



Rockway and First (North Pelham) Pastoral Charge
5th Sunday after the Epiphany, February 4, 2024
Worship at Home

Email: northpelham.rockwaypc@gmail.com Website: <https://northpelhamrockwaypresbyterian.ca>

CALL TO WORSHIP

L: We gather as your community, O God.

P: We come to worship, to sing, pray, and seek your presence in Scripture.

L: We gather as those who face life's challenges.

P: Yet, we also gather as those who enjoy life's blessings.

L: We gather as a diverse blend of experiences and seasons.

P: Come, Lord, unite us in worship as we gather before you.

Let us worship God together!

Hymn 290 Immortal, invisible, God only wise

PRAYERS OF APPROACH, CONFESSION and The Lord's Prayer

We have come, O God, and we stand before you. Our hearts are open, and our minds are attentive. Speak to us. Guide us to where we have been, where we are now, and where we need to go. Help us confront our fears and hesitations. Is there something burdening us with guilt, responsibility, or shame? Are there frustrations, resentments, or anger weighing on us? Do we feel despair, with little hope for resolution or new possibilities?

In the silence of our breathing, O God, hear our confessions. (pause)

Come to us in this hour of worship, O God. Speak to us what we need to hear. Move through us with your forgiving and empowering love. Ground our spirits in you again, bringing us peace as we surrender to your sustaining presence throughout our lives. In the name of Jesus, who taught us to pray, we offer these words:

THE LORD'S PRAYER

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be 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 debts, as we forgive our debtors and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

Hymn 747 There is a balm in Gilead

Prayer for Understanding

As we gather today, we reflect on the weight of grief and the struggles faced by those who mourn. Illuminate our hearts with compassion and understanding as we contemplate the journey of loss. Guide us, Lord, through the darkness of sorrow into the light of your love. Grant us the courage to trust in your faithfulness, even in our times of deepest despair. May this time of reflection draw us closer to you and to one another, strengthening our bonds of community and compassion. In your mercy, hear our prayer. Amen.

SCRIPTURE PASSAGES

Psalm 77; Lamentations 1: 1-8; John 11: 35-36

SERMON

Navigating Loss and Grief

This morning, I want to share a message of hope and healing, particularly in the face of loss and grief. Let me begin by sharing a personal experience. My parents were married for 66 years and raised eight children together. Sadly, my father passed away in 2018, leaving my mother to live alone in their shared home for over 50 years. This has been a challenging experience for her, as she has struggled with feelings of grief, depression, and loneliness. Is it understandable for her to feel this way after such a significant loss? At what point does one become overwhelmed by loss?

Grief affects us in many different forms. Some of us may have experienced similar losses, while others may have faced various forms of loss, such as the end of a significant relationship or a change in employment, and physical or mental abilities. Despite our individual experiences, grief can leave us feeling lost and consumed by sorrow.

Today's biblical narratives are filled with stories of profound loss and grief. The book of Lamentations, traditionally attributed to the prophet Jeremiah, vividly portrays the immense loss and grief experienced by the Israelites after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. Similarly, in Psalm 77, we encounter a heartfelt lament expressing deep anguish as the speaker seeks comfort from God in times of distress. The speaker is kept awake by their worries and cannot express themselves. These feelings are expressed in verses 1-4, 'I cry out to God; I cry out, and he hears me. In my distress, I seek the Lord; at night, I stretch out my hands, but I find no relief. I think of God, and I groan; I meditate, and my spirit grows faint. You keep me awake; I am too distressed to speak.'

Have there been moments in your life when a prayer like this would have spoken to you? Perhaps this is one of those times.

Moreover, the speaker feels that their experiences of comfort and solace are as elusive as God himself. They express doubt in God's love and faithfulness, asking, "Has the Lord rejected us forever? Will God never again show us his favor? Has God's anger shut up his compassion?" (vv. 7-9). The speaker feels let down by God and questions God's ability to deliver them. They may even feel as though God is intentionally neglecting or punishing them. These feelings of disappointment can be overwhelming.

We may feel that everyone and everything, including God, is against us. Or even if not against us, no one can truly understand or assist us in our grief. We become consumed by feelings of isolation and loneliness, not because we choose to be, but because the pain and sadness we carry are too intense to distance ourselves from enough to move forward. We become lost and feel that even God, if God exists, cannot find us in our distress.

