



To our beloved Congregations,

Church has been anything but normal since the beginning of the pandemic. Just as Covid-19 has affected the way you experience church, we are aware that this is especially true for pastors and staff.

Perhaps you have been hearing the term, “The Great Resignation.” It is a term recognizing the growing trend of people who are burned out from the pandemic; fighting decision fatigue, resigning from their jobs, feeling that they cannot do enough, or anything more. This is not just a corporate phenomenon. It’s happening with teachers, nurses, and pastors, along with many other professions. We want to be sure that our pastors, church educators, church musicians, and staff know they have support from Conference staff as well as from congregational members.

We have a request of you and a gift for your congregation to help make it happen! Please consider giving your pastor(s) and staff an extra paid week off this winter (including Sunday) in addition to their regular vacation and personal time off. The week following Christmas or at the beginning of the new year is a perfect time to thank them for having journeyed with your congregation through this time of unprecedented change, and you can encourage them to take the extra time for renewal and Sabbath. We invite you to also use the gift of the attached Lay-led Worship Service at the Turning of the New Year to invite members and friends to host a time of worship while your pastor and staff are away.

Generosity is a gift of the Holy Spirit, and it is our hope that you will be generous at this time by caring well for your pastor and staff. Help them care for you by caring for them. What a wonderful cycle to be in!

Thank you for using this gift. Thank you for the ways you appreciate your pastor and staff! Do more of it! Being the Church together is not always easy, but it is worth it - especially when there is mutual caring in the covenant relationship.

If you would, please let us know how your congregation is practicing generosity with your pastor and staff, and send us a picture or two of your laity leading worship! We hope that you will experience joy in the sharing of your gifts with the congregation as you lead this service.

With care,

Your Conference Staff

A Lay Led Worship Service at the Turning of the New Year

There are hymn suggestions in this worship service. We encourage your leadership team to think about how best to use music in this service within your context, and to consider singing acapella, utilizing recordings, or inviting lay-led music leadership so that music staff are gifted with a week off from music leadership.

Call to Worship

As you open the service and greet the congregation, consider orienting them to the uniqueness of the service. Worship will be led by lay members and friends to allow our pastors and staff a time of rest.

One: As we gather this morning, we bring with us the remnants of last year - memories, challenges, discoveries, grief, and resilience

All: God of new years and new life, may our souls find peace in you

One: As we breathe in the dawn of a new day, a new year, knowing that you, O God, grace us with the spirit of Immanuel, Our God with us

All: God of new years and new life, may our souls find rest in you

One: May the spirit of the wonder and anticipation draw us into what lies before us

All: God of new years and new life, may our souls find hope in you

Opening Prayer *(prayed by one person or by congregation)*

Beloved Creator and Source of all life and love, we remember this day that you have created and redeemed us; you have called us by name and know us as your beloved. You are Immanuel, God with us, this day, and every day. You are able to do immeasurably more than we can ever ask or imagine. May your way become our way this day and in the new year. Amen.

Sharing of God's Peace

Invite people to share a morning greeting with each other ("May the peace of God be with this day and in the year to come"). Use whatever protocols are in place in your worship space. Maintain a safe distance and reduce movement in the space.

Hymn ideas

If you are using the New Century Hymnal, the hymn numbers are in parenthesis.

- Joy to the World (132)
- This Little Light of Mine (525)
- All Creatures of Our God and King
- All Things Bright and Beautiful (31)

- For the Beauty of the Earth (28)
- Holy, Holy, Holy (277)
- Joyful Joyful, We Adore You (4)
- We Are Marching in the Light of God (526)
- O For a World (575)
- Over My Head (514)
- Great Is Your Faithfulness (423)

The Story of Our Scripture

A coloring sheet and pencils or crayons can be provided to any who want to sketch

Leader:

For generations, the ancestors of our faith passed on stories, one to another. Each generation, then, made the faith their own, telling and retelling the stories in a way that allowed more truths and wisdom to be uncovered. This morning we share in the retelling of a story of the creation, rediscovered for our generation. May the story stir within us a holy imagination.

Hear now the story of creation:

In the beginning, when the world was without shape or form, when the beauty of deep black was all there was, God smiled with joy. She began to imagine all the things she was about to create. Then she whispered, "Let there be light," and bright yellows and oranges shone so bright, even She was startled. And then delighted.

Both the light and the dark were so beautiful that God decided each should have a time to share their gifts. God named the light "Day" and the dark "Night" and then helped them each practice showing off.

The next morning, God's imagination danced with thoughts of the possibilities. She decided to make water first, and after splashing it around herself, she gathered it together in puddles to jump in, streams to swim in, rivers to canoe, and oceans to revere. She made rocks and dirt and sand. She shaped mountains and carved valleys. When it seemed like it was right, she took a few steps back to admire her creation, and God saw how good it was.

