

## **Sermon: A Change of Heart**

**Sunday 8 September 2024**

**Pentecost 16 | Creation 2**

### **Bible Readings:**

**Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23** (New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition)

**Mark 7:24-37** (New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition)

The rich and the poor have this in common:  
the Lord is the maker of them all.

Now the woman was a gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

Let's pray:

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts and minds be acceptable to you, O God, our strength and our liberator.

I have titled this sermon, **A Change of Heart, A Change of Heart.**

The second part of our reading from Mark describes a typical healing by Jesus.

A man has a speech impediment, linked to his hearing loss. We can imagine that this makes it hard for other people to understand what the man is saying, and hard for him to hear and understand them. Conversation is difficult for the man. He probably feels socially isolated.

But people who care about the man have heard that Jesus, the miracle healer, is in town and bring the man to Jesus. They are confident Jesus can heal him.

Just as a doctor would today, Jesus takes the man to a private place to perform his examination. Jesus is hands on. He touches the man's ear and spits in the man's mouth. Then Jesus says "Ephphatha," "Be opened," and the man can hear and speak clearly again.

That Jesus can heal the man is never in doubt. One message to take from this story could be that even if we have doubts about our faith, if we keep an open mind and are open to trying something different, then good things can happen for us.

The last part of the story is linked to a theme we find throughout Mark's gospel, called the "messianic secret." Jesus says many times to his disciples, don't tell other people that I am the messiah. The time is not yet right. Again, in this story, Jesus says to the man and those who brought him, don't tell anyone else about this healing. But the people are amazed and inspired by what Jesus has done and tell everyone the good news.

If we are amazed by Jesus we should share this Good News too!

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Jesus' encounter with the Syrophenician woman is anything but, "business as usual."

[Show slide of woman and Jesus]

I'm indebted to US Jewish academic Amy-Jill Levine for her insights about this story in her new book **Jesus for Everyone: Not Just Christians**.

Let's recap the story.

Jesus is taking refuge from the crowds in a house in Tyre. A Greek woman finds him and implores Jesus to perform an exorcism for her daughter. He refuses. Worse, he implies that she is a dog. (The Greek word in the original manuscript of Mark is "kynarion" which means little dog.) Rather than return the insult, she tells him that even dogs are entitled to food scraps. Because of her clever response Jesus performs the healing.

Let's dig a little deeper.

The story is not about Jesus transgressing social or religious boundaries by speaking with a woman or a Gentile. Jewish society did not ban either of these things.

Tyre is on the Mediterranean coast in Lebanon, north of Nazareth and the Sea of Galilee. Tyre had in the past been considered part of Galilee, but was now independent, so no longer a Jewish city. There were no restrictions on Jewish people visiting Gentile areas.

The Syrophoenician woman is from Tyre, so is an outsider from Jesus' point of view.

When we meet someone from "outside" who is "not us" what's our first reaction? Fear or curiosity? Hospitality or the desire to call 111?"

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To explain Jesus calling the woman a "little dog," some modern commentators say that it was common for Jewish people to call Gentiles "dogs" in Jesus' time. Amy-Jill says there is no evidence for this claim. Ironically, Christian writers, well after Jesus' time, called Jews "dogs". This went on into the middle ages. Remember that Jesus was a Jew.

The story indicates that Jesus' mission was in two stages, first to the Jews and then to the Gentiles. When Jesus says "Let the children be fed first," he means the Children of Israel, that is God's chosen people – those of the Jewish faith. It is not a reference to youngsters of primary school age.

Jesus' message was that people should prepare to become part of the Kingdom of God here on earth, as a grassroots alternative to accepting the status quo, of rule by a Jewish elite supported by the Romans. His movement was all about renewal within the Jewish religion and society. His ministry was mainly in the Jewish regions of Galilee and Judea. The missions of Paul and others to Gentile people and regions, came later, after Jesus' death and resurrection.

Jesus tells the woman, a Gentile, to wait her turn. She refuses and instead comes back to Jesus with a clever repost to his insult. She doesn't rise to the bait and trade insults with him.

