



Rockway and First (North Pelham) Pastoral Charge
3rd Sunday in Lent, March 23, 2025
Worship at Home

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

CALL TO WORSHIP (provided by Presbyterian World Service and Development)

L: In the wilderness, Jesus was tempted to abandon God

P: for the false hopes of indulgence, arrogance and certainty.

L: During our Lenten journey, we recognize we too are tempted

P: to turn aside from seeking only God and God's ways.

L: As we worship, may we celebrate all the bounty of God's grace

P: and always return with mindfulness and gratitude to God.

Hymn 321 Praise to the Lord, the Almighty

PRAYERS OF APPROACH, CONFESSION and The Lord's Prayer

Here we are, O God. We have come. Meet us here.

Not just in who we are meant to be but in who we truly are—right now, in this moment. Not only in the dreams we carry of what could have been or should have been but in our honest thoughts, our actual words, and our real lives. Thank you for stirring within us the hope to believe more deeply, to love more freely, and to become more fully who you call us to be.

But we also confess, O God, that too often, we are tangled in worry and stress, gripped by fear and insecurity, drawn toward envy, resentment, anger, and pride. We can be competitive, judgmental, arrogant, or indifferent. And we are sorry. Hear us now as we offer our silent confession to you. (pause)

You see us, O God. You know us. You believe in us. You never give up on us. Keep working within us to heal and transform. Make us more open to your grace, more ready to love. Send your Holy Spirit to be our inspiration, our conscience, and our guide. We offer this prayer in the name of Jesus, who taught us to pray together, saying...

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 209**O Love that wilt not let me go****Prayer for Understanding**

O God, as we turn to your holy Word,
 we seek your wisdom, your truth, and your voice for our lives. By your Holy Spirit, open our
 minds and soften our hearts, so we may hear what you are saying—in our time, in our world, and
 within us. Help us not only to listen but to follow Jesus, your Living Word, with faith, courage,
 and love. Amen.

SCRIPTURE PASSAGES**Responsive Psalm 63: 1-8****Isaiah 55:1-9; Luke 13: 1-9****SERMON****Fruitful Living in Hard Times**

Tragedies happen to us, around us, and across the world. Every day, we are confronted with
 heartbreaking images of suffering on our TVs, smartphones, and computer screens. While some
 live in comfort, others face unimaginable hardships.

At the end of last year, a Korean airplane crashed after a bird strike, belly-landing and striking a
 concrete structure, killing all 175 passengers—a tragic end to a routine flight. This month, three
 masked suspects opened fire at a Scarborough pub in Toronto, injuring 12 people, including six
 with non-life-threatening wounds. This senseless act of violence left the community in shock and
 mourning.

Beyond these sudden tragedies, countless others endure prolonged suffering. Syrians have faced
 over a decade of civil war, displacing families desperate to escape violence and build better lives
 for their children. In Venezuela, people are pushed to the brink by severe shortages of food,
 power, and cash, forcing many to flee for survival. In Afghanistan, more than one-third of the
 population battles severe food insecurity, with regions like Bamyān—a cold, disaster-prone
 area—struggling against droughts, floods, and near-impossible farming conditions.

The same heartbreak echoes in Ukraine, Gaza, and beyond, where war has shattered
 communities, leaving people without loved ones, homes, livelihoods, or access to education—
 facing a future with little hope.

How is it that some people have good lives and others do not? Is it their faith? Is it the
 consequences of their lives? Is it the quality of their prayers? Is it their intelligence or something
 else that makes the difference?

Today's gospel story in Luke deals with such questions, and Jesus answers them by mentioning
 two tragic incidents. One is that Pilate has killed a group of Galilean Jews because they tried to
 incite the people to rebel against the injustices of Roman oppression. They were tortured and
 maimed, and their blood was used to desecrate the holy sacrifices in the temple. The other
 incident concerns the eighteen people killed when a large tower unexpectedly fell on them. Did
 they find themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time because of something they did wrong?

