



# Easter 5

April 28, 2024



9:00 AM

*Welcome to our worship of the Lord Jesus Christ on this Fifth Sunday of Easter! This Sunday's image of how the risen Christ shares His life with us is the image of the vine. Christ the vine and we the branches are alive in each other, in the mystery of mutual abiding described in the gospel and the first letter of John. Baptism makes us a part of Christ's living and life-giving self and makes us alive with Christ's life. As the vine brings food to the branches, Christ feeds us at His Table. We're sent out to bear fruit for the life of the world.*

*Congregational responses are printed in indented boldface italics.*

## GATHERING

### GATHERING MUSIC

### GATHERING HYMN:

**"Alleluia! Jesus is Risen!"**

*ELW 377*

*Alleluia! Jesus is risen! Trumpets resounding in glorious light!  
Splendor, the Lamb, heaven forever! Oh, what a miracle God has in sight!  
Jesus is risen and we shall arise! Give God the glory! Alleluia!*

*Walking the way, Christ in the center telling the story to open our eyes;  
Breaking our bread, giving us glory: Jesus our blessing, our constant surprise.  
Jesus is risen and we shall arise! Give God the glory! Alleluia!*

*Jesus the vine, we are the branches; life in the Spirit the fruit of the tree;  
Heaven to earth, Christ to the people, gift of the future now flowing to me.  
Jesus is risen and we shall arise! Give God the glory! Alleluia!*



***Weeping, be gone! Sorrow, be silent! Death put asunder, and Easter is bright.  
Cherubim sing: "O grave, be open!" Clothe us in wonder, adorn us in light.  
Jesus is risen and we shall arise! Give God the glory! Alleluia!***

***City of God, Easter forever, golden Jerusalem, Jesus the Lamb,  
River of life, saints and archangels, sing with creation to God the I AM!  
Jesus is risen and we shall arise! Give God the glory! Alleluia!***

## **INVOCATION, CONFESSION, AND FORGIVENESS:**

We gather today just as God has gathered us into His family in our Baptism:  
in the Name of the Father, and of the ✚ Son, and of the Holy Spirit. ***Amen.***

Almighty God, to You all hearts are open, all desires known;  
and from You no secrets are hid.  
Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of Your Holy Spirit,  
that we may perfectly love You and worthily magnify Your holy Name,  
through Jesus Christ our Lord. ***Amen.***

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.  
But if we confess our sins, God who's faithful and just will forgive us our sins  
and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.  
So let's confess our sin against God and one another:

*Silence for reflection and self-examination.*

Most merciful God,

***we confess that we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves.  
We have sinned against You in thought, word, and deed,  
by what we have done and by what we have left undone.  
We have not loved You with our whole heart;  
we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.  
For the sake of Your Son Jesus Christ, have mercy on us.  
Forgive us, renew us, and lead us, so that we may delight in Your will  
and walk in Your ways, to the glory of Your holy Name. Amen.***

Listen to the Good News, brothers and sisters:

In the mercy of Almighty God, Jesus Christ was given to die for you,  
and for His sake, † God forgives you all your sins!

To those who believe in Jesus Christ, He gives the power to become the children of God  
and bestows on them the Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

## HYMN OF PRAISE: "This is the Feast of Victory!"

*Refrain*

This is the feast of vic-to-ry for our God. Al-le - lu - ia,

al - le - lu - ia, al - le - lu - ia. 1 Wor - thy is Christ, the Lamb


who was slain, whose blood set us free to be peo - ple of God.

*Refrain*

This is the feast of vic-to-ry for our God. Al-le - lu - ia,

al - le - lu - ia, al - le - lu - ia. 2 Pow - er, rich-es, wis - dom, and

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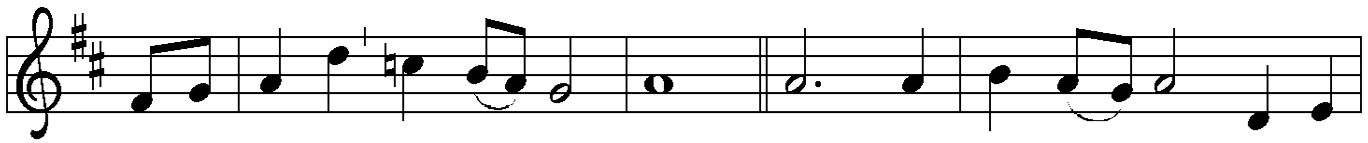


strength, and hon - or, bless - ing, and glo - ry are his.

*Refrain*



This is the feast of vic-to-ry for our God. Al-le - lu - ia,



al - le - lu - ia, al - le - lu - ia. 3 Sing with all the peo - ple of



God, and join in the hymn of all cre - a - tion: Bless - ing, hon - or,

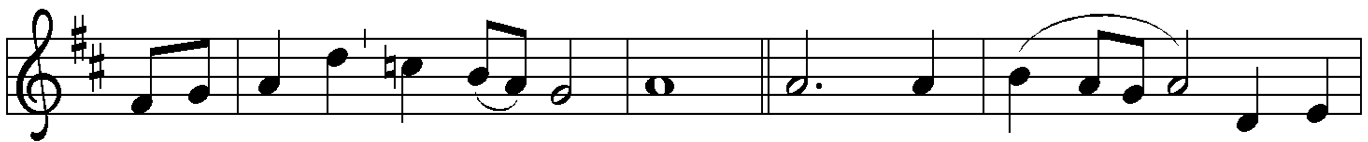


glo - ry, and might be to God and the Lamb for - ev - er. A - men.