Mark's story instructs the privileged to attend to outsiders as well as insiders; to show compassion not only to those who can reciprocate, but also to those who can't.

The woman is of some status herself. So the story is a reminder that illness and impairment can affect the wealthy as well as the poor.

The woman is seeking help from an outsider. She is tenacious in asking for what she needs. She absorbs Jesus insult, then keeps pressing her case.

Having received the help she asked for – the healing of her daughter – what now should be the woman's response? If we receive a blessing, how should we respond?

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Here are some of my thoughts about this story.

Jesus doesn't respond to the woman in a typical way. He could have healed the daughter immediately. He could have been polite, patient and compassionate – but he wasn't.

I think Jesus is showing us he is human, not perfect. He's tired. He's attempting to hide from the crowds, but the woman has found him. He's annoyed about this.

Eventually, the Christology built up around Jesus, that he was fully human **and** fully divine, all at the same time. Well, this is the fully human side of the equation. He's just like us and for me this makes him more believable. Push us too far, too hard, and for too long and we crack. Any social grace and good manners we have are discarded, and we say and do things we might regret later.

Earlier in the chapter he has been challenged by Scribes and Pharisees about rules for washing hands and eating food. Jesus is exhausted by their legalistic pettiness. Another reason for snapping at the woman.

As with the stories of the Centurion's servant and Jairus' daughter, the Syrophenician woman has no doubt that Jesus can heal her daughter. The gospel writer also takes this as a given. Note also that Jesus does not need to visit the daughter to heal her – she is simply healed from a distance.

What makes Jesus change his mind and heal the girl? The mother's persistence and clever answer. This got through to Jesus.

Note (despite the subheading in the NRSV Updated Edition) that it is not the woman's religious faith at play here. She was not a Jew or a follower of Jesus. But she knew of Jesus' reputation as a healer and was confident that he could heal her daughter.

What are the things about the life of this church that we can change from being uncertain about to being confident about. What new good things can happen if we change our mindset and persist?

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In the same way that people need healing from their physical and mental ailments, our Earth needs healing from the damage we are doing to it.

The two prayers we said earlier, and the closing blessing, are adapted from a resource for the Season of Creation prepared for the church by Christchurch Methodist minister Mark Gibson. They remind us that if the Earth is in trouble, humanity is in trouble. But if the Earth thrives, people do well.

The Earth tells us she is in trouble and begs us for help – not with words like the Syrophenician woman making her demand on Jesus – but in more violent winds, more floods, more droughts, more forest fires. And in more sea level rise, that has already doomed low-lying nations like Kiribati and Tuvalu, and is coming for the world's coastal towns and major cities later this century.

If Jesus can change his mind and heal the daughter of an annoying outsider, we too can soften our hearts and change the way we treat the earth, and take up our intended role as guardians of God's creation.

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Making a change of heart is not easy.

When I sent the original version of this order of service to the office, I included English translations of the waiata, and te reo Lord's Prayer and Grace. Nicola noticed this and offered her wisdom that the te reo text stands by itself. It is up to us to meet the challenge of getting more familiar te reo and taking it into our hearts. I realised I needed to put the theme of the service into action and have a change of heart myself, so I deleted the English translations.

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The book of Proverbs offers us ancient wisdom that can still guide us today.

The rich and the poor have this in common:  
the Lord is the maker of them all.

This is Humanity Sunday. God is the maker of the Earth and of us. We are all in this together. We broke it together and must fix it together.

I pray that, following Jesus example, with God's grace, and the through the energy of the Holy Spirit, we will have a change of heart.

Amen.

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## **Sermon: Making a Home for God**

**Sunday 21 July 2024**

**Pentecost 9**

### **Bible readings:**

**2 Samuel 7:1-14** (New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition)

**Ephesians 2:11-22** (The Message)

Now when the king was settled in his house and the Lord had given him rest from all his enemies around him, the king said to the prophet Nathan, “See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent.” Nathan said to the king, “Go, do all that you have in mind, for the Lord is with you.”