Early the next morning, God thought it'd be fun to try her hand at crafting blueberry bushes and grapevines, wildflowers, and walnut trees. Soon the earth was bursting with color: fruits and blossoms, seeds and nuts, herbs, and spices. God gazed at the lavender and pansies, the squash and pumpkins, the dandelions, and the thistle. And God saw how good it all was.

It was about midafternoon the next day that God had quite a bright idea. She grinned as she gathered up some of the light and rolled it into a ball and nestled it into its place. "You will be the sun," she said, then rolled a second ball of sparkling light and nestled it into its place. "You shall be the moon." She spent the rest of the time dotting the night's sky with glittery light, and when it was night's turn again, there was just the right amount of shimmer. She looked at it all and with delight God, saw how good it all was.

That was all just a warmup for the days that would follow. God made fish and whales, shrimp, and coral, and all the things that call the water home. God dreamed up colorful parrots and powerful hawks, annoying crows, and impressive blue jays, and all the things with wings that let them soar through the air.

God thought it fun to make cows and pigs, tarantulas and walking sticks, elephants, and mice. And so it was. Each time God created even the smallest of the things that fly, walk, crawl, or swim, She blessed it. At the end of those days, as night drew closer and magnificent sunsets called attention to the beauty that happens when both light and dark share the same place, God looked out at the diversity, creativity, strangeness, and beauty of all of creation, and saw how good it was.

There was one final idea that had been stirring around in God's mind in those beginning days. An idea so outrageous, it just might work. So, she began to sculpt one more bit of creation, modeling them after her own heart. She gave them a propensity for laughter, a heart that earns for connection, a mind prone to imagination and curiosity, and a love and care for creation that paralleled her own. They varied in how they looked on the outside, but they held so much in common. She named the whole lot of them "humanity." Then she leaned in close as she told them their sacred task. They were to care for all her creation. They were to be creative and creators each in their own way. Humanity excitedly agreed to keep God's intentions for her world at the forefront of their mind.

With that, God took one last look over the whole of creation. She smiled with joy and blessed them, for it was all, very, very good.

Reflection

Because the work of the church is more than the work of the pastor and because you all have said a holy and enthusiastic yes to offering a grace filled sabbath time of rest for your pastor; this is the time within the worship service you, as a whole congregation are invited on to do the work of the church alongside each other.

Two options are provided below. The first option is a written reflection that can be read aloud as a meditation and response. The second option is a series of questions that a worship leader might utilize to prompt engagement among those in the congregation. The questions might be offered as discussion prompts and engaged in trios, small groups or all together. Alternatively, individual questions could be the centering focus of a prayer station and people invited to move through the worship space to write and reflect. Or, different still, a congregation may find it meaningful to invite leaders to give testimony (two-minute reflection of how they answer the question themselves) followed by two minutes of silence for people to reflect on their own (recommendation: have someone keep track of the silent time so that you are leaving actual minutes).

Whether you choose the first or second option or choose to adapt them in another way for your context, our hope is that you will be able to find ways to fully include online participants as well. Consider utilizing chat cascades, breakout rooms, or other mediums to allow for sharing and reflection.

Option 1: Reflection and Response (to be read aloud as a meditation and response)

God smiled with joy and blessed her creation, for it was all, very, very good. These lines echo through every generation who bears witness to the story and retells it as their own.

Perhaps because in those lines there is something so True it must be spoken.

This act we call blessing is as old as our story. In the beginning, blessing was simply what you called it anytime the Creator's presence touched the earthly stuff—the dirt, the plants, the animals, the people.

The creator spun the land and sky, wove the plants and animals, and stitched together the human ones, the story goes, and in doing so, blessed them. The creation was good. And soon, the task of blessing stuff became a joint effort. God said to Abraham, pretty much 14 seconds after they'd met, "I'll show you the way to a new land and a new way of life." "I will bless you," God said, "I will be with you, and you will be a blessing for the nations. Those who you bless, I will bless." God's blessing wasn't a fancy way to say life was going to be easy or simple...rather, this blessing was a way to say, through Abraham, God's presence would continue to bend low to the earth and get mixed up with that earthly stuff, blessing it.

The blessing given to Abraham and the charge to bless the world, was only the beginning. Generations later, like a divine game of telephone, God instructed Moses to tell Aaron, the priest, to bless the people. This is Moses of *lead the people out of Egypt and across the red sea to freedom only to have the people then doubt God, revolt, and build a golden calf while he was up on the mountain scrolling down the 10 commandments*, fame. The people of Israel had been nothing but difficult since they'd left Egypt. But God saw something in them, and again bent low, bringing a bit of heaven to earth to bless them. God told Moses to get Aaron, to walk among the people, and bless them. And so Aaron, and his children, did just that. Every day that the Israelites wandered wondering what the future had in store, the priests stood among the Israelites, hands out-stretched saying, "The Lord bless you and keep you." You are God's. Protected. Safe.