*Refrain*

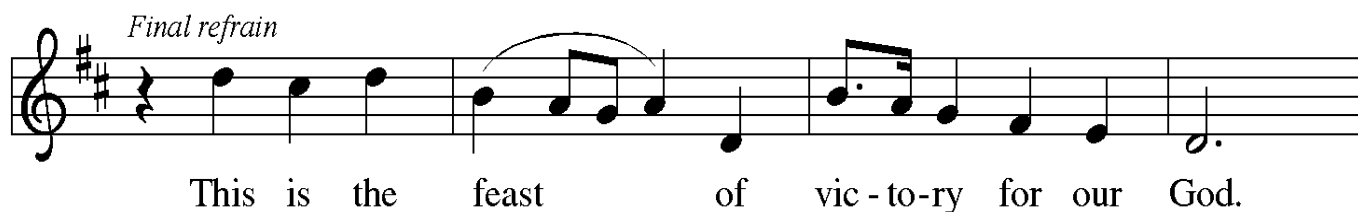
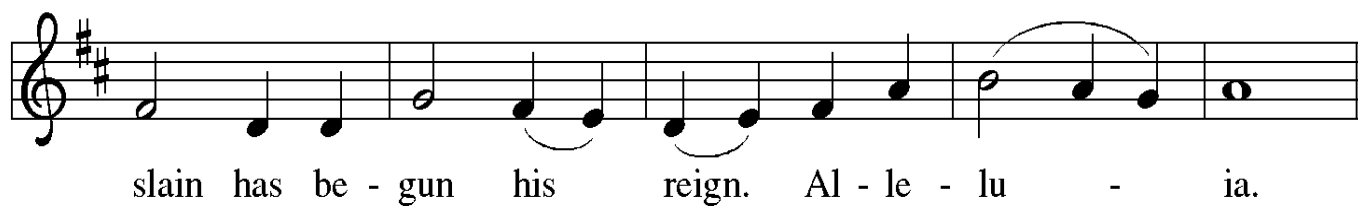


This is the feast of vic-to-ry for our God. Al-le - lu - ia,



al - le - lu - ia, al - le - lu - ia. 4 For the Lamb who was

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## GREETING AND PRAYER OF THE DAY:

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

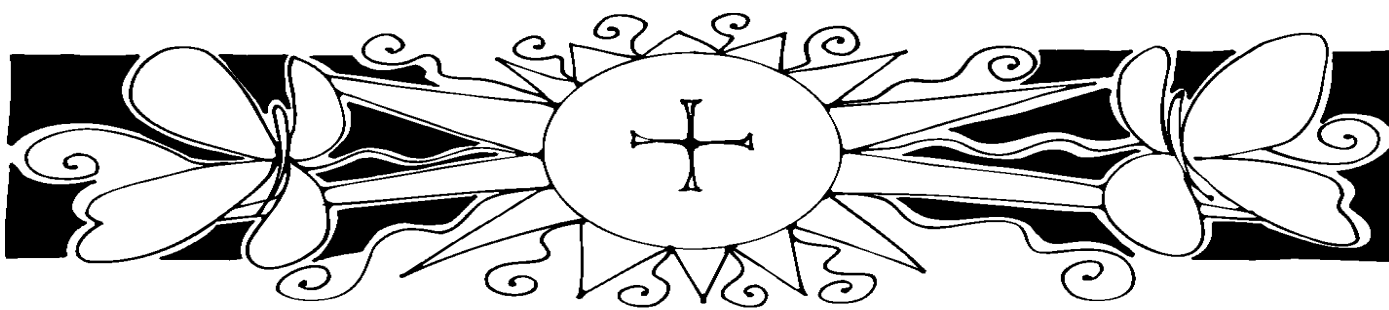
*Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!*

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the ✝ love of God,  
and the communion of the Holy Spirit are with you all.

*And also with you.*

Then let's pray: Vinegrowing God,  
You've grafted us into Your Son as branches into the true Vine,  
and we can't thrive apart from Him.

Nourish our life in His resurrection, that we may bear the fruit of His love  
and know the fullness of Your joy through Christ Jesus our Savior and Lord,  
who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**



# WORD AND PRAYER

## PREPARATION FOR THE WORD:

*Pr Dave will introduce this song to us;  
then we'll sing it together once or twice to let the tune (and the promise) sink in...*

***Behold, behold—I make all things new, beginning with you and starting from today.  
Behold, behold—I make all things new; My promise is true, for I am Christ the Way!***

## FIRST READING:

**Acts 8.26-40**

**NRSVUE**

An angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” (This is a wilderness road.) <sup>27</sup> So he got up and went.

Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, the queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship <sup>28</sup> and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. <sup>29</sup> Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over to this chariot and join it.” <sup>30</sup> So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, “Do you understand what you’re reading?” <sup>31</sup> He replied, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. <sup>32</sup> Now the passage of the Scripture that he was reading was this: “Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. <sup>33</sup> In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth.” <sup>34</sup> The eunuch asked Philip, “About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” <sup>35</sup> Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture he proclaimed to him the Good News about Jesus.

<sup>36</sup> As they were going along the road, they came to some water, and the eunuch said, “Look, here’s water! What’s to prevent me from being baptized?” <sup>38</sup> He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. <sup>39</sup> When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more and went on his way rejoicing. <sup>40</sup> But Philip found

himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the Good News to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

This is holy wisdom; this is holy word.