You belong here, with as much right to the name Christian as anyone. God is building a home. He’s using us all—irrespective of how we got here—in what he is building. He used the apostles and prophets for the foundation. Now he’s using you, fitting you in brick by brick, stone by stone, with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone that holds all the parts together.

Let’s pray

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts and minds, be acceptable to you O God, our rock and our redeemer.

I have titled this sermon **Making a Home for God, Making a Home for God.**

Our reading from 2 Samuel chapter 7 continues on from last week’s passage, where David brought the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem and danced for joy in the presence of God. What do we know about the Ark of the Covenant?

We need to go back to the story of the people of Israel on the 40 years’ Exodus out of Egypt through the desert, eventually arriving in Canaan – the Promised Land. At one point on the journey Moses climbed the mountain to talk with God and returned with two stone tablets on which were inscribed the Ten Commandments – broad rules from God about how to regard and worship God, and how to live well and peacefully as a community. The Ark was originally a stone box in which these tablets were stored.

(Recall that Moses was so disgusted and angered by what he found the people doing when he came back down the mountain, that he smashed the first pair of tablets, and had to go back up the mountain to get a replacement set from God. So it is these replacement tablets that were kept in the Ark.)

The Ark was kept in the tabernacle – a large, ceremonial tent – which the Israelites carried with them on the journey and set up in each place they stopped and made camp.

Later, the Ark came to be seen as a symbol of God’s presence. God could be worshipped wherever the Ark of the Covenant was located.

God was found in one place, but that place was mobile.

In Exodus, God is also present as the pillar of cloud going before or after the Israelites, during their 40 year journey in the desert.

In the reading from 2 Samuel, David has the Ark brought to Jerusalem where he is making his home. The Ark is still in a tent. David wants to build God (as symbolised by the Ark) a better home, like his own solid and impressive wooden one.

We now come to the crux of the reading. Nathan is a prophet in David's court. The role of a prophet in the Hebrew Scriptures is **not** to predict the future – generations in advance – **but** to help the king and his people, to understand God's will for their particular time and situation. Often the prophets need to speak truth to power, to bravely tell their king, that what he is doing is not right. The prophets, like Nathan, have a kind of hot line to God. They can discern God's message. They are trusted advisors to their kings.

David tells Nathan that he is worried about the symbol of God's presence, the Ark, living in a humble tent. We can guess that David feels uncomfortable about this situation, that he thinks the placement of the Ark is disrespectful. Surely, the Ark should be better housed. Surely, we should build a temple befitting God. And at first it appears that Nathan goes along with this idea.

But that night God has a surprising message for Nathan. Chill, the tent is fine for now. Tell David that **I'll** actually build a home for **him**, and that in due course, I will have **his son** build me a permanent temple. We know that after David's time, Solomon did build the first temple in Jerusalem. And the Ark was placed in the Holy of Holies, in the core of the Temple.

The question is why didn't God want David to build a temple? **HarperCollins Bible Dictionary** suggests that, as David had only recently defeated his enemies and set up his administration and rule over Israel, the proper time to build a temple would be when the proof of the permanence of this new regime and order was established – that is, when David successfully passed on his rule to the next generation. God is saying, wait, let's see what happens.

Another commentator suggested that David would be too proud of building a temple, and that God felt David needed to just humbly go about the business of learning to run his kingdom for a while.

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As we move on to our reading from Ephesians, Jesus, as another aspect of God, comes into the picture.

I have been re-reading Bart Ehrman's 2016 book ***Jesus Before The Gospels: How the Earliest Christians Remembered, Changed, and Invented Their Stories of the Savior***. In it he makes a fascinating observation about how the perception of Jesus changed, as the first century progressed, after Jesus' death in the year 30. The gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke written 40 to 60 years after Jesus, portray him as a human being, who is later exalted, as a potent symbol of God in action in the world. Jesus is resurrected and will return in their

lifetimes for, what John Dominic Crossan calls, “the great divine clean-up of the world,” to defeat the powers of evil and establish a just and fair permanent Kingdom of God, here on earth. The apostle Paul, writing his seven genuine letters in the late 40s to early 60s of the first century, also expected Jesus to return in his lifetime.

