

Good morning church! Happy New Year once again! It's my first Sunday back at home in Sydney for 2022. Last week we did join online to hear Seungjae for the communion service from Melbourne at Mum and Dad's home. So I hope the new year has started well for you even though we are all aware of the Covid pandemic reaching new emergency levels in Australia and especially in our home state of NSW.

Irrespective of the challenges we all face as a society and community we still must have set our New Year's resolutions. Have you set yours as yet? I am happy to share mine. But my top 3 resolutions for 2022 are: i) becoming a better cook in vegetarian meals, ii) get away with the family as much as possible for breaks and iii) being a better father and husband and servant of God.

I know we are online again today and might be for awhile. So maybe we can greet each other with our big waving hands and especially those who are seated as a family (big waving hands to each other). As you know our Minister Seungjae Yeon and family are away on leave at present so we wish them well and to be well rested during this time the lay preachers will cover for his absence.

Today is the first Sunday of Epiphany which is the Baptism of Jesus and in 2022 marks the eight weeks in the church calendar before Lent. The length of Epiphany depends on the year and on the date of Easter, so this year it is 8 weeks in duration. Epiphany is the time of year that reflects on the manifestation of Christ to people.

Let us have our Call to Worship now.

### **CALL TO WORSHIP**

There are varieties of gifts,  
but the same Spirit who gives them.

There are varieties of services,  
but the same Lord who is served.

There are varieties of activities,  
but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone.

Each one is given a gift of the Spirit,  
to build up the whole body and to proclaim that 'Jesus is Lord'

### **1<sup>st</sup> Hymn**

#### **Morning Has Broken**

Morning has broken,  
like the first morning  
Blackbird has spoken,  
like the first bird

Praise for the singing,  
praise for the morning  
Praise for the springing,  
fresh from the word

Sweet the rain's new fall,  
sunlit from heaven

Like the first dewfall,  
on the first grass

Praise for the sweetness  
of the wet garden  
Sprung in completeness  
where his feet pass

Mine is the sunlight,  
mine is the morning  
Born of the one light,  
Eden saw play

Praise with elation,  
praise every morning  
God's recreation  
of the new day

Words: Eleanor Farjeon, 1881-1965

### **Prayer of Confession**

We pray for forgiveness when our words and actions are shaped and moulded by other than the Holy Spirit. For the times when we have used the gifts of your Spirit to enhance our own glory rather than using them to serve others.

**Forgive us, O God.**

When our use of your gifts has led to division and discord rather than increasing understanding and unity.

**Forgive us, O God.**

For believing one gift to be superior to another rather than celebrating the various ways in which they complement each other and build up the whole community.

**Forgive us, O God.**

The Holy Spirit enables us to confess Jesus as Lord and in so doing, we are acknowledging our total allegiance to, and love for Jesus.

**Merciful God, forgive any lack of commitment by us to love as Jesus loved and to serve as he served.**

Fill us anew with the Holy Spirit so that our worship, witness and service may reflect our unity and the faithful use of our diverse gifts. This we pray in Jesus' name. **Amen**

## **Assurance of Forgiveness**

The good news is that God has continued to love and save us (Psalm 36 v.10) in and through Jesus - whom we confess as Saviour and Lord through the power of the Holy Spirit. Friends, believe these words of grace:

In Jesus Christ we are forgiven.

**Thanks be to God. Amen.**

## **1<sup>st</sup> Reading ACTS 8: 14-17**

14 When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to Samaria. 15 When they arrived, they prayed for the new believers there that they might receive the Holy Spirit, 16 because the Holy Spirit had not yet come on any of them; they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. 17 Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

## **2<sup>nd</sup> Reading LUKE 3: 15-17, 21-22**

15 The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. 16 John answered them all, "I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 17 His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

21 When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened 22 and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

## **2<sup>nd</sup> HYMN The Love of God**

1 The love of God is greater far  
than tongue or pen can ever tell;  
it goes beyond the highest star,  
and reaches to the lowest hell.  
The guilty pair bowed down with care  
God gave his Son to win;  
his erring child he reconciled,  
and pardoned every sin.

2 When time at last shall pass away,  
and earthly thrones and kingdoms fall;  
When those who here refuse to pray  
on rocks and hills and mountains call;

God's love, so sure, shall still endure  
all measureless and strong,  
redeeming grace to Adam's race,  
the saints' and angels' song.