***Thanks be to God!***

**SECOND READING:**

**1 John 4.7-21**

**NRSVUE**

*St John writes:* Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. <sup>8</sup> Whoever does not love does not know God, for God **is** love. <sup>9</sup> God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent His only Son into the world so that we might live through Him. <sup>10</sup> In this is love, not that we loved God but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. <sup>11</sup> Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. <sup>12</sup> No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us.

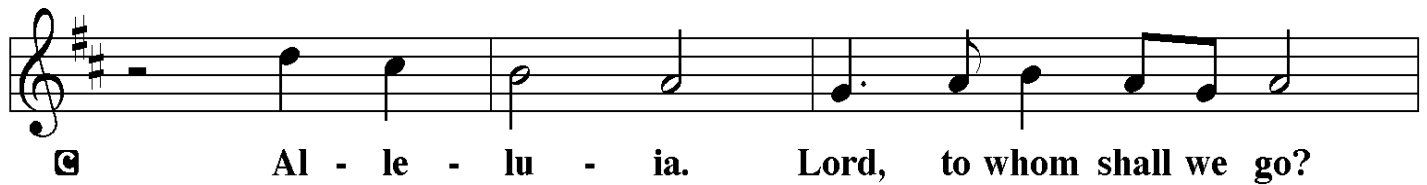
<sup>13</sup> By this we know that we abide in Him and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit. <sup>14</sup> And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent His Son as the Savior of the world. <sup>15</sup> God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. <sup>16</sup> So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

God **is** love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. <sup>17</sup> Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as He is, so are we in this world. <sup>18</sup> There's no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.

<sup>19</sup> We love because He first loved us. <sup>20</sup> Those who say, "I love God," and hate a brother or sister are liars, for those who do not love a brother or sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. <sup>21</sup> The commandment we have from Him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

This is holy wisdom; this is holy word.

***Thanks be to God!***



Al - le - lu - ia. Lord, to whom shall we go?



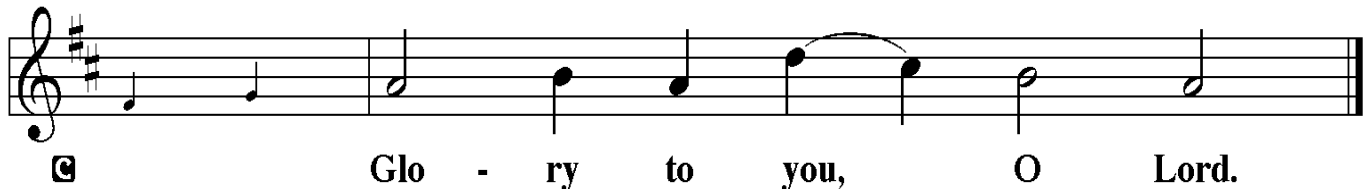
You have the words of e - ter - nal life. Al - le - lu - ia.

## THE HOLY GOSPEL:

## John 15.1-17

NRSVUE

The Holy Gospel according to St John, the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter.



Glo - ry to you, O Lord.

*Jesus said to His disciples, "I'm the true vine, and My Father is the vinegrower. <sup>2</sup> He removes every branch in Me that bears no fruit, and every branch that bears fruit He prunes to make it bear more fruit. <sup>3</sup> You've already been cleansed by the word that I've spoken to you. <sup>4</sup> Abide in Me, as I abide in you. Just as the branch can't bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in Me.*

*<sup>5</sup> "I'm the vine; you're the branches. Those who abide in Me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from Me you can do nothing. <sup>6</sup> Whoever does not abide in Me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. <sup>7</sup> If you abide in Me and My words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it'll be done for you. <sup>8</sup> My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become My disciples.*

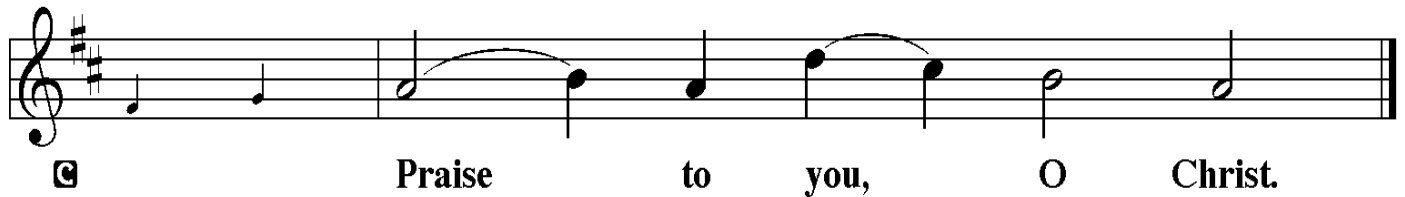
*<sup>9</sup> "As the Father has loved Me, so I've loved you; abide in My love. <sup>10</sup> If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I've kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love. <sup>11</sup> I've said these things to you so that My joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.*





<sup>12</sup> “This is My commandment: that you love one another as I’ve loved you. <sup>13</sup> No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. <sup>14</sup> You’re **My** friends if you do what I command you. <sup>15</sup> I don’t call you servants any longer, because the servant doesn’t know what the master’s doing; but I’ve called you friends, because I’ve made known to you everything that I’ve heard from My Father. <sup>16</sup> You did not choose Me, but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that’ll last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask Him in My name. <sup>17</sup> I’m giving you these commands so that you may love one another.”

This is the Gospel of our Lord.