Jesus teaches that there is no simple connection between what we do and what happens to us. Those who were killed were no worse than any of us here now. Here is what he asks his listeners: “Do you think these Galileans were more sinful than all the other Galileans? Or those eighteen people who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them...Do you think they were more guilty of wrongdoing than everyone else who lives in Jerusalem? No, I tell you, but unless you change your hearts and lives, you will die just as they did.” We are all vulnerable to calamity and hardships. I don’t believe we think our superior righteousness will save us from such things. Also, Jesus is acknowledging that there *is* fallout for sin. We do reap what we sow in many cases.

Jesus explains this in the parable of the fig tree, a story about a vineyard owner and his gardener. The owner needs to use his land for trees that are bearing good fruit, not ones that are just taking up space. There is one tree that has failed to produce any fruit for three seasons now. Isn’t it time to cut it down? “No” says the gardener. “Give me a chance to care for it and love it for one more season. Let me water it, and put manure around its roots and bring it back to the peak of its fruitfulness.”

This parable has symbolic significance because it is about what is happening on the inside, not on the outside. The fruit we bear comes from the internal state of our being. The parable is about a tree recovering health from the inside. Only then can the tree bear good fruit on the outside. If we have love within us, we will bear the concrete fruits of love on the outside. And if we don’t have love inside us, we will not bear tangible fruits.

The world represents God’s garden, and we are God’s trees. God’s love functions like fertilizer in us so that, like trees, we may bear the fruits of love. Yet unless we allow God’s love inside and unless we cultivate the soil of our spirits, we will have little love in us for any fruit to grow. We can only cultivate the seed of love within us through a relationship with God. God’s love will give us wisdom and strength. It will help us build bridges and relationships. Love spreads healing energy outward into the world. The unpleasant truth we have to acknowledge, however, is that love cannot protect us from all the bad things that can happen. Love is, instead, the spiritual power that enables us to use even the bad things that happen as part of how we grow in love.

So we all need to change the wrong belief that bad things happen to others and will not happen to us simply because we are Christians. In fact, in today’s Gospel, Jesus wants to get rid of such thinking because it is misguided and false. God intends to grow love so we might have empathy and compassion and not judgment for people who suffer. Awful things can happen to anyone because God does not control the world like some cosmic emperor. Instead, as gardeners, God provides us with love as fertilizer so that we may bear the abundant fruits of love. As Isaiah teaches us, God’s power is not the physical power we may wish it were. God’s plans are different from ours. God’s ways are not our ways.

The prophet Isaiah challenges Israel to see that all that seeking after wealth, power, and status has got them nowhere. The only foundation that will give them a future is God’s love. So, too,

Jesus teaches his followers and us now that the kingdom of God is a kingdom of love. Relationships in God's kingdom are based on love. In the kingdom of love we are not measured by how popular we are, how much money we have, or by how powerful or talented we are. Love is what saves us. That is the kind of garden God wants to cultivate. That is the kind of fruit God wants to taste.

For God to build the kingdom of love inside us, we are asked to repent and bear the spiritual fruits of love. Unless we change, we will die, just as the people in today's gospel story did. We are especially vulnerable to bad happenings if we do not repent. Whether we do something stupid or whether we do something criminal, we do need to be held accountable and people need to be protected. At the same time, we all are vulnerable to the possibility of bad things happening to us, regardless of how good we are: whether we are a refugee, a young woman vulnerable to exploitation, revolutionary Galileans fighting for a better life, or just a people in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Yet despite our uncertain, insecure, and fearful lives, we can grow inner spiritual fruits to bless the world and be blessed by God through a spiritual and meaningful journey that includes repentance. Repentance is about changing our thoughts, words, and attitudes. Such a change has to begin inside us. In what ways do you and I need to change in this season of Lent to return to God's plan for us and through us?

May you and I seek to bear the spiritual fruits of God's healing, forgiving, and abundant love. Amen.

Hymn 640 **Softly and tenderly**

Invitation to the Offering

Doxology

Prayer of Dedication

We thank you, O God.

