



Queen Anne

LUTHERAN CHURCH

Called to Proclaim God's Love in Christ for Every Person

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✘ *In Worship Today* ✘

Pastor

Cantor

Lector

The Rev. Dr. Daniel Peterson

Kyle Haugen

Jacqui Darroch

This service of worship can also be heard as audio online. Go to queenannelutheran.org and click on "WORD OUT" to find audio, video, and print resources for worship at home.

SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

July 12, 2020

"Word Out #19 audio transcript



Prelude

Voluntary on the cornet stops
Starling Goodwin (1711-1774)

Welcome

- ☐: Welcome, this sixth Sunday after Pentecost. Wherever you are listening, we invite you into this space: one where we will hear the good news in proclamation, spoken and sung, a time where you can be still and know God is God.
- ☐: God's word is like the rain that waters the earth and brings forth vegetation. It sustains us in difficult times, providing water for our thirsty souls. God's word is also like the sower who scatters seed indiscriminately. Our lives are like seeds sown in the earth. Even from what appears to be little, dormant, or dead, God promises a harvest. Once received, the word compels us to find creative ways in these days of pandemic and civil unrest, to love and serve our neighbor.

Greeting

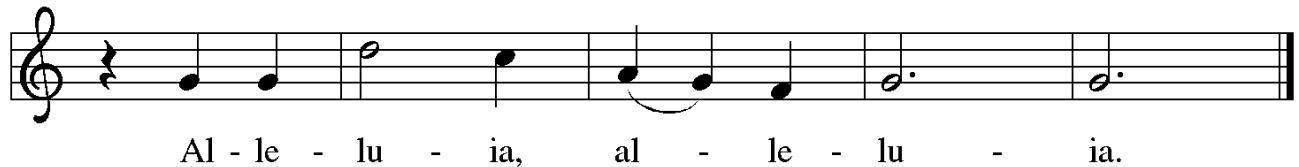
P: The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God,
and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

C: And also with you.

Gospel Acclamation

Matthew 11:25

C:



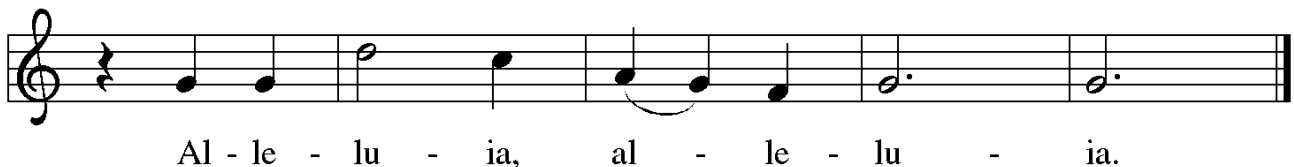
Repeat alleluia



A:

The word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart.

C:



The Holy Gospel

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

A: The Holy Gospel according to Matthew, the thirteenth chapter.

G: **Glory to you, O Lord.**

¹That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. ²Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. ³And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. ⁴And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. ⁵Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. ⁶But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. ⁷Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. ⁸Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. ⁹Let anyone with ears listen!"

¹⁸"Hear then the parable of the sower. ¹⁹When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. ²⁰As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; ²¹yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. ²²As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. ²³But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty."

A: The Gospel of the Lord.

G: **Praise to you, O Christ.**

Two weeks ago I shared with you what motivated me to switch from being a university professor to a parish pastor. Ultimately, I said, I wanted to see if true Christianity, the kind where we share one another's pain and difficulties, was possible today – not as an academic experiment but as a living option in a world where people often seem to live only for themselves instead of for those around them.

Today I would like to add one more reason to the list of why I became a pastor: I wanted, as the Apostle Paul says in Philippians 2:12, to work out my own salvation in fear and trembling. I wanted, in other words, to see if the faith of my upbringing could make a difference in my life. I wanted to find out if I could pray without it feeling like I was just talking to myself. Most importantly perhaps, I wanted to reconcile my faith in God with the reality of pain and suffering in the world – not least of which was my own.