## PROCLAMATION OF THE GOOD NEWS

**HYMN OF THE DAY: "O Blessed Spring"**

*ELW 447*

*We'll sing this to the tune O WALY WALY (see the next page for the melody and lyrics →)*



# O Blessed Spring

Musical score for "O Blessed Spring" in G major, 4/4 time. The score consists of four staves of music. The first staff starts with a G chord, followed by Am7 and G. The second staff has Em, Am7, and D. The third staff has G, Am7, and G. The fourth staff has Am7, D, C2, C, and G. The music features a mix of quarter, eighth, and half notes, with some notes beamed together and others held over with slurs.

*O blessed spring, where word and sign embrace us into Christ the Vine:  
Here Christ enjoins each one to be a branch of this life-giving Tree.*

*Through summer heat of youthful years, uncertain faith, rebellious tears,  
Sustained by Christ's infusing rain, the boughs will shout for joy again.*

*When autumn cools and youth is cold, when limbs their heavy harvest hold,  
Then through us, warm, the Christ will move with gifts of beauty, wisdom, love.*

*As winter comes, as winters must, we breathe our last, return to dust;  
Still held in Christ, our souls take wing and trust the promise of the spring.*

*Christ, holy Vine, Christ, living Tree, be praised for this blest mystery:  
That word and water thus revive and join us to Your Tree of Life!*

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## **NICENE CREED:**

*We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty,  
Maker of heaven and earth— of all that is, seen and unseen.*

*We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God,  
eternally begotten of the Father:*

*God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God,  
begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father.*

*Through Him all things were made.*

*For us and for our salvation, He came down from heaven;*

*by the power of the Holy Spirit,*

*He became incarnate from the virgin Mary and was made man.*

*For our sake He was crucified under Pontius Pilate;*

*He suffered death and was buried.*

*On the third day He rose again in accordance with the Scriptures;*

*He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father.*

*He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,*

*and His Kingdom will have no end.*

*We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life,  
who proceeds from the Father and the Son.*

*With the Father and the Son He is worshipped and glorified.*

*He has spoken through the prophets.*

*We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.*

*We acknowledge one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins.*

*We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Amen.*

## **PRAYERS FOR OURSELVES AND OTHERS:**

In the hope born of Christ's resurrection, let's pray for all in need:

Holy Vinegrower, we give You all thanks and praise, for You've sent Your Son as the Savior of the world and Your Spirit to graft us into the Vine of Life. In Your perfect love, our fear is cast out; and now, like branches of a vine, we abide in Christ and draw our life from Him, that we might bear much fruit to Your glory. Cleanse us day by day by Your word and give

Yourself to the whole Church on earth so that it bears fruit and witnesses to Your love. God of new life, ***receive our prayer.***

Spread Your sheltering presence over all that's budding and blooming in Your creation—plants sprouting out of soil and young animals growing stronger— and protect all that's fragile in Your world. As we wonder at the beauty of Your creation, help us to notice the vital connections among all that depends on the earth for life, and make us wise caretakers who find our place within those connections rather than sundering them for our own ends. God of new life, ***receive our prayer.***

You rule the nations with justice and love. Give the leaders of the earth the assurance of Your abiding presence, that they may lead not by fear, but with love for those they're called to serve. Bring Your peace to every place where lawlessness, terror, and disorder hold sway, including Ukraine, Israel, Gaza, Palestine, Syria, Afghanistan, Libya, Yemen, Sudan, Ethiopia, Haiti, Ecuador, and violence-riddled homes and communities in our own land, that they may come to know Your peace and healing. Send Your calming and healing Spirit to ease tensions and encourage ways of living beyond conflict and oppression, that all may know the blessings of Your grace. God of new life, ***receive our prayer.***

We seek Your healing grace for all in need of Your love, especially those who are poor, lowly, outcast, hungry, homeless, weak, or fearful. Abide with those who struggle with any kind of sickness or sorrow, grief or fear, addiction or resentment, loneliness or despair. Surround them with people who embody Your compassion for them and provide for their needs, and raise them up to newness of strength and life, hope and joy, nourished in the Vine of Christ's own life. We especially pray for... and those whom we remember before You now... God of new life, ***receive our prayer.***

We give You thanks for all those who've gone before us testifying to Your work in their lives. As You gather us with all the saints by the power of Your Spirit, grant that our hearts may live forever in Your keeping, and that through us future generations may proclaim and embody Your saving Good News. God of new life, ***receive our prayer.***

Rejoicing in the victory of Christ's resurrection, we lift our prayers and praise to You, almighty and eternal God, through Christ Jesus our risen Lord. ***Amen.***  
The peace of the Lord is with you always. ***And also with you.***

*Reconciled to God and to one another, we share a sign of Christ's peace.*

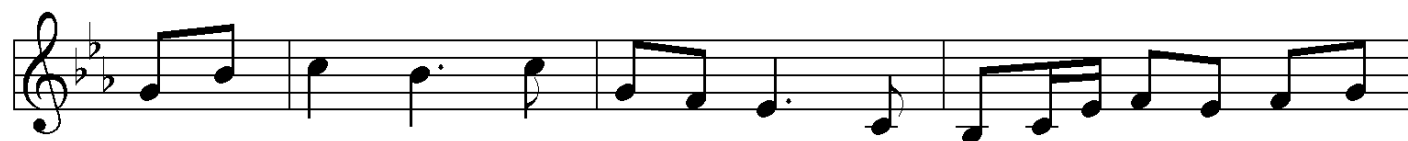
# MEAL

## OFFERING OF OUR GIFTS AND OURSELVES, WITH ANTHEM:

“Easter Alleluia”