You call us to love, and through our love, to serve and bless the world—and in doing so, to discover our own blessing. So now, we give with grateful hearts. Bless these gifts, O God, and use them for your holy purpose. Amen.

Prayer of Thanksgiving and for the People

God of Life, God of Creation,

We live in a world of incredible beauty, O God: The earth is beautiful, and living things are beautiful. We witness beauty in other people every day we live, O God. Thank you!

And yet, the world we live in is a place where tragic things happen, O God. Nature is not always our friend. There are floods and storms, tornadoes and fires, earthquakes, and deadly viruses like COVID-19. And if that is not tragic enough, O God, there are terrible accidents that happen, and, even worse, terrible things that human beings do to each other, to the vulnerable, and to this earth.

We want to be grateful always, O God. But the very things we love about life and the world around us cause us pain, sadness, anger, and suffering when bad things happen.

You feel our pain, anxiety, and vulnerability, O God. The meaning of the cross is that you have chosen to share our pain. But the meaning of the cross is also that you have chosen to do something about our pain. Through your forgiveness and the hope it inspires, you call and challenge us to act, to focus, and to pray.

War is terrible, but you find us, Loving God. You find us anxious as conflict rages in Ukraine. You find us angry at the senseless loss of life, you find us distressed as civilians are caught in a terrible war, you find us grieving over the death of innocent bystanders.

War is terrible, but you listen to us carefully, Loving God. You listen as we ask politicians, “Can’t you work for a peaceful solution?” You listen as we say to the aggressors, “Don’t put children or hospitals at risk.” You listen as we give thanks for countries that welcome the displaced with big hearts and open arms; you listen as we fear for journalists who put themselves in danger to report the truth.

War is terrible, but you give us hope, Loving God. Hope that leaders will patiently give peace a chance. Hope that, despite the heartache, terror, and loss, places of sanctuary will be found, and acts of kindness will take root and grow. Hope that feelings of revenge for broken livelihoods and broken bodies will be replaced by a willingness to restore community and to forgive.

Finally, we pray for our own lives and communities before You, O God. We pray for those facing health challenges in body and mind—our families, friends, and ourselves. We name before You now the personal concerns we carry in our hearts... (silence)

We also pray for those suffering in war-torn lands, displaced from their homes, or battling hunger and hardship. We pray for consolation and comfort, healing, discernment, and a way through darkness to light. We pray for resilience and compassion. We pray for deep and abiding peace in our hearts and across the world. We offer all these prayers in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Hymn 794

Abide with me

BENEDICTION

May the love of God the Gardener, the grace of Jesus the Living Word, and the power of the Holy Spirit our Guide nurture your heart, so you may bear the fruits of love, even in a broken world. Go in peace. 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, March 30, at Rockway**

***Alarm System Update:** Rockway will hold tutorials on the new alarm system after the service on March 30. The alarm system will be activated after March 30. Please get your new code from Bonnie Roland.

***Presbytery Mid-Week Lenten Worship Services 2025:** As we continue our Lenten journey together, we warmly invite you to the third Presbytery Mid-Week Lenten Worship Service on Wednesday, April 3, 2025, at 2:00 PM, hosted by Knox (Hope) Presbyterian Church in Welland. Then, mark your calendars for a special Maundy Thursday Communion Service on April 17 at 7:00 PM at Kirk on the Hill in Fonthill. All are welcome!

***Ham Dinner at North Pelham Youth Hall** will be held on Saturday, April 5, 2025, from 5:00 PM to 7:00 PM. Tickets are \$20.00 per person and can be purchased in advance or at the door. Enjoy a great meal and good fellowship!

***Quilting** Tuesdays at North Pelham at 9:00 am

***Wednesday Bible Study led by Diane McMillan** meets at 10:00 am at North Pelham

***Outreach - Thursday Walking:** Join our Wellness Walk & Coffee Chat! Meet at Canada Games Park at 9:30 a.m. for the walk, followed by a joyful coffee chat at Rockway at 10:45 a.m.

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