But what if the purpose of Psalm 77 is to guide us through the journey of grief, however long it may take? The psalm takes a significant turn from start to finish. There is a change or transformation that occurs. The prayer begins to hold hope, and the light of hope begins to shine through.

How does this transformation occur? It starts when the psalmist's self-centred lamentation transforms into questions about God. At first, the questions express doubt about God's presence and view it as abandonment or even punishment. Being consumed by grief can often lead to feelings of self-pity and the belief that one is being punished.

This passage talks about the experience of grief and how it can cause us to feel isolated and as if even God is against us. However, Psalm 77 is meant to be seen as a journey, a map to help us navigate our grief and reach the other side. The psalmist's prayer starts as self-focused but gradually shifts to questions about God and their understanding of God's absence. At one point, the psalmist questions whether their interpretation of God's absence as punishment is accurate. They realize that God is always a compassionate and merciful being, so their focus and thinking about God need to change. This shift in focus and thinking may bring hope and the start of healing.

The psalmist then decides to recall the actions of the Lord and reminds themselves that God has performed wondrous deeds and shown their strength to the nations. They also recall how God rescued their people, the descendants of Jacob and Joseph, with their strong arms.

In John 11:35-36, we witness Jesus' deep compassion and sorrow at the death of his friend Lazarus. Despite knowing he would raise Lazarus from the dead, Jesus wept at the sight of his friend's tomb, moved by the sorrow of those around him. This moment reassures us of Jesus' profound empathy and understanding of our experiences of loss and grief, showing that we are not alone in our pain.

Regardless of their life journey, everyone will face challenges and hardships at some point. The challenge is whether we can find and connect with God during these difficult times, or whether our pain and fear will consume us so much that we cannot trust in the larger story of redemption and find our way to the other side.

As flawed human beings, we all need assistance in getting out of the negative situations we may find ourselves in. There are valid reasons for falling into these situations, such as the loss of someone or something we deeply care about. However, how do we reach a point where we can take a step back and be open to receiving and giving compassion, which is crucial for our journey toward healing and completeness?

By remembering the story of their people and the presence of God as a source of steadfast love and faithfulness, through leaders like Moses and Aaron, the psalmist's soul is given room for faith, hope, and love to resurface. This is not about forgetting the grief, as what was lost remains a part of us, but about embracing new possibilities for growth and evolution as grief adds a new level of depth to our love. Grief becomes a new gift that we are tasked with sharing with others.

The psalm changes from the psalmist's self-centered perspective in their grief to a focus on God and their community's history of liberation. This spiritual shift is crucial for their journey toward healing and becoming whole, moving from focusing solely on themselves to recognizing the presence of God and the potential for blessings in life, despite hardships.

My mother's journey through grief serves as a testament to this truth. Despite her initial struggles, she found comfort and support in her church, allowing her pain to transform into compassion and appreciation for life's simple joys.

The advantage of being part of a lively and dynamic church community is that we get to experience the full spectrum of life's ups and downs. We find joy in the innocence of childhood and the shared journey of faith, with God above, Christ beside us, and the Holy Spirit within our hearts.

We also celebrate the lives of those who have died and offer our love and support to their families, who are also a part of us. We give thanks for the communion of saints, a faith that gives us the gift of seeing life as so much bigger than the physical years given us here and now. Our life journey is measured in eternal terms.

Let us continue to celebrate, express gratitude, and comfort those who mourn. May we treasure the laughter and shared friendship experiences, knowing that we can find healing and wholeness through faith, hope, and love. Amen.

Hymn 749

Be still, my soul

Invitation to the Offering

Doxology

Prayer of Dedication

Gracious God, as we prepare to offer our gifts, we remember the central message of today's sermon: the journey through grief to hope. Bless these offerings, that they may bring comfort to those who mourn and support to those in need. May our giving reflect your boundless love and mercy, guiding us towards healing and wholeness. Amen.

Prayer of Thanksgiving and for the People

Gracious and loving God, as we close this time of worship, we come before you with hearts filled with gratitude. Thank you for the message of hope and healing that has been shared with us today. In the face of loss and grief, you are our source of strength and comfort, guiding us through the darkest of times.

We thank you for the reminder that grief affects us all in different ways, but we are never alone in our pain. Just as the psalmist cried out to you in distress, so too do we turn to you in our times of need, knowing that you hear our cries and offer solace to our weary souls.