The problem is that Jesus **didn’t** return. By the time John’s gospel is being written in the mid-90s the theology and ideas about Jesus have evolved. Jesus is now identified as divine, as being almost the same as God. Jesus was with God from the beginning of time. The powerful

“I AM” statements are put on Jesus lips. The goal of faith shifts from a holy kingdom down here on earth, to eternal life with God in up in heaven, after we die.

The logical modern extension of this idea, is that faith is all about Jesus being our personal saviour, and that good works, following Jesus’ earthly example, are not important. John’s gospel also prompts us to consider whether we should worship Jesus or whether we should worship God. My approach is to **worship God** and **follow Jesus’** example.

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Most Bible scholars agree that the letter to the Ephesians was not written by Paul, but a generation or two after him, by a writer in a Christian community that followed his teachings. Marcus Borg, in his book ***Evolution of the Word: The New Testament in the Order the Books Were Written***, suggests that it was written around the year 90, at roughly the same time as Luke’s gospel.

The reasons for thinking that the letter is **later** than Paul are interesting. Paul’s genuine letters, such as Corinthians and Thessalonians, were specifically addressed to Christian communities that he had established, and they deal with specific named issues that have arisen in those communities. Ephesians contains more generic advice. It is full of references to the broader Church of many places – “the church universal.”

The second reason is highlighted by today’s reading. The text treats the controversy, about the status of Gentile Christians, as being in the past, settled, and resolved. It does not **argue** for unity, but **celebrates** a unity **already** achieved – that is, the unity of Jews who were Christian and Gentile Christians.

Back in Paul’s time, there was still tension between Peter and James and the rest of the Jewish Christian community in Jerusalem, and Paul, about whether to be Christian you had to also follow Jewish laws, for example, circumcision for males and eating only kosher, clean food. That has now all been settled.

And we note that Ephesians also refers to “the apostles” [Peter and the rest of the 12 disciples] as if they were figures of the past.

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What messages does the reading from Ephesians have for us today?

Even though we are different people, from different cultures, being a community of faith, a congregation, unites us and binds us together. God, through Jesus, tore down the barriers between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians **then**, and can dissolve any barriers that divide us **today**.

The old rules (the complex interpretations of the Ten Commandments) were no longer helpful, so they have been discarded. Jesus has simplified them: Love God, love your neighbour and love yourself.

Instead of continuing with two groups of people, separated by centuries of animosity and suspicion, God created a new kind of human being, and gave everyone a fresh start. For me, this is in an important part of celebrating Matariki. We are forgiven and freed to make a fresh start for the coming year.

The image of Jesus being the cornerstone of our lives, and of the church, is still vivid and powerful today.

God is making a new home, using us, fitting us in brick-by-brick, stone-by-stone, with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone, that holds all the parts together.

[Show image on slide]



I created the image that appears on the front cover of your Order of Service using Microsoft's online Artificial Intelligence Copilot designer software. You enter some keywords, ask for a photorealistic image, and it generates four images at a time, for you to choose from. It's quite magical.

What I like about **this** image is that it shows people working and worshipping together, with lots of tools and building materials, with Jesus in the centre. I wonder what they are constructing. I wonder what marvellous things we can make with Jesus as our central guide.

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In King David's time, God dwelt in one place – wherever the Ark of Covenant rested.

This God was static, passive almost.

Later in Mark's gospel – the curtain across the holy of holies in the temple is torn in two, when Jesus dies on the cross. God is set free. All people can see and interact with God, not just one priest, selected by random ballot, on only one day each year.

What if we come to see that God is active in the world – through us.

What if we see that, like the internet, God is in many places. The love of God is like a distributed network. If one part fails, the rest keeps operating and the message still gets through.

But perhaps, if we think of God as being **everywhere**, there is a risk that, for us, God is effectively **nowhere**.

In the hymn we are going to sing next, I affirm that God is here in this country, Aotearoa.

And God is here in this church this morning.

In the last service I took in April we discussed the text from John about Jesus being the true vine and his invitation to "abide in me."

Let's turn this around, and invite God to abide **in us**.

Let's invite God to make a home in **our hearts**.

