

**KOGARAH UNITING CHURCH  
JANUARY 29, 2023  
EPIPHANY 4  
BEAUTIFUL VISION**

The Gathering of the People of God

**WELCOME & GREETING**

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY**

We acknowledge the elders past present and future of the Biddegal and Gweagal people of the Eora Nation who have cared for this land from time immemorial, recognising that this land on which we live and move was and always will be, Aboriginal Land.

**CALL TO WORSHIP**

Friends, come!

Gather around deep insight.

Feed on words of unusual wisdom, seeing before us an unfolding vision of a renewed and just world as close and real as our breathing.

Come!

Jesus, our teacher, healer, leader, and friend, invites our good and attentive company.

Our time together will be blessed.

**LIGHTING THE CHRIST CANDLE**

God is here!

**God is always here!**

God is with us!

**God is always with us!**

**OPENING PRAYER:**

Open to your Spirit  
and alive to the Christ,  
who was, who is, and who comes,  
we gather in thanksgiving, O God.  
We offer you our adoration,  
our acclaim, and our very lives as we sing.

**SING:** For everyone born / A place at the table SEASONS 4-14

For everyone born, a place at the table,  
for everyone born, clean water and bread,

a shelter, a space, a safe place for growing,  
for everyone born, a star overhead,  
and God will delight when we are creators  
of justice and joy, compassion and peace:  
yes, God will delight when we are creators  
of justice, justice and joy!

For woman and man, a place at the table,  
revising the roles, deciding the share,  
with wisdom and grace, dividing the power,  
for woman and man, a system that's fair,  
and God will delight when we are creators  
of justice and joy, compassion and peace:  
yes, God will delight when we are creators  
of justice, justice and joy!

For young and for old, a place at the table,  
a voice to be heard, a part in the song,  
the hands of a child in hands that are wrinkled,  
for young and for old, the right to belong,  
and God will delight when we are creators  
of justice and joy, compassion and peace:  
yes, God will delight when we are creators  
of justice, justice and joy!

For just and unjust, a place at the table,  
abuser, abused, with need to forgive,  
in anger, in hurt, a mindset of mercy,  
for just and unjust, a new way to live,  
and God will delight when we are creators  
of justice and joy, compassion and peace:  
yes, God will delight when we are creators  
of justice, justice and joy!

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## **PRAYER OF CONFESSION & DECLARATION OF FORGIVENESS**

**We have heard it said:**

It's just common sense.

Self-protection at all costs.

Conquer or be conquered.

Charity always begins at home;

**and we often believe without thinking**

*(observe silence followed by bell).*

**We have heard it said:**

Of course, our culture is superior.  
Warheads make for peace and security.  
Wealth will buy happiness.  
Celebrities are role models;  
**and we often believe without thinking**  
*(observe silence followed by bell).*

**We have heard it said:**

Nothing can be done to change that.  
The poor will always be with us.  
I am not my brother or sister's keeper.  
Tears are for women and children;  
**and we often believe without thinking**  
*(observe silence followed by bell).*

God of surprises and non-convention, grace us with a vulnerability and openness to hear the wise and lyrical voice of Jesus anew.  
May our way of seeing, thinking, acting, and responding be changed in light of Jesus' great love of you and the world of your making.  
**Amen.**

**PEACE**

The Peace of God be with you. **And also with you.**

**SING:** Be God's SEASONS 9-10

Where the world is merciless,  
be God's mercy.  
Where the world is hopeless,  
be God's hope.  
Where there is injustice, be God's justice.  
Where there is sadness, be God's joy.

Where the world is doubting,  
be God's faith.  
Where there is ingratitude,  
be God's grace.  
Where there is confusion, be God's truth.  
Where there is weakness,  
be God's strength.

Let your life change the world one person at a time.  
Let your life be the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ.  
As the bread becomes his body, we can be the living sign.  
With God's love, change the world with your life.

Where the world is wounded,  
be God's healing.  
Where the world is weeping,  
be God's song.  
Where there is despairing,  
be God's beauty.  
Where the world is crumbling,  
be God's rock.