Every day the Israelites received a blessing, "God be with you, God look upon you with graciousness, God lift up her face upon, smiling bringing peace."

This act of blessing wasn't just nice words or hopeful prayer. No, the ancient people thought that the person offering the blessing became a mediator, calling on the peace making, earth shaking, dead waking, light creating, shadow abating power of God, and that power coursed through their body and landed out on the people. They believed that in that act of blessing, God's power and love was literally channeled and sent to wash over the one receiving blessing like a tidal wave.

THAT is what blessing is about. And on this News Year's Day, that is what we are invited to do. We are invited to hear ourselves into the age-old story that has been unfolding since the beginning of creation and unfolds anew each day. To smile alongside God who takes delight in who we are as we offer blessing upon one another.

Friends, I invite you to warm up your blessing hands and to raise them up outstretched towards one another as we pray blessing with and for one another:

Creating God, pour out your Spirit on your beloved people in the days ahead.
On days that are beautiful
On days that are blistering hot or bone chilling cold
On days that are full of laughter
On days that are bookended by tears
On days when You are evident
On days when You seem far away

May we remember the holy story that has been unfolding since the beginning of time. May we remember who we were created to be, and who we are still being created to be. May our work be faithful. May we be kind with one another. May we laugh. May we dream. May each of our days be blessed, and may we be a blessing. Amen and Amen.

Option 2: Congregational Conversation

Invite those present to reflect on the creation story heard this morning. Invite them to reflect and then share out responses to these question prompts. You may want to ask a few people ahead of time to prepare responses, as well. Create time and space for those who want to share responses aloud. Encourage folks to carry these questions into the coming week/year and consider them beyond this morning.

- Creation stories inspire us to pay attention to the world around us, and to see God's devotion to details. As this new year begins, where is your attention? And related to that, what is your intention?
- What has this last year taught you about yourself? (*This can relate to individuals or for congregations*)
- Creation begins with beautiful darkness. What might this look like in our lives? Have you ever experienced darkness that was or became beautiful?
- What's your hope for the year to come?

Hymn ideas

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Prayer of the People

You may want to invite folk in the congregation to name if there are any specific joys or sorrows they ask others to be holding in prayer. You can take this time to make a list for the pastor when they return from their time away. You might also name your pastor and your staff, as well as their families. It would be powerful if all our churches offered prayer for our pastors and staff since we are the Church united.

Option to include: The new year will bring new life and a bright future to our beloved camp, Pilgrim Pines. This unique ministry and beautiful part of Creation are now an independent entity for the first time in the life of the camp. Consider taking time to give thanks for the countless ways the camp place, people, and programming have impacted the lives of children, youth, and adults in our Conference and beyond. And pray for their future as they continue to live their mission to provide an inclusive and safe environment for personal and spiritual growth; Nurture community by building personal relationships; and Encourage care and concern for all of God's creation.

Leader:

Let us pray.

God of all that is, we collectively take a big, deep breath in (*breath in audibly so people follow your lead, once you're ready you may continue*) and we slowly let it go. May we breathe in your Spirit of love and peace and hope as we enter a new year. May we remember those who have been mentioned, serve those in need, rejoice with those who share joy, amplify the voices of the unheard, and be some measure of your light and love in this world. Amen.

Lord's Prayer

Offering

Leader:

God's love creates all that is. The love of Jesus offers a new way of being. Spirit manifests love in each of us, and we embody divine love in countless ways. Let us take this time to reflect on the ways in which we give as our ushers come forward to receive our gifts and offerings.

Doxology

Lyric options

Praise God from whom all blessings flow, praise God all creatures here below

Praise God for all that love has done; Creator, Christ and Spirit, one. Amen.

or

From all that dwell below the skies, let songs of hope and faith arise

Let peace, good will on earth be sung, through every land, by every tongue. Amen.

Dedication

All: Covenant-keeping God we offer these tangible signs of hope as well as the hope we carry within us trusting that by the power of the Holy Spirit; the kin-dom of God might be made known more fully in us and through us. Amen.

Benediction *This can be read aloud by the entire congregation or a small group as a benediction they give to each other*

Beloved Is Where We Begin (Jan Richardson)

If you would enter into the wilderness, do not begin without a blessing. Do not leave without hearing who you are: Beloved, named by the One who has traveled this path before you. Do not go without letting it echo in your ears, and if you find it is hard to let it into your heart, do not despair. That is what this journey is for. I cannot promise this blessing will free you from danger, from fear, from hunger or thirst, from the scorching of sun or the fall of the night. But I can tell you that on this path there will be help. I can tell you that on this way there will be rest. I can tell you that you will know the strange graces that come to our aid only on a road such as this, that fly to meet us bearing comfort and strength, that come alongside us for no other cause than to lean themselves toward our ear and with their curious insistence whisper our name: Beloved. Beloved. Beloved.