Let's offer God a home within us to enjoy and play and work in.

Let's be confident of the power of God's love within us.

Let's "Be not afraid" of anything the world challenges us with.

Let's live God's love, act for the common good and go out to serve the people in our community, in Jesus' name.

Amen.

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## **Sermon: Abide with me**

**Sunday 28 April 2024**

**Easter 5**

### **Bible Readings:**

**Acts 8:26-40** (New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition)

**John 15:1-8** (New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition)

“Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?” He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him.

Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.

Let's pray:

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts and minds, be acceptable to you, O God, our strength and our liberator.

I have titled this sermon: Abide with me, Abide with me.

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For me, one of the appealing things about our reading from The Acts of the Apostles is that we can imagine it happening. It is not a cleverly crafted parable designed to provoke a response from the listeners that they didn't expect. It's not a miracle story, which we can only believe is history if we suspend our knowledge of modern physics and medicine.

A seeker after God's good news meets one of Jesus' original 12 apostles and is baptized by him. The story takes place sometime Jesus has died, perhaps in the 40s to 50s of the first century.

The details of the story are interesting. What do we notice?

**An** angel of the Lord instructs Philip. The phrase “An angel” tells us that God has many angels. A little later we read “Then the Spirit said to Philip” and further on we have “the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away.” The angel and the Spirit are talking directly to Philip, as clearly as you can hear me talking to you now. God uses different messengers for different times and places. Who, for us, are God's messengers today?

Philip acts on the angel's instruction and walks from Jerusalem towards Gaza, a distance of about 100 kilometres. The same Jerusalem that is the seat of the government of Israel today, and the same Gaza that is being destroyed by violence today. Real, not mythical places.

Along the way Philip meets an unnamed Ethiopian eunuch – let's call him Ethan. In biblical times eunuchs were generally castrated men, who could safely be put in charge of a king's harem. In other places, the Bible alludes to eunuchs as men who chose to lead a celibate life, so that they could better worship God – more like a monk or Catholic priest today. We are told that Ethan was in charge of the entire treasury of Candace, a queen of the Ethiopians, so he may have been in this latter category.

The Ethiopia in this story was also known as Nubia, and was inland and south of Egypt down the Nile river.

Chariots were drawn by horses and could have 2, 4 or even 6 wheels. Ethan, seated in his chariot, is able to read scripture aloud, so the chariot must have given him a fairly smooth ride, with not too much jostling. Not a war chariot.

Ethan, from a land south of Egypt, is returning home after worshipping in Jerusalem, the location of the Temple, the central place of worship for members of the Jewish faith. Ethan is reading from Isaiah. Most people at that time could not read, so Ethan is a well-educated member of the Jewish faith.

When the book of Isaiah was first written down, 500 or 600 years before Jesus, it was written on a long roll of parchment made from papyrus. This was rolled into a scroll attached to wooden poles at both ends. To read the text, you opened up a section of the scroll about 2 feet wide. [Indicate with hands]

The written Hebrew used in these scrolls, consists only of tightly spaced consonants, with no vowels. To read the text you need to decide where words begin and end, and which vowels to insert and where. I have seen scrolls like this in the Temple Sinai synagogue at the top of Ghuznee Street. It would impossible to read from such a scroll while riding in a chariot.

So Ethan is likely to be reading from a handwritten codex, which is formed by folding a sheet of papyrus into 4 or 8 pages, into sections which can be sewn together, more like a book today.

By the middle of the first century Ethan would also be reading a Greek translation of the original Hebrew text. And, while Jesus would have spoken Aramaic, the books of the Christian scriptures, the New Testament, were also first written down in Greek – an interesting symmetry.

Ethan is not only reading from Isaiah, but is reading it aloud, to the chariot driver, his other servants travelling with him, and anyone else close enough to hear. I find this an endearing image.

Ethan wants to understand the meaning of the scripture, but it eludes him. Enter Philip, who asks, "Do you understand what you are reading?" Ethan replies, "How can I, unless someone guides me?"