-- Nancy Price and Don Besig

## OFFERTORY CANTICLE: “Let the Vineyards Be Fruitful”



Let the vine-yards be fruit-ful, Lord, and fill to the brim our cup of



bles-sing. Gath-er a har-vest from the seeds that were sown, that we may be



fed with the bread of life. Gath-er the hopes and dreams of all; u -

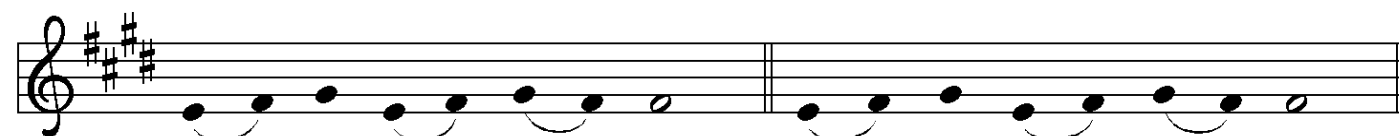


nite them with the prayers we of - fer. Grace our ta - ble with your

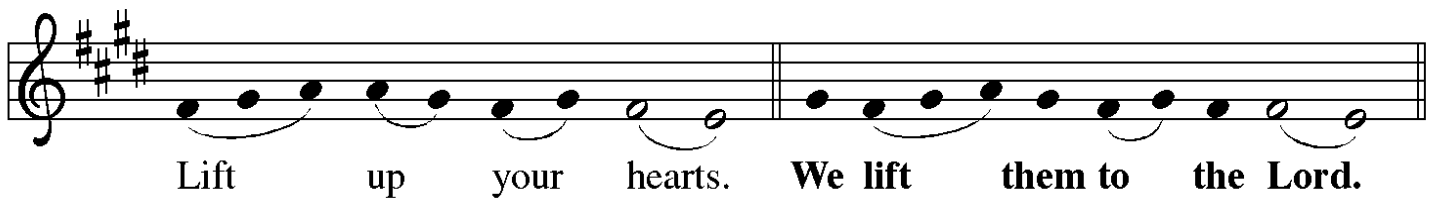


pres - ence, and give us a fore - taste of the feast to come.

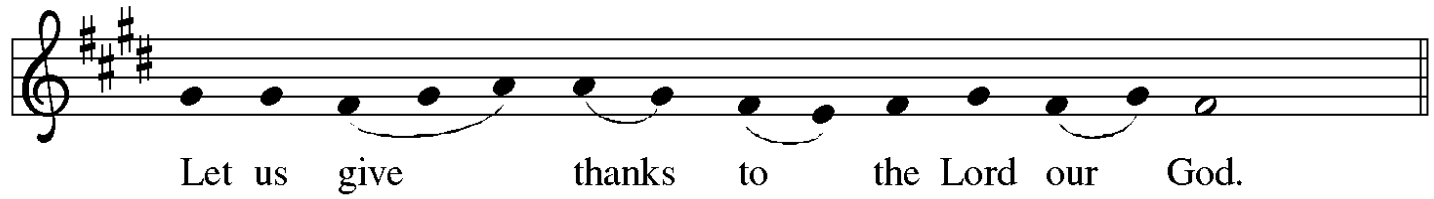
## EUCCHARISTIC PRAYER:



The Lord be with you. And al - so with you.



Lift up your hearts. We lift them to the Lord.

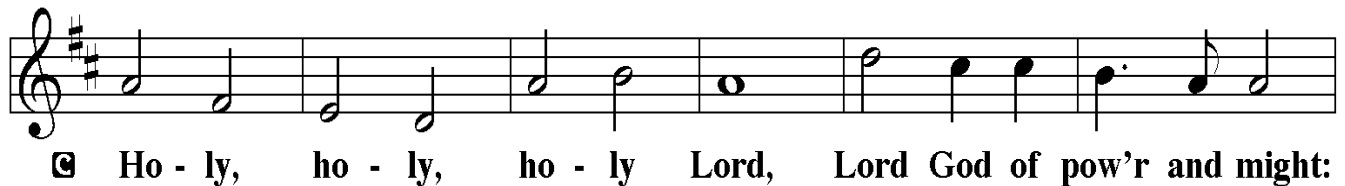


Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

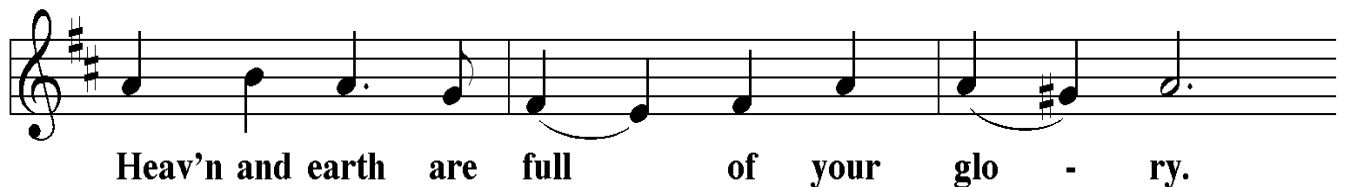


It is right to give our thanks and praise.

