

## **Gathering for Worship**

Sunday, July 14, 2024

Rev. Debi VanDenBoom MAPCC LPC

As a Deacon clergy person, who prior to this appointment was working in very different ministry settings, it is a great honor to begin this next chapter in my life pastoring in partnership with this congregation here in New London including each of you who have already been providing compassionate care for those in your midst. And while part of my previous appointment included a more traditional role of fostering faith formation at Stevensville United Methodist Church, I was also teaching private swim lessons at the local YMCA. Teaching swim lessons and lifeguarding in aquatic settings at several different YMCAs and park & recreation programs was where I began my vocational call by teaching others how to overcome their fears and stay safe specifically near water. Yet, the primary part of my last appointment was as a mental health clinician. I trained to become a pastoral counselor at Garret Evangelical Theological Seminary and the Center for Religion and Psychotherapy of Chicago graduating in 2020.

As we embark on this journey together, I will learn what it means to have the role of pastor in a congregational setting while continuing to provide care for individuals seeking mental and emotional health strategies. My counseling role will take place using telehealth and only for those residing in Michigan because that is where I am currently licensed to provide care. I observed how my time at the church in Stevensville was a platform to prepare me for some of the ministries I will encounter here in New London. They too, offer programming for children in the form of an onsite daycare housed in their building along with an office for an outside agency to provide mental health services for individuals. My colleague who used the office at the church had a caseload made up of mostly teens and young adults while my office was located in nearby Benton Harbor, Michigan where I worked primarily with adults.

In life I have found there are the parts I can choose and then there are the unexpected happenings I find myself adapting to including present situations. In

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preparing to gather for this particular worship experience there were many obstacles and challenges I needed to accomplish or overcome so that I could be present here in mind, body, and spirit. Today's theme is gathering for worship. Worship is our time of coming together to celebrate Divine God while supporting one another in our Christian faith.

The reading from 2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19 tells part of David's story as king. David had many lived experiences prior to this leadership role. Biblical writers tell us he was formed by his experiences and they start David's story when he worked as a shepherd for his father Jesse. Shepherding was considered one of the lowliest forms of employment in ancient times. Prior to becoming king, David spent time as a musician working for Israel's first king, Saul. David was a known giant-slayer and had a stint as an outlaw working with Israel's enemies after Saul became jealous of David's leadership skills. Saul attempted to have David killed several times. All these experiences happened before David became king.

Once King David was granted kingship over both the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel, he made the decision to relocate the ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem. By bringing the ark to his location of power, David also sought to use Israel's religious traditions to unify the people by demonstrating that he as king supported their shared religion. The ark was the most important symbol because it contained the stone tables inscribed with the Ten Commandments and signified the throne of God. King David hoped by bringing the ark to his new capital others would recognize his choice of action as a powerful symbol of bringing the kingdom of Israel together.

Could you imagine gathering for praise and worship with 30,000 others as stated in 2 Samuel 6:1. Perhaps some of you have experienced an even bigger crowd assembled if you have ever attended a sold-out Packers game at Lambeau

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Field which seats over 80,000. It appears that the writer, or writers, of 2 Samuel wanted to explore how King David worshipped God with others. And on this occasion the celebration included an extensive processional movement from one location to another but not everyone was a fan of the manner in which King David celebrated and this is made clear in verse 16 where it states that Michal, one of David's numerous wives, despised him in her heart after watching the celebration.

I feel reading this passage of scripture helped me to remember that no matter how I choose to worship, others may not feel comfortable worshipping in the same way. They might be afraid if the ways of celebrating are new to them. Others might feel disgusted or disappointed for reasons I am not aware because we have lived different lives and our understandings are unlike. Along with the music, dancing, burnt offerings and sacrifices King David used during this celebration, he chose to include poetry of praise as part of his adoration of God.

Maybe you are aware that David is the renowned psalmist and is said to have written Psalm 24 which was also read earlier in the service. The words of this psalm were the praises David shared when he gathered those 30,000 people together to dance and sing while worshipping God. In verse 8 David writes, "Who is this glorious king? The Lord-strong and powerful! The Lord-powerful in battle!" Hearing these sentiments makes me uncomfortable. As a person striving to become the peacemaker, I believe Divine God wants me to be, I can't help but wonder why would a God of calm presence exhibit and condone violence? Jesus Christ modeled peace and love by healing Malchus who had his right ear cut off by Peter while Jesus was being arrested in the garden of Gethsemane and John Wesley taught do no harm, do good, and love God.

Divine God exhibiting calm presence is my perception and experience of how God cares for and connects with me. I could see how King David would pray

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for God's favor and project his desires onto Divine God. If leadership has only been modeled after one's understanding of what it means to be a powerful king, then I can see how a person living in that context would see God as the most powerful king. Psalm 24 depicts God as a battle hero using the military language of ancient Israel. I however do not experience Divine God as using power over. In my experience Divine God has been the power with me. I believe that "power with" is much stronger than "power over" because together more can be accomplished cooperatively and collaboratively like the saying, "many hands make light work" articulates.

In my reading and reflecting, I can see how nations under the rule of kings were problematic because kings make choices that are not in the interest of Divine God and God's beloved children. Instead, kings make choices to satisfy their personal wants and whims. I guess maybe I feel a bit like Michal and am displeased with the choices King David makes while worshipping God with his friends and followers as they get swept up in their celebrating and seem to forget about caring for others. The psalmist writes that God is the King of glory and repeats this several times throughout Psalm 24. In doing this the writer views "king" as a most important role and that is not a role, I find comforting when thinking about Divine God.

What if Divine God was instead lifted up as comforter or compassionate healer and not as a powerful king entering into battle? How might this change a person's understanding of Divine God? I am curious what role you find most beneficial as Divine God provides for you in your life. Our understanding of Divine God comes from our lived experiences so it makes sense that David would want an example of how to be a powerful, war winning king. Personally, that is not the example of God I find I need in my daily life. My needs are best met by the companion who travels with me everywhere I go. The Great Pastoral Presence who

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cries with me in my anguish and suffering. A person's actions may prevent them from connecting and nurturing healthy relationship but this is because each of us is in charge of our choices. We control our thoughts, behaviors, and emotions.

Perhaps I understand my relationship with Divine God to be more compassionate and caring because of my lived experiences and the fact I view our relationship through the lens of pastoral counselor and not king. I find this observation an important lesson remembering that everyone's relationship with Divine God is unique. While God is, was, and will be always and evermore I personally do not need to be the source of harm to myself or others. I prefer to find ways to stay connected to Divine God honoring love and life using the fruits of the spirit as my guide. The fruits of the spirit are listed in Galatians 5:22 as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

I am excited to learn from each of you the visions and steps you are taking to bring people together. Excited to learn what worship celebrations New London United Methodist Church has participated in and those that will continue as we partner together in ministry. Maybe we will decide to participate in creating a celebration parading our symbols of Divine God and love like King David. May whatever we choose to do demonstrate and profess to our neighbors what it is like to be in healthy relationships with Divine God and others. My hope is that our actions lead with compassion and kindness. May our gathering for worship utilize our best roles and include an intentional partnership with Divine God where we strive to create the spaces of healing and growth necessary to live into a vision of building connections, partnerships, and spiritual growth.