Lord, as we reflect on the stories of lamentation and sorrow in the Scriptures, we are reminded of your unwavering presence amidst our struggles. Like the psalmist, may we find hope in the midst of despair, knowing that you are a God of compassion and mercy.

As we leave this place today, may we carry with us the assurance that you walk beside us on the uncertain and unknown journey of life, guiding us through the valleys and lifting us up on the mountaintops. Give us strength to face whatever challenges come our way, knowing that your love never fails.

We are grateful for the example of Jesus, who wept with those who mourned, showing us that you understand the depths of our sorrow. Help us follow his example, offering comfort and support to grieving people, just as you have comforted us in our own times of need.

We pray for Bonnie, Donna, and their family as they navigate grief and emptiness following the loss of their beloved Joe Roland. May they feel your presence surrounding them, bringing peace and comfort in their time of need. We also lift up in prayer those struggling with physical ailments: Tim Norton, Fran Johnson, Tom Keenan, Liz Cook, and Kent Reynolds.

We also take a moment in silence, O God, to name before you those persons and situations in our lives we are especially mindful of now. (pause)

For healing, we pray in the many ways recovery may become manifest. For new strength and blessing, we pray. For patience and grace, we pray. For acceptance and peace, we pray. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Hymn 651

Guide me, O thou great Redeemer

BENEDICTION

May the eternal blessing of God, the peace of the Risen Jesus, and the fellowship we share in the Holy Spirit, be with us all this day and forevermore. Amen."

Sung Response- Go Now In Peace

Postlude

**We acknowledge that we meet on the traditional
Territory of the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe**

ANNOUNCEMENTS

***Worship on Sunday, February 11, at North Pelham**

***Honoring the Life of Joe Roland:** Funeral arrangements to commemorate Joe's life are as follows:

- ✓ **Visitation:** Sunday, February 4th, from 2 – 5 PM at Tallman Funeral Home, 3277 King St. Vineland.

- ✓ **Celebration of Life:** Monday, February 5th, at 11 AM at Rockway Presbyterian Church. Let's support Joe's wife, Bonnie, and their family during this challenging time. Joe's faith and wisdom left a lasting impact on the Rockway congregation, and he will be deeply missed.

***Two Bible studies:** Join us for Wednesday Bible study at 10:00 AM at First Church, led by Diane McMillan. Our Thursday Bible study was suspended due to Fran's illness. She is currently at the hospital.

***Outreach - Thursday Walking:** Join us for the Wellness Walk and Coffee Chat! We gather at 9:30 a.m. at Canada Games Park to start our walk together. After the walk, we meet at Rockway for a joyful chat over hot and fresh coffee at 10:45 am.

***Quilting Gathering:** Join us for our quilting session on Tuesday, from 9:00 AM to 3:00 PM at North Pelham. All sewing enthusiasts are welcome to participate!

***RPCW Meeting:** The RPCW will meet on Wednesday, February 7, at the church at 1:30 PM.

***Out of the Cold Dinner:** Rockway will provide dinner for those in need at Knox Presbyterian Church in St. Catharines on February 9th. We will gather there at 5:00 pm.

***Offering Update: Circulating the Plate Starting February** - We circulate the offering plate during our worship service. If you make monthly offerings through PAR, you can place your PAR cards on the plate each week.

***Holy Communion:** On February 11, Transfiguration Sunday, we will celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Communion.

***Session Meeting:** A joint session meeting will be held on Wednesday, February 14th, at 7:00 pm at Rockway.

***World Day of Prayer:** The Local World Day of Prayer service for the Pelham area in 2024 will be held at St. Alexander Church in Fonhill on March 1st at 2:00 PM.

***Special Guest Preacher: Rev. Krista Hilton** - On March 3, we are excited to welcome Rev. Krista Hilton, a Chaplain at Brock University and a priest in the Anglican Church. She will share her experiences in chaplaincy for young students and present mission opportunities for our congregation to support the ministry of spiritual and pastoral care for university students.

***Annual Congregational Meetings:** The 2023 Annual Congregational Meeting for North Pelham is planned for March 10, right after the service, and for Rockway, our gathering is scheduled for March 17 following the service. Committee reports play a vital role in providing a thorough overview. Committees, please submit your reports for North Pelham by February 25th to Janice or Carole and Rockway by March 3rd to Bonnie.

***Connect with your Minister Jacob for pastoral visits.** Reach Jacob at jacoble0501@gmail.com or 289-213-2797.