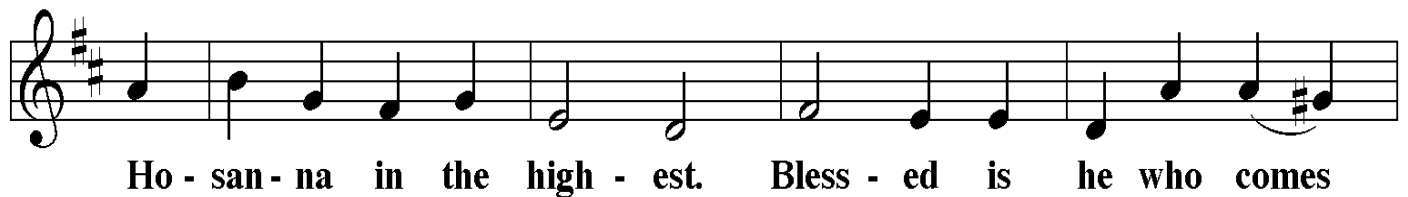
It's indeed right, our duty and our joy, that we should always and everywhere give thanks and praise to You, O Lord, holy Father, through Christ Jesus our Lord, who on this day overcame death and the grave, and by His glorious resurrection opened to us the way of everlasting life. And so, with Mary Magdalene and Peter and all the witnesses of the resurrection, with earth and sea and all their creatures, and with angels and archangels, cherubim and seraphim, we praise your Name and join their unending hymn:



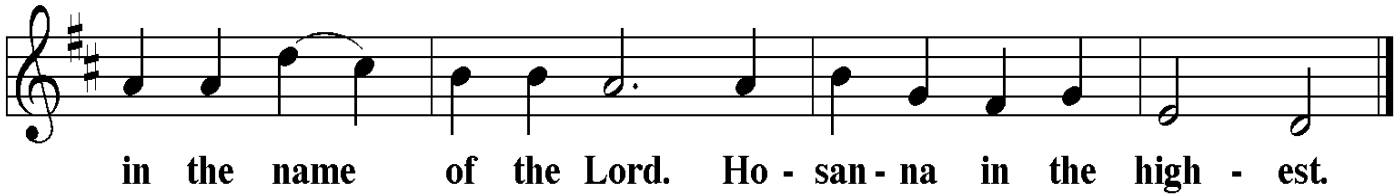
Ho - ly, ho - ly, ho - ly Lord, Lord God of pow'r and might:



Heav'n and earth are full of your glo - ry.



Ho - san - na in the high - est. Bless - ed is he who comes



In the night in which He was betrayed, our Lord Jesus took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and gave it to His disciples, saying, "Take and eat. This is My body, given for you. Do this for the remembrance of Me." Again after supper He took the cup, gave thanks, and gave it for all to drink, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood, shed for you and for all people for the forgiveness of sin. Do this for the remembrance of Me."

And so, remembering all that our Lord has done for us, believing the witness of His resurrection, awaiting His final appearing in glory, we share this foretaste of the feast to come. Now send Your Holy Spirit upon us, that we may receive our Lord with a living faith as He comes to us in His holy Supper. Empower us by that same Spirit to love and forgive, that our lives may anticipate that day when You'll make all things new. All this we pray with joy through our Lord Jesus Christ, who's taught us to pray:

***Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed by Thy Name!  
Thy Kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses,  
as we forgive those who trespass against us.  
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.  
For Thine is the Kingdom and the power and the glory, forever and ever! Amen.***

Alleluia! Christ Jesus says, "Fear not; I'm the First and the Last, and the Living One. ***I died, and behold, I'm alive forevermore!***" Alleluia!

The risen Christ dwells with us here! All who are hungry, all who are thirsty, come!

**CANTICLE: "Lamb of God"**



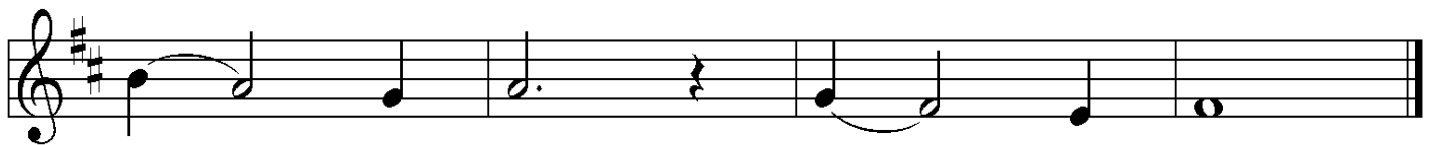
**Lamb of God, you take a-way the sin of the world; have mer-cy on us.**



**Lamb of God, you take a-way the sin of the world; have mer-cy on us.**



**Lamb of God, you take a-way the sin of the world;**



**grant us peace, grant us peace.**

## THE HOLY COMMUNION

*Now we share God's consecrated gifts among God's consecrated people, knowing that our living Lord Jesus is fully present with us in His Supper, giving Himself to us in bread and wine and forgiving love. Today, we'll share the Lord's Supper by receiving the body and blood of Christ at communion "stations" at the altar rail. Come forward a pew at a time; take a glass already filled with grape juice if necessary. Receive **"the body of Christ, given for you"** from the Pastor; then, by dipping the bread into the wine ("intinction") or drinking the grape juice from your glass, receive **"the blood of Christ, shed for you"** from our communion assistant. We'll pause for silent prayer after we've all communed...*

*If you're joining us from your home, we invite you to share the bread and cup with one another. When giving the bread to your neighbor, say **"The body of Christ, given for you."** When giving the wine/grape juice say, **"The blood of Christ, shed for you."** Whatever's left over may be reverently eaten and drunk by everyone after our worship is over. Once we've all shared in the body and blood of Christ, we continue in blessing and prayer:*

## SENDING

## THANKSGIVING, PRAYER, AND BENEDICTION:

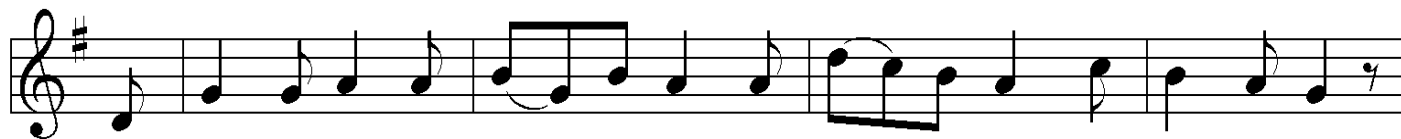


May the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ  
strengthen us and keep us in His grace.

