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Covenant Presbyterian Church
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Sounding Forth

(Stewardship Season)

Prayer of Illumination

Present God,
Settle our hearts.
Still our minds.
And stir our imaginations,
That we might hear your Word for us this day. Amen.

Exodus 33:12-23

Moses said to the LORD, “See, you have said to me, 'Bring up this people'; but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, 'I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.'

“Now if I have found favor in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people."

The LORD said, "My presence will go, and I will give you rest."

And Moses said to the LORD, "If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth."

The LORD said to Moses, "I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name."

Moses said, "Show me your glory, I pray."

And the LORD said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, 'The LORD'; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But," the LORD said, "you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live." And the LORD continued, "See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen."

1 Thessalonians 1:1-8

From Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy.

To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

Grace to you and peace.

We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that God has chosen you, because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of persons we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord,

for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy from the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia (uh-KAY-uh). For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia (uh-KAY-uh) but in every place your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it.

The Word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

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Sounding Forth

Have you ever been with a kid when they tried to create an echo? Both of my kids went through phases when they couldn't enter a parking garage without shouting something into the open space, hoping to hear it come back, and then trying again. And again. I'm still not clear on why it works in some parking garages and not others, which was unfortunate because it meant I never had a good reason to dissuade them from trying. And unlike any chore they've ever been given, they were tireless in their efforts.

For two summers after I graduated from college, I worked at The Ghost Ranch in the mountains of northern New Mexico. A stunning part of the country with its red sandstone mesas and vast landscapes, it is not far from a place called Echo Amphitheater—a canyon of sorts where the sandstone rock forms a natural curve that allows sounds to echo and reverberate long after they are first made. My first summer taking campers there, I learned that not all noises deserve to reverberate and some sounds don't improve with repetition. But children aren't the only ones who delight in Echo Amphitheater. Adults and groups come not only to shout random words, but to pray, chant, and sing because the sounds linger and overlap; the ends of words fall away until the sound that comes back is more than what went out.

Moses, you may remember, was not having an easy time of it. When we left Moses and the Israelites last week, God had freed them from slavery, traveled with them in the desert, and provided for them with miracles. But as soon as Moses took too long on the mountain, the Israelites melted down their jewelry and fashioned themselves a golden calf to worship.

Unsurprisingly, God has had enough. Between last week's story and this week's, God tells Moses to take the people and go. God is no longer going with them. But Moses, equally annoyed with the Israelites, is not having it. "These aren't my people," he says to God. "These are your people. You called them. You called me. You told me to lead them. I'm not going if you're not going." So God relents: "My presence will go with you." But Moses is not satisfied. "Show me your glory," he prays.

Moses has seen God do some remarkable things. But he's still standing in the wilderness with a group of cantankerous Israelites and no clear sense of what lies ahead. God's promise to go with them is reassuring, but Moses wants something more. He wants to see God—to know, with undeniable certainty, that God really is there, that God will be with them, that this journey is going somewhere.

But God doesn't give Moses what he asks for. God doesn't show him what lies ahead or tell him how it all turns out. Instead, God tucks Moses into a cleft in the rock and covers him with a hand. Then all of God's goodness passes by, and God proclaims God's name. Only after God has passed, God's name still reverberating off the rock, does God take God's hand away. "You may see my back," God says, "but my face shall not be seen." Moses wants to know where God is going. God lets him see where God has been, and that God has gone ahead.

Centuries later, Paul writes a letter to a small community in northern Greece facing adversity of its own. "We give thanks for you," Paul writes, "for your work of faith, your labor of love, your steadfastness of hope. … The word of the Lord has sounded forth from you." Exēcheō (ex-ayKHEH-o) is the Greek word Paul chooses—it means to echo or resound. Paul wants the Thessalonians to know—to know that the life they're living, the faith they're living, is reverberating beyond what they can see, traveling places they'll likely never visit, impacting people they'll likely never meet. But I suspect even Paul would have been surprised to learn that two thousand years later, people in Wisconsin would still be hearing echoes of the Thessalonians' faith in his words. And yet … here we are.

