

Something Old, Something New

A seven day devotional for the participants in the
Haddonfield United Methodist Church's mission trip to the
Dominican Republic
(And those who support them in prayer)

February 20-26, 2024

Based on two hymns by Charles Wesley (1707-1788)
and Fred Pratt Green (1903-2000)

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Charles Wesley was an English leader of the Methodist movement. He was a prolific hymn writer who wrote over 6,500 hymns during his lifetime. His most famous hymn is "O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing", which is traditionally used as the first hymn in every Methodist hymnbook.

Fred Pratt Green was a British Methodist minister and hymnodist. His writings reflect the social changes going on in the world of his time. His best known hymn is "God is Here!"

Tuesday, February 20, 2024

*O for a thousand tongues to sing my great Redeemer's praise,
The glories of my God and King, the triumphs of his grace!*

Yes, we all realize that there are not 1,000 people going on this trip. Imagine the struggles with luggage! I believe that what Wesley is thinking of here is the company of saints and angels who have sung and continue to sing the praises of God. The people going on this mission trip add their voices to the chorus. The people at home engaging them in partnered prayer add their voices to the chorus.

It does not take 1,000 people to change the lives of others. When you see the faces of the people moving into their new homes - the homes this team will build - you realize how little it takes to change lives. You realize how a small group of dedicated people can make that difference. You can't help but rejoice at the triumphs of God's grace!

There is a Jewish deli not far from my new home in Delaware. They sell pastrami sandwiches, corned beef sandwiches, salami sandwiches - and tongue sandwiches. While the first three sell for typical deli prices, the tongue sandwich costs thirty dollars! And that's without a bag of chips. A thousand tongues would cost about thirty thousand dollars. That kind of money would have bought a lot of hay for Charles Wesley's horse, and it would provide for a lot of supplies for building houses. But instead, the thousand tongues sing the praises of God.

May our hearts and mouths join with all others who pray for a safe journey to the Dominican Republic, a joyous homecoming for those who have been before, and a festive welcome for those who are going for the first time! Let us all celebrate the glories of our God and King!

Prayer: Lord God, Redeemer and King, we pray for a safe journey to the airport, a safe flight and an uneventful landing so that we can commence the work you have called us to do. Amen

Wednesday, February 21, 2024

*My gracious Master and my God, assist me to proclaim,
To spread thro' all the earth abroad the honors of your name.*

I love that word "assist". All of us realize that we are not doing this mission trip by ourselves. The Holy Spirit is assisting us every step of the way. Our hosts families are assisting us by providing meals and shelter. People back home have assisted us in supporting this ministry with their finances and are assisting us by joining with us in prayer.

For the team in Los Cocos, watch this week as you discern ways to assist one another. Watch as people stronger than you bring you wood to finish the side of a house. Watch as people shorter than you figure out how to squeeze into a tight space to get some task done. Watch as your host families, with their limited English, will work with you to understand what you are trying to say.

In all of these situations, and others, we all proclaim the honors of God's name. Many a Christian are somewhat baffled by the Trinity. How can one person be three persons, and how can three persons be one person? Look around at this group. How can so many of you fulfill God's purpose as one team? How can one team have so many diversified talents? It is as if you are living a miracle.

No wonder Wesley felt that the proclamation had to spread throughout the entire globe. This is pretty miraculous stuff going on in the Dominican Republic and it will be celebrated wherever people have joined in prayer to assist you in proclaiming that miracle.

Prayer: Sometimes, we get wrapped up in our own little social circle, and we forget that there are children of God around the world that need our attention and care. My this week be a week filled with occasions to remember that, Lord. Amen

Thursday, February 22, 2024

*Jesus! The name that charms our fears, that bids our sorrows cease,
'tis music on the sinner's ears, 'tis life and health and peace.*

For people old enough to remember, this date used to be celebrated as "Washington's Birthday". (Now, his birthday is rolled into Lincoln's birthday, and we call it "President's Day") For all of his public speeches and all of his letters, there is no record of Washington ever speaking the name "Jesus" in public. The closest we have come is in a 1779 letter to a delegation of Native Americans, most likely written by an aide, but signed by Washington. In the letter, it stated "You do well to wish to learn our arts and ways of life, and above all, the religion of Jesus Christ. These will make you a greater and happier people than you are."

Although George Washington was not one to speak aloud the name of Jesus, Charles Wesley (as well as his brother John) was certainly not shy about invoking the name of the Savior. The brothers Wesley's writings are full of the name of Jesus - the name that charms our fears, that bids our sorrows cease; the name that is music on the sinner's ears.

By this point in the mission trip, some of you may be fearing that you are not up to this task. Perhaps you are feeling that you have bitten off more than you can chew. That is one of the reasons that copies of this devotional have been circulated among members and friends of the congregation. There is an army of prayer people who are supporting your every move. All of us appreciate what you are giving to the people of Los Cocos and what they are receiving from your generosity. In the name of Jesus, you are offering the people of the community life and health - and peace.

President Washington gets one day to be remembered. The mission team gets seven days to be celebrated - and many more days after that to be remembered.

Prayer: Almighty Father, we give you thanks that you loved this world so much that you sent your only Son into it to be our life, health and peace. May we all continue to serve in his name and walk in his footsteps. Amen

Friday, February 23, 2024

*He breaks the power of cancelled sin, he sets the prisoner free,
His blood can make the foulest clean; his blood availed for me.*

On May 13, 1940, in Winston Churchill's first address to the House of Commons as Prime Minister of Britain, he said that he would do his best to lead a country at war. "I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat." He was not about to let his country become a prisoner to Hitler. He would lead the people in the best way he knew. It worked.