Do you ever feel that you can't quite grasp the meaning of a passage of scripture, that you kind of get part of it, but the rest is out of your reach? I certainly do. Or, have you ever found that a reading you couldn't understand last time you heard it in church, 3 or 6 or 9 years ago, now makes sense? How can this be?

The scripture hasn't changed, but we have. We have more life experience and can see new meaning and new wisdom in the scripture because of this.

My father has a favourite saying that comes from eastern wisdom traditions: "When the pupil is ready, the teacher will appear." "When the pupil is ready, the teacher will appear."

Ethan is the student. The apostle appears and Ethan invites him in.

The writer of Acts, the same person who wrote Luke's gospel, uses an Old Testament prophecy to help explain Jesus' death, and the good news that Jesus' resurrection represents.

Ethan gets it! He wants to be baptised straightaway in a stream next to the road.

After being baptised, Ethan continues on his way - rejoicing!

Let's be like Ethan.

[It's interesting how the Isaiah text "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer," is the source of our modern phrase "Like a lamb to the slaughter," referring to an innocent person, thrust unwillingly into a situation beyond their control.]

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The writer of John's gospel tells the story of Jesus, and what it means to be a Christian, in a different way to the writers of Mark, Matthew and Luke.

He puts onto Jesus' lips new words, expressing a new theology.

Jesus' "I am" statements in John are a deliberate reference back to the Hebrew scriptures, where God tells Moses, speaking out of the burning bush, "I am, who I am." "I am" serves as another name for God.

Here again we have a New Testament writer, drawing on Old testament scripture to reinforce his message.

At a time when followers of Jesus were under pressure to remain loyal to the Jewish faith and local synagogue, or adopt Roman gods and the public worship of them, John is elevating Jesus' status up to the same level as God, and staking a claim for believing in and following him – as the better way.

Today's reading about Jesus as the True Vine resonates with us, because 2,000 years later, grapes are still grown on vines and they still need to be pruned each year, to get the best harvest.

This reading offers us both warnings and encouragement for our faith journeys.

With our permission, God removes every branch in us that bears no fruit. We are challenged to recognise in ourselves actions, ideas, attitudes and emotions that serve no good purpose, that stop us being the best Christians we can be. This is challenging, ongoing, interior work.

The branches that **are** bearing fruit also get cut. This seems counter-intuitive. But if you have ever pruned a grapevine, a rose or hydrangea bush or a fruit tree in autumn, you know that it will spring back with healthy new growth when it gets warm again after winter. If we keep tending the vine, the bush or the tree, it will keep giving us grapes, flowers or fruit for many years.

We need keep tending our faith, and this church – our faith community. If we continue to do so, year after year, we will be rewarded.

The reading assures us that we have already been cleansed by Jesus' words. This counters the old Jewish concepts of certain things being unclean, and the need for ritual purification and the offering of sacrifices, in order to be put right with God, and be allowed to worship. Jesus' message is that we are good enough, just as we are.

And now to that lovely, old-fashioned sounding word, "Abide."

"Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me."

Our call to be followers of the Way of Jesus, is to do this together in company with other believers. We can't follow this path by ourselves. It's too hard, we'll get off track, get lost. There is comfort and power in travelling together.

And we find a high idea of reciprocity here. We will abide in Jesus and Jesus / God, will abide in us. Not only are we part of God, but God is a part of us. What intimacy. Our God, through Jesus, wants a close, down here on earth, relationship with us.

And further, we read that if Jesus' good news abides in us, we can ask for whatever we wish and it will be done for us. What a risk God is taking? What if we wish for foolish things? I think the message is that God trusts us to make wise requests, to pray for good, worthwhile things, because we have taken the good news into our hearts. The good news abides within us.

And the passage goes one step further. God is glorified by us when we bear much fruit and tell the good news to other people. What we say and do affects how others in our communities view God, Christian faith and the church.

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Before I wrap up this sermon, I'd like us to listen to a recording of "If ye love me, keep my commandments." The words are in your order of service and are from John 14:15-17. The music is by Thomas Tallis, a court composer in Henry the 8<sup>th</sup>'s time 450 years ago.

