Pretty heavy texts for a day of such celebration.

And that's the emotional stew that is part and parcel of being a conscientious follower of Jesus. Colleen is always good about reminding me/us of the way that the First Nations Version of the New Testament applies the names of the "kingdom of God" and "eternal life" to language that's a bit easier to chew on. Instead of following Jesus toward the kin-dom of God that leads to eternal life, the indigenous Christians who compiled the First Nations Bible say we are apprentices of Creator Sets Free (JESUS) who calls us onto the good road which leads to the life of the world to come that never fades away, full of beauty and harmony.

> That sums up the aim and joy of seeking to follow the Way of Jesus - to be able to claim a world, a life, that is full of beauty and harmony.

I think we can all agree that "beauty and harmony" do not describe the world most of us live in day-to-day. We all have burdens we bear, pains we carry. You know what they are, but just to get that mental list rolling, we deal with political and cultural disease and turmoil; enmity of and estrangement from our neighbor; we deal with illnesses of all sorts, from cancers to flu to COVID to various forms of dementia; the results of a planet we have blighted with our consumption; the scourge of gun-violence and war…. As I said, you know the list - those things that most keep you unbalanced and feeling discordant.

Sadly, it was no different in Jesus' time. Jesus was born into a marginalized community under the thumb of a bad-hearted king, Herod, who ruled on behalf of an occupying foreign power, those the First Nations Bible called the People of Iron (ROMANS). When Jesus tells the Pharisees who warned him about Herod's intention to assassinate Jesus to "Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow....'" we know that the world in which Jesus was operating was broken, and wounded, just like our own. And, of course, Jesus adds at the end of that statement, "and on the third day I finish my work." He is of course referring to the Resurrection. The Resurrection is the ultimate statement by God that none of the powers and principalities can prevent us from claiming a life of beauty and harmony, as is stated in the conclusion of Romans 8:

> 35 What will separate us from the love of Christ? Trouble? Calamity? Persecution? Hunger? Nakedness? Danger? Violence? ...
> 37 Yet in all this we are more than conquerors because of God who has loved us. 38 For I am certain that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, 39 neither heights nor depths - nor anything else in all creation - will be able to separate us from the love of God that comes to us in Christ Jesus, our Savior.

Ah, but thinking about the Resurrection we might be getting a few weeks ahead of ourselves!

However, it can be with a sense of joy that we hear Jesus invite any who wish to follow him on the good road which leads to the life of the world to come that never fades away, full of beauty and harmony. I don't think there's a one of us who prefers to live with stress in our shoulders, furrowed brows above our eyes,

tear-stains down our cheeks, and a shadow of darkness lurking around our hearts.

Please note, Jesus does not promise an easy life. Aside from what I mentioned above, in our opening story we hear of a couple of reasons for why life can be so difficult. Luke speaks of what seem like two current events that made the "news" of Jesus' time. One appears to be the slaughter of Galilleans while they were worshiping, and the other about victims of a tower that fell on them. Those questioning Jesus seem to think that these are indicators of less-faithful people. "Had they been proper followers of God, or Jewish Law," the thinking went, "they would not have been killed in this manner."
We are familiar with this line of thought. The personal or outward looking question, "What did I (or they) do to deserve this?"
Well, Jesus' "Nos" quickly thwart any kind of understanding that God's judgement is retributive, and that those who "sin worse" than others will suffer proportionately.

Instead, by using these current events, Jesus reminds us that evil is present in the world, and that tragedy occurs in the course of everyday life. And the last thing any faithful person needs to be doing is trying to figure out what "sinful thing" was deservedly done by a victim of destruction.

Aside from pointing out the presence of evil and tragedy in the world, Jesus is highly stressing that rather than judging others, folks are to be more concerned with letting the main thing be the main thing; that is, working on our own stuff

– clearing the interferences in one's own life that get in the way of walking God's good road.

We can recall the words we heard last week when Jesus met with the sisters Mary and Martha – Martha was so fixated on the fact that Mary wasn't helping her do the works of hospitality in the house to make Jesus' stay more welcoming, that Martha completely missed what Jesus called "the better part," which was stopping everything else to listen to and to pay attention to Jesus' teaching. This is what Jesus is IMPLORING his followers to do: turn your attention away from distractions (this is really what it means to "repent"), heed my words and actions, and do likewise in your own lives.

What are some of the texts relevant to these stories that help us take steps on the good road? Earlier in Luke's gospel – in Jesus' so-called "Sermon on the Plain" in chapter 6 – Jesus teaches,

> 36 "Be compassionate, as your loving God is compassionate. Don't judge, and you won't be judged. Don't condemn, and you won't be condemned. Pardon, and you'll be pardoned. …

And a bit later,

> 41 "How can you look at the splinter in another's eye, yet miss the plank in your own? 42 How can you say to another, 'Let me remove the splinter from your eye,' but fail to see the board lodged in your own? …(R)emove the board from your own eye first; then you'll see clearly enough to remove the splinter from the eye of another.

The gospels are filled with so many words of wisdom that help us turn from the ways we are lured to live, that it indeed takes a lifetime of apprenticeship for us

to learn how to walk the good road. But that is the promise of Jesus, to be ever-present with us while we absorb Christ's teaching, and engage in the practices that help us embody them more instinctively.

Through his baptism, Hunter is now officially engaged in this lifetime work of seeking to follow Jesus – should he choose to do so as he matures. A covenant has been formed by the community of faith to engage with him in his faith formation, and to help equip his family for embracing the teachings of Christ. On Friday, during morning prayer, the group was reflecting on the blessed gift of the church as a container for being able to hold vulnerable and brave conversations. After agreeing on some "Essentials for Sharing/Receiving," we were able to seamlessly move into deep discussion while absorbing the material from the book by Francis Weller on Sorrow and Grief. Weller invites us to open ourselves to the understanding that Grief and Sorrow have life skills to offer us. Weller quotes poet Oscar Wilde by saying, "Where there is sorrow, there is holy ground." Weller continues by writing that grief "shakes us and breaks us open to depths of soul we could not imagine. Grief offers a wild alchemy that transmutes suffering into fertile ground."(8)

During a writing practice, we discovered that offering our souls fertile ground encourages fresh life to grow and bloom, leading to an opportunity for an abundance we won't know until we are brave enough to explore our inner selves.

This is the blessed gift of what the church can be when we do the hard work together to strip away the interferences and let the main thing be the main thing.

I'm going to close with a bidding prayer that I discovered in preparation for Friday's Morning Prayer session. It is attributed to 20th Century theologian Nels Ferré.

> Come, O Holy Spirit.
> Come as Holy Fire and burn in us,
> come as Holy Wind and cleanse us within,
> come as Holy Light and lead us in the darkness,
> come as Holy Truth and dispel our ignorance,
> come as Holy Power and enable our weakness,
> come as Holy Life and dwell in us (as has been borne witness in Hunter's baptism).
> Convict us, convert us, consecrate us, **until we are set free from the service of ourselves, to be your servants to the world**. Amen.