*Amen.*



**☩ Thank the Lord and sing his praise; tell ev-'ry-one what he has done.**



**Let ev-'ry-one who seeks the Lord re-joice and proud-ly bear his name.**



**He re-calls his prom-is-es and leads his peo-ple forth in joy**



**with shouts of thanks - giv - ing. Al - le - lu - ia. Al - le - lu - ia.**

Wellspring of joy, through this meal You've put gladness in our hearts.  
Satisfy the hunger still around us, and send us as joyful witnesses,  
that Your love may bring joy to the hearts of all people  
through Christ Jesus our risen Lord.

*Amen.*

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

*Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!*

Now may the God of life, who raised Christ Jesus from death,  
empower you by the Holy Spirit to walk in newness of life;  
and Almighty God, Father, † Son, and Holy Spirit, bless you now and forever.

*Amen.*

**SENDING HYMN:**

**“On Our Way Rejoicing”**

*ELW 537*

*On our way rejoicing, gladly let us go.  
Christ our Lord has conquered; vanquished is the foe!*

*Christ without, our safety; Christ within, our joy;  
Who, if we be faithful, can our hope destroy?  
On our way rejoicing, as we forward move,  
Hearken to our praises, O blest God of love!*

*Unto God the Father joyful songs we sing;  
Unto God the Savior thankful hearts we bring;  
Unto God the Spirit bow we and adore,  
On our way rejoicing now and evermore.  
On our way rejoicing, as we forward move,  
Hearken to our praises, O blest God of love!*

## **ANNOUNCEMENTS AND DISMISSAL:**

God has a plan.

*We're it!*

What's our part in God's plan?

*Sharing God's love in joyful service!*

Then let's go in peace, serve in joy, and live out the new life of our risen Lord!

*Thanks be to God! Alleluia! Alleluia!*

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## **Abide**

Once, when my daughter was two years old, her grandfather took her out for ice cream. After parking his car and lifting my daughter out of her toddler seat, my dad offered her his thumb. "You have to hold it tight until we're inside the ice cream shop, okay?" he told her. "This is a busy street." My daughter took one look at his outstretched hand, wrapped her left fist around her own right thumb, and said "No, thank you. I can hold my own."

My daughter's statement could be the perfect slogan for Western Christianity. We're products of a contemporary culture that celebrates the individual and distrusts the communal. We often represent Christian life as a one-on-one transaction between a single believer and her God:

“I accepted Jesus as my Savior.” We put a lot of stock in our personal spiritual experiences: *my* prayer life, *my* worship, *my* epiphany. If we do align ourselves with a larger Christian community, we generally do so with a consumer mindset, trusting that we’re free to join up and free to quit as personal preference dictates. In other words, we’re proud Lone Rangers. We believe in pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps and encouraging others to do the same. We struggle not to view dependency as moral weakness. We cherish our personal space, and feel claustrophobic when other people press too close. We believe, of course, in loving our neighbors; but we feel most comfortable loving them from a distance, or at least with one eye trained on the nearest exit.

Given this context, I can’t imagine a more counter-cultural and challenging vision of the Christian life than the one Jesus offers us in this week’s lectionary reading: “I’m the vine, and you’re the branches,” He tells His disciples. “Those who abide in Me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from Me you can do nothing.” If those words aren’t blunt enough, He continues: “Whoever doesn’t abide in Me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.” **“Burned”?** Gulp! Goodbye, Lone Ranger. Hello... branches??

I’m not much of a gardener, but I have a potted jasmine vine growing on my patio. It’s fragrant and beautiful— but it doesn’t care one whit about personal space. It’s a messy, curly, jumbly thing. It stretches, it spreads, and it invades. It grows in all kinds of tangled up directions, and its densely interwoven tendrils are just about indistinguishable from each other.

If this is Jesus’ metaphor for the spiritual life, then I think Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz Weber says it best: “Christianity is a lousy religion for the ‘I’ll do it myself’ set.” We’re meant to be tangled up together. We’re meant to live lives of profound interdependence, growing into, around, and out of each other. We cause pain and loss when we hold ourselves apart, because the fate of each individual branch affects the vine as a whole. In this metaphor, interdependence isn’t a matter of personal morality or preference; it’s a matter of life and death— branches that refuse to cling to the vine die.

My problem, of course, is that I don’t believe this. I don’t want to believe it because it’s inconvenient and offensive. It implies that my life’s not my own, that my choices affect people I don’t even know, that I’m bound to the community of God’s people whether such boundedness suits my temperament or not. Worse, it requires me to hold two seemingly contradictory truths in perpetual tension. The first is that the point of my Christian life isn’t me— my growth, my catharsis, my contributions, my achievements. I’m inextricably connected to a larger whole, and apart from that whole, my spirituality (profound and precious though it might feel to me) is without value. Apart from the vine, I’m not only barren; I’m dead. In other words, I’m not the fruit in this metaphor. I’m not supposed to be the end product of my own spiritual life. And the second is that I matter more than I can possibly imagine— that every branch matters more than I can possibly imagine— because the fruitfulness of God’s vine is no trivial thing; it constitutes the life and nourishment of the world.

