow looked pristine and perfect. It reminded me of scripture that talks about how we are forgiven and made new creations.

¹⁶ Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;
remove the evil of your doings
from before my eyes;

cease to do evil,

¹⁷ learn to do good;

seek justice,

rescue the oppressed,

defend the orphan,

plead for the widow.

¹⁸ Come now, let us argue it out,
says the LORD:

though your sins are like scarlet,

they shall be like snow;

though they are red like crimson,

they shall become like wool.

Isaiah 1:16-18 (NRSVA)

⁵This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. ⁶If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; ⁷but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. ⁸If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

1 John 1:5-10 (NRSVA)

REFLECTION

What a beautiful image we have been given of our God cleansing us and forgiving us of our many sins. We do not have to carry guilt or regret, sorrow or shame in our hearts. When we recognize our wrongdoing and confess it, our God loves to make us new! In fact, in him we are new creations, the old has gone and the new has come. We can come out of the shadow of the past and dance into the freedom of today.

The Israelites had followed a similar pattern over and over. They had longed to follow God but failed, slipped up and fell over and over, time and again. Isaiah was reminding them that they had the potential with God to learn to work against the nature of the flesh. They could love, show justice and be compassionate to others. In so doing, healing would come. When we stop trying to get our "fair share" and realize God will provide, we are freed to be abundantly more gracious to people around us (and care for the poor, widowed and orphaned). Self-sacrificial love requires first being filled up with a supernatural love that comes from above. Before we can unselfishly give to others, we must receive the love of God into our own lives.

The letter the apostle John writes to the Johannine community in 1 John reminds us of all of these themes. God is pure and in him is no sin. We walk in the darkness, but he is in the light. If we want to walk with God, we must allow him to cleanse us from our sins and bring us new life. The early Christians John addresses are struggling with sin, greed, and brokenness just like we do today. The centuries change, the distractions are various, and the issues at hand may vary, but the core of selfishness remains the same. We too need a new beginning. Sometimes we need to run to God for forgiveness over and over, because he cleans up and we get all muddy again like that beautiful snow was marred by all the footprints and the melting sun.

I don't know about you, but the idea of new beginnings always warms my heart. I so easily grow cold in my Christian faith. I lose my way because I follow my own desires instead of God's heart for me. But what amazing grace our God shows us that we are given new mercies every day!

The real trouble is when we try to apply it to others. We may struggle with that a bit. If we know the greatness of forgiveness and new starts how can we withhold it from others?

One of my favorite Christian authors is Corrie ten Boom. She writes of how she and her family hid the Jews during WWII in Holland. They unfortunately were captured and sent to prison camps where Corrie's beloved father and later sister died. Corrie struggled to forgive and have a positive attitude particularly for the guards who made their lives so miserable. Betsie, Corrie's sister, would always try to find the bright side of things. They had been able to smuggle in a Bible, they had women who wanted to hear it, and they could encourage one another. Even better was the news that the guards stayed away because they did not want to catch lice. What a journey Corrie had through sorrow and faith. She was released from the prison camp by a clerical error and she began her own healing through telling the story of God's redemption in the most unlikely of places. She began to share her talks on forgiveness and restoration. She even returned to Europe and toured Germany.

While she was there on one occasion at a church in Munich, Corrie came face to face with perhaps her biggest challenge ever. She shares the situation in an article in the Christian magazine Guideposts, first printed in 1972 <https://www.guideposts.org/better-living/positive-living/guideposts-classics-corrie-ten-boom-on-forgiveness>

It was 1947 and I had come from Holland to defeated Germany with the message that God forgives.

It was the truth they needed most to hear in that bitter, bombed-out land, and I gave them my favorite mental picture. Maybe because the sea is never far from a Hollander's mind, I liked to think that that's where forgiven sins were thrown.

"When we confess our sins," I said, "God casts them into the deepest ocean, gone forever."

The solemn faces stared back at me, not quite daring to believe. There were never questions after a talk in Germany in 1947. People stood up in silence, in silence collected their wraps, in silence left the room.

And that's when I saw him, working his way forward against the others. One moment I saw the overcoat and the brown hat; the next, a blue uniform and a visored cap with its skull and crossbones.

She described how this man, her former prison guard and the one who made her sister Betsie's dying days so hard, came forward and told her he had been a guard at Ravensbrück. He did not recognize her, but without a doubt she knew it was her former captor. He told her he had become a Christian after the war. He put out his hand saying he knew God had forgiven him, would she?

And I stood there—I whose sins had every day to be forgiven—and could not. Betsie had died in that place—could he erase her slow terrible death simply for the asking? It could not have been many seconds that he stood there, hand held out, but to me it seemed hours as I wrestled with the most difficult thing I had ever had to do. For I had to do it—I knew that. The message that God forgives has a prior condition: that we forgive those who have injured us. "If you do not forgive men their trespasses," Jesus says, "neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses."