3 Could we with ink the ocean fill,  
and were the skies of parchment made;  
were every stalk on earth a quill,  
and everyone a scribe by trade;  
to write the love of God above  
would drain the ocean dry;  
nor could the scroll contain the whole,  
though stretched from sky to sky.

## **SERMON**

2022 is here and now and I am still on holidays (well at least for another day). Yes my return to work starts again tomorrow but I have enjoyed two and a half weeks of holidays so far and I am very grateful. I was down in Melbourne for some 10 days with the family and although I returned almost a week ago, Lenny and the young adults only returned last night. 2021 had been a great challenge for all of us and that is a huge understatement I know. And I know that we are still amidst very challenging times and the short-term future is still filled with great uncertainty.

As last year we had been in lockdown for over 100 days in Sydney, I started to focus on the garden. Like many of you, being house bound you tend to look outside your own windows and notice the trees and plants. Similar to Seungjae sharing his stories of growing vegetables in his backyard, we also grew vegetables and herbs but my passion has been on native plants and trying to grow native plants from seed.

How many of you watch Gardening Australia on the ABC? I love watching Costa Georgadis and his team or crew of gardening presenters from all over Australia. They provide great tips for growing plants and how to get the most of one's garden. They also have great tips on native plants and how to grow them as well.

I love the outdoors and use my time as best as I can to visit nature's most special places. Yes I love the mountains and rivers but the forests and plants of the reserves and national parks I visit are so very special as they live and provide us oxygen to all breathing life whilst providing habitats for so many of species of life (fauna and flora) that predates humans.

My travel life memories are always dotted with the majesty of forests whether it is the groves of giant sequoias of the US Sierra Nevada (the world's tallest trees), the ancient rhododendron forests of Nepal or the gnarled beauty of thousand-year-old Juniper trees on China's sacred mountains (like Huashan), the coachwood trees, flooded gums and red cedars of the mid north coast of NSW or in my recent trip to Melbourne, the giant mountain ash of the Dandenong Ranges. These moments of my memories of the true grandeur of nature are for all ages and how its conservation and preservation is so key to its survival. But even these grand trees of enormous scales start off from seed. Seed that has been nourished, nurtured by nature and its abundant blessings. Trees of such immense standings can take hundreds if not a thousand years to develop. What starts small can be of immense stature over time.



A little Sequoia on the side of the road, Sequoia National Park, California. 😊



Juniper trees on Huashan (flower mountain in Shaanxi  
China)



Mountain ash (*eucalyptus regnans*) in the Dandenongs

Being a Sydneysider, the waratah flower is a truly special plant for me. Trying to get them to grow well is one challenge but trying to get them to flower is yet another one. Having them in large pots has its pros and cons. One on hand it is easy to move when a heatwave is on BUT I have to keep adjusting the size of the pot as the rootball grows in size. I know its kind of first world problems.

Back at my home with my almost 600 square metres of real estate I am a novice farmer or junior horticulturist as I experiment with seedlings and seeds and beating weeds, insects and understanding shade, water and soil nutrition.

The Bible is full of metaphor and allegory when it comes to references to trees and plants. Think of the tiny mustard seed growing to the large mustard tree, the garden of Eden, the cedars of Lebanon, the parable of the good seed and even the reference to the wheat and the chaff that is mentioned in today's reading. Seeds are like us (people). We grow in an environment (soil) that is provided nutrition through family, friends and God and we hope to bear fruit (our good works as an example).

As an avid gardener, we either grow plants for landscaping (beautifying the look of nature) or we plant for fruits or herbs to consume or we plant for reasons such as conservation or education to better understand how we best work with plants. I recall Costa from Gardening Australia say you don't plant a \$50 plant into a \$5 hole. Plants need the right nutrition and so you don't waste a young seedling or young sapling in the incorrect soil type or soil without appropriate nutrition.

It is the same with us as well. As Christians we value the family and our friends and how our relationships with each other forge us and directs our path and pursuits. But we are not complete without God. We enter God's family through baptism by following Jesus and we let the Holy Spirit live within us to guide us through the paths of life.

Have you ever been to some of the best gardens in the places you have visited in your lives? Note how plants co-exist with each other very well and how some thrive in the ponds, in the shade and in the full exposure of the sun. A master gardener at work knows its plants, its soil, its environment.

God is our master gardener. God knows our talents no matter how small they are, God knows our place and how we figure out our purpose to serve in God's kingdom. The Holy Spirit is some times

conveyed as a flame, the wind or even the dove. If we let the Holy Spirit live within us and trust God's guidance we as seeds of God will find the right soil and take root so that we can flourish. We do this not in isolation but with community. We are all nurtured when we come together and we all grow in love for each other and for God.