In the 1960s, a Baptist preacher in Georgia named Clarence Jordan translated Paul's letters into the language of the rural South. He called it the Cotton Patch Version. In Jordan's translation, Paul's letter to the Thessalonians isn't written to those first Christians but to the Christians of Selma, Alabama. "From you," his translation reads, "the word of the Lord has echoed not only in Mississippi and Alabama but all over the country." It was a message Jordan himself needed to hear.

Twenty-some years earlier, Clarence and his wife Florence and another couple had bought a farm outside Americus, Georgia. They called it Koinonia, a Greek word for sharing a common life. Their vision was a place where black and white families would live together, work the land together, eat at the same table, share what they had. Jordan called it "a demonstration plot for the kingdom of God."

But South Georgia did not care for the demonstration. Neighbors boycotted them, and stores refused to sell to them. Their roadside market was bombed. People drove past at night and fired into their houses. Jordan's translation says the Christians in Selma "paid a terrific price." He knew what that meant.

By the early 1960s, Koinonia was struggling to survive. Then, in 1965, Millard and Linda Fuller pulled in for a visit. Millard was a lawyer who had made a fortune and nearly lost his marriage doing it. He and Linda decided they were going to give their money away and start again—they were looking for what would come next. They planned to stay two hours, Millard later said. They stayed a month, returning a few years later to live at Koinonia full-time. Together, the Jordans and the Fullers began imagining new possibilities for the community. Among them was something they called partnership housing.

The idea was that people who needed a decent home would build it alongside volunteers. The homes would be sold without profit or interest, and the payments would go into a fund that would help build the next house. The first house was completed in 1969, the same year Clarence Jordan died of a heart attack at the age of fifty-seven. Seven years later, Habitat for Humanity was officially founded. And Koinonia remains. More than eighty years after its founding, people are still living and working together, sharing meals, welcoming strangers, and trying to demonstrate what the kingdom of God could look like.

Every stewardship season, we count. We count the number of pledging units. We count how many Brown Bag Breakfasts we've made, how many pounds of food we've composted. Each week we count how many people are in worship, how many kids are in Sunday School. We pay attention to how many people attend Bible Study or youth group or an intergenerational program.

Underneath those counts is the ever-present question: are we being good stewards of the gifts we have been given? Is this a good use of time? Should we be offering something else? Should it be on a different day? They're important questions. But counting can only account for so much. Because how do you count the choice a child might make or the conversation they might have twenty years from now because of something they heard in Sunday School? Or the impact of a word of encouragement offered to someone during the passing of the peace?

Occasionally we get to hear those stories—someone will tell us about something we said or did years ago, something we might barely remember, and how much it meant to them. But there are surely far more that we never hear.

Moses couldn't see where the journey would lead. But he heard God's name resounding and glimpsed that God had gone ahead. The Thessalonians couldn't have imagined that their faith would still be sounding forth two thousand years later. And Clarence Jordan never lived to see what would grow out of that little community in Georgia.

Which means there's no way to know what will sound forth from the life we share in this place. And that, I am here to tell you, is not at all helpful when you're trying to put together next year's budget.

I don’t know what of the life we share together will reverberate into the future. I suspect it isn’t what we’d guess. Maybe it’ll be a casserole or a Brown Bag Breakfast, a Sunday School lesson half-remembered twenty years from now, or the way someone was welcomed on a morning when they weren’t sure they would be. Most of it we will never know. Maybe someone will tell us. Maybe no one will, and it will echo anyway.

For the past few weeks, we’ve been making paper chains. Each link is something we’ve received, or something we can give. None of us knows how all those links will eventually fit together, or how far God's good news might sound forth, but we know that God has gone ahead. And so we add what is ours to the life we share.

Amen.