Where there is no tenderness,  
be God's child.  
Where there is loneliness, be God's smile.  
Where the world is dying, be God's life.  
Where there is darkness, be God's light.

Let your life change the world one person at a time.  
Let your life be the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ.  
As the bread becomes his body, we can be the living sign.  
With God's love, change the world with your life.

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## The Service of the Word

### **BIBLE READING: Micah 6:1-8**

Hear what the LORD says: Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice. Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the LORD, and you enduring foundations of the earth; for the LORD has a controversy with his people, and he will contend with Israel. "O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me! For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of slavery; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. O my people, remember now what King Balak of Moab devised, what Balaam son of Beor answered him, and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the saving acts of the LORD." "With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

## **INTERACTIVE TIME – Richard**

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

The prophet Micah, who uttered these words, was a man of simple means and humble stock. Living in a largely rural area of the country, Micah had a strong concern for the lowly and less fortunate of society--the lame, the outcasts, and the afflicted (Micah 4:6).

I now have extra interest in the Book of Micah since my first Grandchild was named after him. I would like to know that I could explain to him in the future who he is named after and who he was.

Because of this concern, Micah addressed the evil of his time through his prophecy. He publicly opposed the powerful leaders of Samaria and Jerusalem, the capital cities of Israel and Judah. (1:1)

The injustice of his time was that strict religious laws made the rich richer and the poor poorer. In Israel. Keep in mind that Israel's government was a theocracy at that time, much like the state of Iran today. Religious leaders also held great political power and they were not elected officials. More often than not the kings and political leaders of Micah's time were serving their own interests at the expense of the already impoverished middle classes.

The Ostentatious temple operation required the middle and lower classes to pay heavy taxation. The farming community Micah was a part of, were required to send much of their livestock and harvest to keep the sacrificial atonement system going. This was the exact same problem Jesus faced. Nothing had changed in 700 years.

There is certainly a connection between Jesus' ministry and Micah's. Some scholars even suggest that Jesus stood in the prophetic line of Micah. Jesus declared that he had come to bring good news to the poor, the captives, the oppressed. Jesus also opposed the religious and socio-economic oppression that came from the leadership in Jerusalem.

Interestingly, Micah is the prophet who announced the birth of the messiah in Bethlehem: 'But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.' Micah 5:2

Micah, like Jesus had such compassion for the oppressed that they challenged and opposed the corrupt leadership of their time even though they knew it would have grave consequences. But they both continued to proclaim the truth about the oppression and exploitation of the people making an appeal to God's love and compassion.

Micah was saying to the leaders in Jerusalem and Samaria: Do you think God is pleased with your temple sacrifice and a religion that takes advantage of people? No, but this is what God requires instead: 'to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God'

Of course, Jesus too proclaimed these very same principles and values as guidelines for society as well as our personal lives. As did Micah before him, Jesus did not just criticize the corruption, oppression, and discrimination in his time, but he also proposed an alternative to the existing religious system of the priests and lawyers whose guiding principle was the strict enforcement of the purity law. Jesus' idea of God's kingdom was quite different; he promoted compassion, the rule of mercy as a guiding principle toward a just and prosperous society.

Both Micah and Jesus paid a high price for their bold and courageous stance for justice and reform. We know what happened to Jesus, what happened to Micah is not known to us. He simply disappeared, or more likely, he was disappeared by the powers that be.

The prophet Micah certainly inspired Jesus, but he also inspires us today to take a hard stand for peace and justice. He brings clarity to God's intent for how we should live: to act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God. Honestly, if we all lived our lives by these words this world would be in pretty good shape, don't you think?

And so, we are called to raise our voices against the corruption, against the racism, sexism, xenophobia and homophobia of our time. Micah inspires us to proclaim God's love, compassion and mercy especially for those who are mistreated and taken advantage of. He reminds us that we have a moral and spiritual obligation to keep speaking up against the wrongs in our society, even if we're risking our standing, our careers, and our livelihood.