Like the reading in Acts, the Samaritans (an old disputed foe and relatives of the Jewish kingdom) find the blessing of the Holy Spirit in community with their Abrahamic cousins when Peter and John visited and assisted them.

So let God be our spiritual gardener, helping us find the right spot in life and how we can then thrive and be fruitful. AMEN.

Let us pray.

Dear creator God,

God of light which allows life, let us be useful seeds in your garden. Let us find our rightful purpose and passions to pursue. Let us produce wonderful fruit which can in turn benefit and feed others. Lord, let the Holy Spirit live and burn within us guiding us through our lives and leading us through challenges and obstacles but ensuring we find the good soil near springs to be firmly planted in.

AMEN.

### **3<sup>rd</sup> HYMN      AMAZING GRACE**

Amazing grace (how sweet the sound)  
That saved a wretch like me!  
I once was lost, but now am found,  
Was blind, but now I see.

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,  
and grace my fears relieved;  
how precious did that grace appear  
the hour I first believed!

Through many dangers, toils and snares  
I have already come;  
'tis grace has brought me safe thus far,  
and grace will lead me home.

The Lord has promised good to me,  
his word my hope secures;  
he will my shield and portion be  
as long as life endures.

### **Offering & Dedication**

*Holy and eternal God,  
whose vision for humanity*

*is justice, peace and wholeness;  
by the presence of your Spirit  
may our generosity flourish,  
and our living  
hasten the advent of your vision.*

**Amen**

**Prayers of the People (by Rosemary Brooke, recited by Kevin Lee)**

Heavenly Father,

In these extraordinary times, we hold onto the truth that you are with us, whether we *feel* it - or *doubt* it – or *believe* it. You are truly right beside us ... Emmanuel.

Our prayer today draws on some encouragement in the last few days from an inspiring Christian writer in the US, Diana Butler Bass. There, the daily tally of Covid infections reached over one million on Tuesday 4 Jan 2022.

May we:

- be gentle with others
- say please and thank you more often
- be quick with a kind word...

Help us to:

- stay calm and hopeful
- thank those who are on the front line in supermarkets, shops and vaccination facilities – and so many other places
- stay in touch with those who are isolated, unwell or recovering from Covid
- understand that while we're all worn down, sad and tired...in the midst of it all,
  - *there's still love, a healing God, good people, and a beautiful purpose for our life and theirs. We are being called to be our best selves, whether as friends, family members, neighbours or leaders.*

Dear God,

We pray for all who are suffering in this world. We are shocked by the intensity of hatred, and the lack of love and understanding.

Your world has so much astounding beauty, delight and promise.

Help us to stay true to your vision and to bring your heart and hope into so many places which need you loving Light.

Be with our dear Minister Seung Jae and his family, all our loving Church family and especially with those who are unwell. Be also with our sister churches nearby and our Uniting Church leaders and with all who need your divine inspiration as we enter this new year.



May we be people of unfailing hope, compassion and gratitude in 2022.

In Jesus name we truly pray,

Amen.

**4<sup>th</sup> Hymn      Guide us Thou O Great Jehovah**

Guide me, O thou great Jehovah,  
pilgrim though this barren land;  
I am weak, but thou art mighty;  
hold me with thy powerful hand;  
Bread of heaven, Bread of heaven,  
feed me till I want no more,  
feed me till I want no more.

Open now the crystal fountain,  
whence the healing stream doth flow;  
let the fire and cloudy pillar  
lead me all my journey through;  
strong Deliverer, strong Deliverer.  
be thou still my Strength and Shield,  
be thou still my Strength and Shield.

When I tread the verge of Jordan,  
bid my anxious fears subside;  
bear me through the swelling current,  
land me safe on Canaan's side;  
songs of praises, songs of praises,  
I will ever give to thee,  
I will ever give to thee.

**BLESSING**

May the love of God bless you and keep you;  
the mercy and faithfulness of Jesus Christ be born in your hearts;  
and the Holy Spirit create and bring dreams to reality in your lives.

Amen.

**DISMISSAL**

Go in peace; refreshed and renewed in the eternal love of God. In the name of Christ.  
Amen.

**Now Unto Him**

Now unto Him, who is able to keep

Able to keep you from falling

And present you faultless

Before the presence of His glory

With exceeding joy

To the only wise God our Saviour

Be glory and majesty

Dominion and power

Both now and forever

Amen.