Why, I wanted to know, does God permit pain and suffering? Why do bad things happen to good – or at least decent – people?

It would be easy, of course, to dismiss the question of why "bad things happen to good people" in a world created by God as merely a cerebral exercise. Many people do. Philosophers and theologians, they might point out, have been debating the question for centuries, yet none of them have come up with *the solution*. But what if I told you there was a solution, or at least what the theologian Thomas Jay Oord calls "a believable explanation for unnecessary suffering, tragedy, abuse, and other evils" (*God Can't*, p. 60)? What if I added, moreover, that the answer lies not in the next book you read but in how you say your prayers – or, more specifically, how you *end* your prayers?

By way of conclusion, I will share with you five simple words that have changed the way I experience God in prayer and "solved" for me the problem of God and suffering. But first I want to honor the question itself

as one we should *legitimately* be able to ask as people of faith. After all, Job asked it. Jesus asked it. And Joni asked it.

Does Suffering Happen for a Reason?

Most of us are familiar with the story of Job. A perfectly righteous man of faith loses everything – his family, his property, his well-being and his health – for no apparent reason whatsoever. How can this be? Job’s friends have an answer. “Obviously,” they reply, “you must have done something wrong.” One of them, Zophar the Naamathite, takes it to the extreme. “God exacts of you less than your guilt deserves,” he says to Job (11:6).

Imagine that. “You got lucky,” Zophar seems to be saying. “You deserve far worse! God should be punishing you even more!” (Zohar, it seems, may have been the first Protestant...of the Calvinist variety.)

Like Job, Jesus also asks the question of how God could allow him suffer, in this case on a cross. We know it well. “My God, my God,” he pleads according to Matthew and Mark, “why have you forsaken me?”

Who, then, is Joni? Thomas Oord, mentioned earlier, introduces her. “Joni Eareckson Tada’s story is inspirational,” he writes. “It’s a tale of beauty emerging from tragedy. As a teenager, Jodi dove into the shallow waters in Chesapeake Bay. This miscalculation paralyzed her from the shoulders down. She would never again move her arms and legs freely. In the following years, Joni used her limited agency in amazing ways. She wrote a best-selling autobiography, learned to paint impressive art with her teeth, and gained fame as an inspirational teacher. By her late 60s Joni had written more than 40 books, appeared in movies, and recorded musical albums. She founded an organization to help the special needs community called “Joni and Friends International Disability Center.” Academic institutions awarded degrees to honor her life and work” (p. 109).

How did she do it? According to Oord, Joni, an evangelical Christian, believes her injuries are part of God’s plan, and that God caused her to be paralyzed for a reason. She must have done something wrong. “You know, she says directly, “I was involved in some pretty immoral stuff when I was

on my feet [as a teenager]. Even though I was a Christian, I was sinning big time, heading down a wrong path. Deep in my heart, I know that if my accident hadn't happened, I would have completely ignored my convictions in college" (p. 111).

Notice Joni's reasoning. She compares her experience elsewhere with Job's, but her thinking here is a lot more like his friends! God may not like to see us suffer, Joni believes, but He punishes us for our sin and does it for our own good.

Joni, however, goes even farther: instead of blaming her present condition only on sins she committed in the past, she believes God acted *pre-emptively* so that she would avoid going down the wrong path in the future!

You Have Not Spoken of Me What is Right

It's hard to deny the incredible impact Joni's belief has had on her life. Many people, in fact, are comforted by her view that their suffering has a purpose. Even the Apostle Paul thought this way on occasion (see, for example, Romans 5:3 and 2 Corinthians 12:7). But in Job at least, there is one character who sees things differently – God!

We never ultimately learn why Job suffers. God gets mad at him for demanding an explanation, but God also rebukes Job's friends for providing one! Remember what they said: "You (Job) must have done something wrong. God is punishing you for what you did." God, however, wants nothing to do with their way of thinking. To Eliphaz the Temanite, one of Job's three friends, God says: "My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends: *for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has*" (Job 42:7).