I want to close with a quote from Dr. Martin Luther King (whose holiday we just celebrated last week). These are words that move us to show solidarity with those who are profiled, excluded and discriminated against. They are

words that inspire us to keep speaking truth to power: 'In the end we will not remember the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends.'

(Thanks to Rev. Frank Schaefer)

**BIBLE READING: Psalm 15– Richard.**

**O LORD, who may abide in your tent? Who may dwell on your holy hill? Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right, and speak the truth from their heart; who do not slander with their tongue, and do no evil to their friends, nor take up a reproach against their neighbours; in whose eyes the wicked are despised, but who honour those who fear the LORD; who stand by their oath even to their hurt; who do not lend money at interest, and do not take a bribe against the innocent. Those who do these things shall never be moved.**

**BIBLE READING: Matthew 5:1-12**

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

**BIBLE READING: 1 Corinthians 1:18-31**

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.” Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength. Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world,

things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

## REFLECTION – Richard

Blessing. I have watched the TV show based on the book “The Handmaid’s Tale” by Canadian author Margaret Atwood. A common form of greeting is “Blessed Day”. I often cringe when I hear that coming from such a dictatorial oppressive and totalitarian regime.

What is blessing? Have you ever wondered about that? It’s one of those words that we have so thoroughly taken into our religious vocabulary that I think it’s quite easy to take for granted. But if one of the members of our congregation — or, better yet, a friend of yours that *doesn’t* go to church — were to ask you what in the world a blessing is, or what it means to be blessed, how would you answer?

I thought of this question while reading the Beatitudes and being struck once again by how notoriously slippery *makarios* — the word translated here as “blessing” — can be. In addition to “blessed,” it can mean “happy,” “fortunate,” “well off,” and more. Hence Robert Schuller’s famous — or was it infamous — “commentary” on these verses called “The Be-Happy Attitudes.”

But suppose, for a moment, that we stick with the traditional “blessed.” I still am having a hard time figuring out precisely what that means. This word, too, has several meanings. It can indicate special favour, unique standing, permission, empowerment, endowment, and more. So maybe the question isn’t what it *means*, but rather what it *feels like*. What does it feel like when you’re blessed?

Blessing is something that can’t be pursued, but can only be received as a gift.

And by asking the question this way, I begin to get a sense of Jesus’ promise. To be blessed feels like you have someone’s unconditional regard. It feels like you are not and will not be alone, like you will be accompanied wherever you go. Being blessed feels like you have the capacity to rise above present circumstances, like you are more than the sum of your parts or past experiences. Being blessed feels like you have worth — not because of something you did or might do, but simply because of who you are, simply because you deserve it.

When this passage came up a few years ago, I [suggested](#) closing the sermon or service with blessing, whether entering into a corporate renewal of baptism and blessing or having individual blessing. The outcome — in terms



of comments, emails, and conversation — was staggering. What, I wondered, is so powerful about blessing? One thing that occurred to me is how *rare* it was then and still is today. Jesus lived in a culture of honour and shame and he defied both cultural norms by offering blessing. We live, I'd suggest, in a culture of affirmation and blame, and need also to defy both by offering blessing.

Affirmation. Have you noticed how often our children receive medals, ribbons, and trophies merely for "Participation" — that is, for just showing up. One day a few years ago my kids returned home from an outing, each with a medal for participation in their hands. I couldn't resist: "Do you know what you had to do to earn one of those when I was a kid?" I asked. "You had to WIN!" I answered, laughing so they would know that I meant no harm. But I needn't have worried, for they laughed right along, as they had already come to learn that such awards mean next to nothing. Affirmation is nice, but often is empty.

And then there's blame. This has become all but a national pastime — it's the politicians fault (or, if you are a politician, it's the other party's fault); it's the official's fault; it's my teacher's fault; it's my parents'/children's fault; and on and on and on. Blame is a way of discharging pain and disappointment without taking any responsibility.

Sometimes I think we've been taught to pursue happiness, settle for affirmation, and — when neither of those work out — relapse into blame. So in place of empty affirmation and corrosive blame, let's substitute blessing: God's unconditional regard for us, assurance to accompany us, power to help us persevere and flourish, and promise that we deserve love, honour, and respect. Blessing is something that can't be pursued — sorry, President Jefferson! — but can only be received as a gift.