Wesley says the same of Jesus. Jesus comes to set the prisoner free. We, who are imprisoned by our original sin, look to Jesus to free us from that bondage. With his cruel death on the cross, Jesus' blood availed for all of us.

The mission team is expending quite a bit of toil and sweat, and, we hope, little blood and tears. They are working shoulder to shoulder with the new homeowners. (Habitat for Humanity calls this "sweat equity") Relationships are forged and appreciation is expressed, and, at the dedication of the new home, there are tears which are shed. But they are tears of joy; tears of empowerment; tears through which can be seen a new life.

Jesus is the reason why this mission trip happens. Jesus breaks the power of cancelled sin and sets all of us free to offer service in his name. There is a cleansing and a purification that comes with this service. It is not the cleansing of using buckets of cold water with which to shower, although that has been known to make the foulest clean. It is the cleansing power of service in the name of Jesus. If we are free in Jesus, we are free indeed.

Prayer: Oh Holy Jesus, thank you for your sacrifice on our behalf. Thank you for giving your life so that we may have new life, and that we may share this new life with others. Amen

Saturday, February 24, 2024

*To God all glory, praise, and love be now and ever given
by saints below and saints above, the Church in earth and heaven.*

Often, when watching a football game or a baseball game, when one player has done something extraordinary, like scoring a touchdown or hitting a home run, the player will pause and point skyward. What they are staying is “To God be the Glory”, thanking God for endowing them with the physical gifts to do what they just did.

Johann Sebastian Bach used to write “Soli Deo Gloria” on all his church music: “To God be the Glory”. It was his way of acknowledging God’s presence in the writing of his music.

All of us have ways in which we acknowledge the presence of God in our lives. A member of the mission team, Pastor Cricket Denton, has written a beautiful house blessing that is being used at the dedication of each new home that the team builds. God is recognized as the master builder, the one who has used the saints here on earth to get the task accomplished.

I hope I have not offended anyone by referring to living people as saints. I come out of a tradition in which saints are anyone who reflects the love of God in everything that they say and do. I believe there are living saints walking among us who, although they don’t get their own day in the Church year (like Saint Matthias, patron saint of second-stringers, whose day is observed today), are clear examples of God-centered, Christ-inspired, Spirit-driven service-to-others kind of people.

Although the members of the mission team will be leaving in a few days to head back home, their work and their service will long be remembered in Los Cocos. I think this is what Wesley was thinking of when he wrote about the Church on earth and heaven. The service and the caring will live on in perpetuity. The team will say thanks to the host families; the owners of the new homes will say thanks to the team, but the reality is: To God be the Glory!

Prayer: Lord God, while we think that “Gloria in Excelsis Deo” is just a Christmas song, it has become a mantra for the mission team and for those praying for them. Let our words of praise always rise to our lips to be heard by all those around us! Amen

Sunday, February 25, 2024

*God is here! As we your people meet to offer praise and prayer,
may we find in fuller measure what it is in Christ we share.
Here, as in the world around us, all our varied skills and arts
wait the coming of the Spirit into open minds and hearts.*

In New Jersey (and elsewhere), this is the Sabbath, the day of rest and renewal. Fred Pratt Green calls it the day that “people meet to offer praise and prayer”. And yet, later on in the opening stanza, he writes that even though we gather with our varied skills and arts, we “wait the coming of the Spirit into open minds and hearts.”

There is a wonderful sense of the “already, but not yet” expressed in those words. In Los Cocos, homes have been built, but they haven’t been completely lived in yet. That is to come. Members of the team have had amazing experiences this week and those experiences will come back to life each time they tell someone else the transforming story of service in love. Prayer partners back home are going to be anxious to tell their stories of how praying with the team changed their lives. “May we find in fuller measure what it is in Christ we share.”

Prayer: Holy Spirit, continue to be stirred up in us that the service we have offered and the witness we have shared will continue to open hearts and minds. Amen

Monday, February 26, 2024

*Lord of all, of church and kingdom, in an age of change and doubt,
keep us faithful to the gospel; help us work your purpose out.
Here, in this day's dedication, all we have to give, receive;
we, who cannot live without you, we adore you! We believe!*

“All good things must come to an end.” Supposedly, Geoffrey Chaucer wrote words similar to that, but he probably never had to say good-bye to people who had endeared themselves to him in only seven days. A lot has happened in these past seven days, but Christ has been with us all throughout.

“In an age of change and doubt, keep us faithful to the gospel; help us work your purpose out.” That’s what this mission trip has been about - dealing with change, sometimes dealing with doubt, but at all times, staying faithful to the gospel message of hope and renewal.

Early on in this devotional booklet, it was suggested that we do not do this alone. There is a visual joke on the internet, in which the poster says that he is sending the chairman of Ikea a birthday cake. The picture is of eggs, flour, water, oil - all the ingredients, but separate. That way, the chairman can put the cake together himself. Think about when this journey started, and you were all individually waiting to get on board the van to be taken to the airport. Think about yourselves today - a cohesive team of life-changers and house-builders, backed up by a magnificent crew of prayer partners.

We echo the words of Fred Pratt Green: “We who cannot live without you, we adore you, we believe!”

Godspeed in your travels home!

Prayer: Finish then thy new creation, pure and spotless let us be; let us see thy great salvation perfectly restored in thee! Changed from glory into glory, till in heaven we take our place, till we cast our crowns before thee, lost in wonder, love and praise. Amen (Charles Wesley, 1707-1788)