Surely there are people who benefit like Joni from believing that their pain and suffering ultimately come from God, that it's all part of God's magnificent yet mysterious plan, that God causes paralysis, cancer, and permits rape and trauma for some kind of greater good and to punish sin. There are many others, however, for whom the belief that God is the source and cause of our suffering *makes our suffering worse*.

I am one of them.

In today's Gospel, Jesus identifies various reasons for why people fall away from the faith. Some, he says, are lured away by wealth; others remain only when times are good. Then, when persecution occurs or things become difficult, they leave. Today, as membership declines and numbers dwindle across churches of every denomination, we could probably identify dozens of additional reasons for why people leave. Bad theology, I submit, ranks among the highest of them.

Why Doesn't God Do Something?

Several years ago when I was first starting out as a pastor, a former university student of mine contacted me. His sister, who was also one of my students, had suffered from a debilitating stroke. She was in a nearby hospital and he asked me to see her.

When I arrived, he greeted me in the lobby. Together we rode the elevator up to see his sister. When I saw her, she was nothing like I remembered. She had been bedridden now for months and could barely speak. Had things gone as planned, she would have just been starting graduate school. Now at 22, she was learning how to walk, as if for the first time. It was devastating.

About mid-way through my visit with her I met her father, a lifelong Christian who brought up her (and her brother) in the church. We talked for a moment in the hallway. His wife, I learned, had died unexpectedly years before. This family knew heartbreak. Now they had more. When our conversation ended, he confided something to me. Pointing upward, he said, "I've stopped going to church. I just can't believe in a God who has the power to stop these things from happening but doesn't use it. Why didn't he save my wife? Why doesn't he save my little girl?"

I shook my head, wondering silently to myself, "Maybe because He can't."

Even God Has Limits

The Bible imposes all kinds of limits upon God. Titus 1:2 tells us that “God cannot lie.” James 1:13 tells us that “God cannot be tempted by evil,” and 2 Timothy 2:13 tells us that “God cannot deny himself.” C.S. Lewis writes accordingly: “Not even Omnipotence [i.e., being all-powerful] can do what is self-contradictory” (Oord qtd. Lewis, 23). In a little known passage tucked away in the early history of the Israelites, the Bible even tells us that God experiences defeat in battle (see Judges 1:19, NRSV translation).

The real reason behind God’s limitation, however, is not poor strategy on the battlefield. It’s the nature of God. 1 John 4:8 tells us that “God is love.” Thomas Oord calls it “uncontrolling love,” Godly love, the kind that does not force, does not coerce, and does not violate the freedom of God’s creatures or the integrity of God’s creation. Yes, God always wants healing, but never works alone to accomplish it. Instead, God works with us and alongside of us for healing to occur because God by nature is “uncontrolling love.”

Oord writes, “Divine healing isn't a solitary, controlling ‘ZAP’! It's not supernatural control. Healing requires cooperation because God always expresses uncontrolling love” (p. 93). We can join God in this healing by adding five simple words to our prayers.

The True Power of Prayer

When I was a child I suffered from severe asthma. One day when I was about eight, I remember having an attack at school. It was late in the school day, and I was able to get on the bus. By the time I got home, however, I could barely make it across the lawn and to the house. I collapsed into the brown recliner we had in our living room. Nobody was home. “Help me,” I prayed to God, straining to breathe as tears rolled down my young cheeks. When no relief came, I only became more desperate. “Help me, God, please.”

Why, I asked bitterly, wouldn’t God do anything?

When I feel like God can do something but doesn’t, I get angry. I lash out at God. What kind of God would choose not to intervene? What lesson did I

have to learn at eight by not breathing except to *hate God for not doing anything?*

This is the problem with believing that God can do something but chooses to refrain to “teach us a lesson” or “for our own good”: for many of us, it makes suffering worse. That is why, when I was struggling recently with another health issue, I was initially reluctant to pray to God. Finally, however, I did. “Help me God,” I said. Moments later I asked, “Why won’t you help me?”