Second question: Why these people? I mean, think about it, the people Jesus names as blessed most certainly are *not* the people society considers blessed, which is partly why I think Jesus chooses them. Because in this sermon he is not — contrary to all of the pseudo-Christian, pseudo-therapeutic preaching of these verses over the years — offering a recipe for success or the keys to happiness or a roadmap to having your best life now. Rather, he is demonstrating once again that God regularly and relentlessly shows up just where we least expect God to be in order to give to us freely what we can neither earn nor achieve: blessedness.

But that's just part of it. Frankly, I also think that Jesus chooses these states or conditions to lift up because it's precisely in our moments of disappointment or despair that we are likely finally to abandon cultural stereotypes about blessing (understood as happiness, wealth, fame, or power) and be open to the presence of God that gives without asking in return and blesses that we might be a blessing. Andy Root makes a persuasive case in his book [\*The Relational Pastor\*](#) that to be human is to be broken. And when we

meet ourselves in brokenness (poverty of spirit or mourning) and vulnerability (eschewing the way of violence for peace), we experience the power and presence of God mediated through the Christian community.

Maybe that's what true blessing is: drawing together as the family of God, seeing each other as God's beloved children, meeting each other at the points of our brokenness, and conveying to each other our and God's promises of regard, presence, accompaniment and, above all, worth. We are worthy of blessing, for God Almighty has created us and called us so.

(David Lose Working Preacher)

**SING:** What Does the Lord Require Strathdee Music - video

### **OFFERING**

The poor struggle to put food on the table, the meek are bullied in the schoolyards, the mourners find no comfort in hollow words, and peacemakers are publicly ridiculed by those who should be emulating them. So, as we offer our gifts to you, Gracious God, we pray you would use them to bring blessings to all in this world. Amen.

### **ANNOUNCEMENTS**

#### **PRAYERS FOR OTHERS & THE LORD'S PRAYER**

God of all goodness, by glimpsing something of your vision of a just and merciful world, we become acutely aware of how much inhumanity and suffering still exists in the world.

It would overwhelm us if it were not for the tender beauty and hope that arises each new morning and shimmers from the heavens at night.

And so from graced places of gratitude and wonder we pray:

For Earth staggering under the weight  
of global warming and deforestation,  
**together, may we see and find another way.**

For people staggering under the weight  
of poverty, violence, and loss,  
**together, may we see and find another way.**

For nations staggering under the weight  
of pride and a need to impose their will,  
**together, may we see and find another way.**

And for the Christian Church staggering under the weight

of seeming irrelevance within secular cultures,  
**together, may we see and find another way.**

God of all, honour the desires in our hearts  
and may they flourish within the people  
of grace and compassion we seek to be.

**Amen.**

The Sending Forth of the People of God
--

**SING:** Jesus, Face of God SEASONS 9-22

Jesus, face of God,

Holy mystery.

Truth beyond what we've conceived,

bold reality.

Jesus, word of God,

Heaven's poetry,

wisdom born beyond our minds,

divine humanity.

Jesus, heart of God,

pierced on Calvary.

Love beyond imagining,

Heaven's majesty.

Jesus, song of God,

Spirit's melody

sounding deep within our hearts

transforming harmony.

Holy mystery.

Words and music: James Maher MSC.

Arr: Tony Amidharmo.

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## **BLESSING**

Go now, beloved, to follow the love of God to be surprised by God's wonder to lift your voice for love and compassion.

Dare to believe that you are people on a mission of healing and grace.

Feel God's encouragement to be a blessing as you offer blessings with your heart and hands and know that you never, ever go alone.

Amen.

**SENDING SONG:** Come All You People ATW 419

Come all you people, come and praise your Maker,  
come all you people, come and praise your Maker,  
come all you people, come and praise your Maker,  
go now and worship the Lord.

Come all you people, come and praise your Maker,  
come all you people, come and praise your Maker,  
come all you people, come and praise your Maker,  
go now and worship the Lord.

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