Corrie learned to forgive, can we? We who have been forgiven much are perhaps holding back forgiveness for someone who has hurt us. We too can rejoice that our sins have been thrown into the sea of forgetfulness, and there is no fishing allowed. Yet, we so often dredge up the sins of others and are slow to let go of old grudges.

In this time of lockdown and the challenging year we have had filled with so many losses, perhaps a lesson we can learn is that life is too short to hold back forgiveness. If God so freely bestows it on us, can we also share it generously with others?

I pray all of us might know the joy of forgiving lavishly as we too have been made white as snow and given new fresh beginnings every moment of the day!

What a beautiful day it is, fresh and clean and sparkling! Jesus has paid our debt so that we might know new life. Let us rejoice in the blessing we have been given and share that each day ahead!

Much love,
Julia

PRAYER

Jesus, Forgiver of our Sins,
You have born the cross of pain and suffering,
You have born the pain of the Father seemingly turning his face away,
You have spanned the gap of death and the chasm of sin,

That we might know unlimited forgiveness,
Thank you for taking our dark and dead limbs and
Giving us light and bright new beginnings,
Just as the new snow is pure and beautiful,
So too do you look upon us with such love.
Give us your heart so that we can look upon those who have hurt us in the same way.
May we cast aside our selfishness and extend our hand to our captors as well.
In Jesus name we pray,
Amen.



Hope Gatherings – Wednesdays in February

We are going to be meeting on Wednesday nights at 7:30 (Virtual Vestry from 7-7:30 p.m.) throughout February to discuss how we can get through this latest lockdown and thrive in this time of isolation. We will discuss different themes as we move through the month that will help us to better cope with what is before us. This week we will talk about our emotions and how to negotiate losses and celebrate blessings. We will spend some time reading the Psalms (Psalm 46 is a great one that reminds us of God’s unshakable presence) and remembering that the psalmists wrote from the depth of their emotions. God met them right in their pain, questions and doubts.

1. **Talk about your losses with trusted friends.** We have all lost many things during this pandemic. Time with family and friends, plans we made that were cancelled, and so much more. It is normal to grieve and to feel sad about these losses. Do not just bottle your feelings up inside, but talk with a friend on the phone, write in a journal, or do both!
2. Some of us have complicated losses. We have lost loved ones to this dreaded pandemic, and we have not been able to grieve as we normally would with family and friends. Isolation may have brought up long buried losses. **In these cases, you might benefit from talking to someone who is an experienced listener.** A clergy person (David or I would be happy to speak with you!), counselor, or even someone on a crisis hotline (see link later in this text) can give additional support. There is no shame in struggling or needing someone to listen.
3. **Focus upon whatever is good, noble, and beautiful.** Philippians 4:8 reminds us that when we focus upon that which is a blessing, our hearts and minds are changed for the better. It can be easy to allow our negative thinking (some call it “stinking thinking”!) to spiral us into feeling even more isolated. Take a break from listening to negative media. Sometimes the news around us may feel overwhelming. It is okay not to read it and watch it all the time. However, when we bring to mind that for which we are thankful, even little things (like getting out of bed this morning, the beauty of

the birds singing, a warm house, enough food to eat, etc.), we begin to find hope and inspiration for daily living.

4. **Stay connected to others!** Why not come to the Virtual Vestry? Maybe there is a friends' WhatsApp group you could organize? There are always the good old-fashioned telephone and sending a letter in the post that can brighten your day or lift someone else's spirits. It can be easy to want to withdraw from others when we are feeling overwhelmed or sad, but when we push ourselves to make that call or send that email, we will be reminded that we are not as alone as we might feel. We will also be helping someone else to feel loved too!

We have been created for community! God made us to relate to others and need relationships in our life. One of the reasons why the lockdown is so hard is that we cannot see or hug one another face to face. In order to protect each other right now and care about community, we need to make these sacrifices. Thankfully, there are ways to "see" one another and share in community!

The light at the end of the tunnel is getting brighter, vaccines are on their way and treatment for Covid-19 is improving. While we still have to isolate at the moment, we can look to brighter days where we will once again be able to gather for worship, join a friend for a meal, or enjoy a coffee morning at the church hall. Won't we appreciate those moments all the more when the time comes?

Meanwhile, plan to come out on Wednesday night to discuss your thoughts on navigating this recent lockdown and how we might help each other to negotiate it. We will hear Scripture and spend time in prayer too! To enter the Virtual Vestry, go to the church's website (<http://www.southholburn.org/>) and scroll down for the Zoom Meeting link.

Below are a few helpful resources you might want to check out.

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/mental-health-helplines/>

<https://www.bbrfoundation.org/blog/how-stay-mentally-healthy-amidst-covid-19-pandemic?gclid=Cj0KCQiA6t6ABhDMARIsAONiYw9zBiVBKegWys-JktX5k-Yknn2JssiMijrGp>