I read a little bit about grapevines this week. Apparently, the best grapes are produced closest to the central vine, where the nutrients are the most concentrated. To cut myself off from the vine, then, is to diminish my fruitfulness. It's to deny the world the fruit of Christ's saving, cleansing, healing love.

I titled this essay "Abide" because it's the key word in Jesus' metaphor, appearing eight times in the reading. If God's the Vinegrower, Jesus is the Vine, and we're the branches, what should we do? We have only one task— to **abide**: to tarry, to stay, to cling, to remain, to depend, to rely, to last, to persevere, to commit, to continue, to tolerate, to endure, to acquiesce, to accept, to hang in there for the long haul, to make ourselves at home...

"Abide" is a tricky word— passive on the one hand and active on the other. To abide is to stay rooted in place. But it's also to grow, to change, and to multiply. It's a vulnerable-making verb: if we abide, we'll get pruned. It's a risky verb: if we abide, we'll bear fruit that others will see and taste. It's a humbling verb: if we abide, we'll have to accept nourishment that's not of our own making. And it's a relentlessly communal verb— if we abide, we'll have to coexist with our fellow branches. We'll have to live a life that's messy, crowded, tangled, and gorgeous, a life that's deeply rooted and wildly fertile...

I can't imagine that there was ever a time when Jesus' followers found the metaphor of the vine easy to apply in daily life. But I also think that it's especially challenging to do so now. We live in bitterly divided times. We have good reasons to be cautious and self-protective, even within the Church. It's hard in our self-promoting culture to confess that we're lost and lifeless on our own, that our glory lies in surrender, not self-sufficiency.

Equally hard is the spiritual and imaginative leap we must make in order to trust the metaphor at all: "Really? Jesus isn't just a wise teacher, a good role model, a provocative historical figure? He's really the very source and sustainer of my life?"

My dad and I had a good laugh over my daughter's attempt at independence when he brought her home from their outing. Needless to say, he didn't allow his two-year-old granddaughter to hold her own hand while crossing the street. He told her she had to grasp his thumb, or else miss out on the ice cream. In typical toddler fashion, my daughter threw a tantrum, waited for a few minutes to see if my dad would relent (he didn't), and finally grabbed hold of his hand, not letting it go until she got her ice cream.

If only we'd surrender our ferocious independence with no more than a quick tantrum! If only we'd consent to see reality as it truly is— not that Jesus is sitting around waiting for us to get organized, but that He's already started nourishing the world through us. "I **am** the vine," He told His disciples. "You **are** the branches." It's a done deal— meaning that whether we like it or not, our lives are bound up in his and in each other's; that the only true life we'll live in this world is the life we consent to live in relationship, messy and entangled though it might be; that the only fruit worth sharing with the world is the fruit we produce together.

Yes, it's difficult. But it's also easy. Remember, our Vine is true and our Vinegrower is skilled. This is what we were made for. Abide...

- *Debie Thomas*

# Grounded

Throughout the Bible, people and nations aspired to be **trees**— “cedars of Lebanon” whose tops reach to the heavens, whose branches are the nesting places of birds by the hundreds and thousands, and whose shadow darkens the entire region around them. Nebuchadnezzar dreamed of his Babylonian Empire being such a tree [Daniel 4.10-12]. Israel herself aspired to such glory, as Solomon’s Temple and reign proclaimed with every wall panel and gold shield. And today, there are plenty of churches that aspire to be trees like that as well. With great numbers and great resources, they can put on a show that we can’t match and project a “glory” that folks want to be a part of, or at least hide in the shadow of...

But the God whose “glory” is seen in the depth of the footprint He leaves in the stuff of earth has a habit of identifying with much more modest plants. When the Almighty God reveals Himself to Moses, He does so from a **bush**, not a tree. And when Jesus Himself invests one of His great “I Am” statements into a plant and speaks of remaining united to Him, He says “I am the **Vine**”— again, a plant that sticks close to the ground, one that remains deeply rooted and rises to a modest height, and yet still bears fruit. The branches of this Vine intertwine and spread both high and wide as they remain connected to the stem and to the roots, and in so doing produce fruit that’s sweet and life-giving. (And personally, while fine lumber is great and maple syrup’s great, I’ll take a fine wine over either of them anytime!)

This is what we have to offer our entire community: life in the Vine, deeply rooted in Jesus. It’s a life that’s full and rich and abundant in things that money can’t buy— but it’s not meant to be kept to ourselves. As we continue to celebrate Christ’s resurrection victory, let’s not only “keep our roots deep in Him, build our lives on Him, and become stronger in our faith, as we were taught, and be filled with thanksgiving” [Colossians 2.6-7], but spread out our branches to those around us who don’t yet share in our life in Christ, that whether or not we cast a big shadow, all around us may know the abundant grace of Christ Jesus our risen Lord!

**BE A BLESSING**  
**PRAY OFTEN. PRACTICE PEACE. LEAD WITH LOVE.**  
**BE JOYFUL. BE KIND. GIVE THANKS.**  
**DO GOOD. HAVE COURAGE. WORK FOR JUSTICE.**  
**BE THE LIGHT. ENCOURAGE OTHERS.**