The room was silent, but then these words arose within me: “Help me, God... in whatever way you can.”

Help me, God, in whatever way you can.

It was a prayer unlike any I ever prayed. By adding these words, “in whatever way you can,” I turned an enemy into an ally, a God against me into a God for me, a God I secretly hated into One I openly loved. God, I realized, wants to heal me and will do God’s best. But God needs our hands, our efforts, to bring that healing about. “God,” Oord says, “doesn’t heal single-handedly.”

This week, whether you find yourself struggling with fear, pain, uncertainty, sickness, loneliness, isolation, or despair, ask God to help you – but don’t forget to add five important words: “Help me, God, help me in whatever way you can.” These words changed the way I experienced God in prayer. May they change yours, too.

1 On what has now been sown your bless - ing Lord, be - stow; the
 2 To you our wants are known, from you are all our pow'rs; ac -
 3 Oh, grant that each of us, now met be - fore you here, may

pow'r is yours a - lone to make it sprout and grow. O Lord, in
 cept what is your own and par-don what is ours. Our prais - es,
 meet to - geth - er thus when you and yours ap - pear, and fol - low

grace the har - vest raise, and yours a - lone shall be the praise!
 Lord, and prayers re - ceive and to your word a bless - ing give.
 you to heav'n, our home. E'en so, A - men! Lord Je - sus, come!

Text: John Newton, 1725–1807, alt.
 Music: DARWALL'S 148TH, John Darwall, 1731–1789

Prayers of the Church

P: Called into unity with one another and the whole creation, let us pray for our shared world.

A brief silence.

P: Gracious God, your word has been sown in many ways and places. We pray for missionaries and newly planted congregations around the world. Inspire us by their witness to the faith we share. Lord, in your mercy,

C: **hear our prayer.**

P: Creating God, the mountains and hills burst into song and the trees and fields clap their hands in praise. We pray for the birds and animals who make their home in the trees, and for lands stripped bare by deforestation. Empower us to sustainably use what you have given. Lord, in your mercy,

C: **hear our prayer.**

P: Reigning God, we pray for our nation's leaders. Increase their desire for justice and equality. We pray for our enemies. Bridge the chasms that divide us and guide authorities to a deep and lasting peace. Lord, in your mercy,

C: **hear our prayer.**

P: Abiding God, care for all who are in need. For those who are doubting, renew faith. For those who are worrying, provide release. For those who are struggling, ease burdens. For those in fear, give hope. Lord, in your mercy,

C: **hear our prayer.**

P: Renewing God, revive your church. Nourish and nurture the seeds you have planted, that we might grow as disciples. Replace what has been depleted. Sustain our ministries and deepen relationships with the wider community. Lord, in your mercy,

C: **hear our prayer.**

P: For who or what else do the people of God pray?

A silence is given so that your prayers may be offered.

P: Lord, in your mercy,

C: **hear our prayer.**

P: Eternal God, we give thanks for all who have died. Comfort us in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection. Lord, in your mercy,

C: **hear our prayer.**

P: Receive these prayers, O God, and those too deep for words; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

C: **Amen.**

Lord's Prayer

P: Lord remember us in your kingdom and teach us to pray.

C: **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.

Announcements

P: We thank you for joining us for this service. If you would like to hear other services or access the newest edition of *the Quill*, our newsletter, we invite you to go to our website at queenannelutheran.org.

P: Receive now the blessing:

Benediction

A: Let us bless the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

P: Almighty God, the Father, † the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
bless and preserve you.

C: **Amen.**

Dismissal

P: Go in peace. Serve the Lord.

C: **Thanks be to God.**

Postlude

Processional of Joy
Lawrence J. Meyer (1928–1996)