The hymns we sing are homophonic. Each part, soprano, alto, tenor and bass, sings the same words at the same time. [Indicate with hand moving up and down in straight line]

The Tallis piece is polyphonic. The parts interweave, with discords and tensions that are then resolved. It's like God's Spirit weaving in and out, around and between us. [Indicate with hand weaving in and out] This music is a joy to sing. Let's listen.

If ye love me, keep my commandments.  
And I will pray the Father,  
and he shall give you another comforter,  
that he may 'bide with you forever;  
E'en the sp'rit of truth.

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Today we are encouraged to find joy in the good news of Jesus, as Ethan the Ethiopian did.

And we are given a choice to either abide in God, and invite God to abide in our hearts, or to turn away.

May we choose the path of wisdom that leads to abundant life.

Amen.

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## Sermon: Symbols of God in Action

Sunday 10 March 2024

Lent 4

### Bible Readings:

**Numbers 21:4-9** [Common English Bible]

**John 3:14-21** [New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition]

“So Moses prayed for the people. The Lord said to Moses, ‘Make a poisonous snake and place it on a pole. Whoever is bitten can look at it and live.’”

“And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”

Let’s pray:

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts and minds be acceptable to you, O God, our life spring and our redeemer.

I have titled this sermon: Symbols of God in Action, Symbols of God in Action.

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In the reading from chapter 21 of Numbers, the Israelites are on their 40 year Exodus journey from Egypt to the promised land of Canaan. Let’s look at the map to see the route Moses has led them. [show map slide]



The people started in Goshen in Egypt on the left. You can see it is located in the triangle shaped delta of the river Nile, and that the land there is green and fertile.

The people's destination is the land of Canaan, on the top right of the map. This is their promised land, a land that will flow with milk and honey. Canaan is also green, indicating that there is plenty of water to grow crops and sustain life.

The area on the coast of Canaan labelled *Philistines* is the location of the Gaza Strip today.

The rest of Egypt, the Sinai Peninsula, Arabia and the lands of Edom and Moab are dry and mountainous. The dominant colour is sandy brown. Life is much harder in these areas.

The red line that starts on the upper left in Goshen traces a possible route on which Moses led the Israelites during their 40 year Exodus – fleeing from slavery in Egypt.

The people travelled south down one side of the Sinai Peninsula. At the bottom of the peninsula is Mt Sinai, on which God gave Moses the stone tablets with the 10 Commandments engraved on them, that we heard about last week in the service that Tahi led.

They then crossed the narrow strait of the Red Sea into Midian. Then on past Mt Hor – marked with the blue triangle – and around in a loop of the land of Edom, which is where the events in today's Bible reading take place.

Eventually the Israelites travelled north to Jericho and from there over the River Jordan into Canaan. Moses dies and is buried within sight of the Promised Land, but doesn't reach it himself. Joshua leads the people across the river into their new land.

Do you notice anything strange about the route that Moses led the Israelites? It is as if Moses obtusely chose the longest and most difficult way to journey from Egypt to Canaan.

Why didn't he choose the direct route along the Mediterranean coast, shown by the green arrow? This is only around 200 miles or 320 kilometres and would have taken no more than a couple of months, even on foot – certainly not 40 years.

This is a clue that the Exodus is a symbolic story. It is one of the foundational stories that helped to shape the identity of the Jewish people. In Moses' time, 40 years would have been an average lifetime. It is about two generations, a fantastic duration for a journey.

The number 40 occurs elsewhere in scripture and is shorthand for "a long time." We think of the 40 days and nights that Noah and his family endured on the Ark before finding dry land. And also of the 40 days and nights that Jesus spent in the wilderness, being tempted by Satan, just before the start of his ministry in Galilee.

There is another reason that Moses may have led the Israelites on a journey that took so long. Perhaps he reasoned that for the sake of the future for his people, the older

generation of leaders, stuck in old ways of thinking, needed to have died and the younger generation, like Joshua, needed to step into leadership roles. Such transitions take time.

We don't know exactly how long the Exodus took, how many people – men, women and children – took part, nor the route that they took. The route in red on the map is just one possibility. One book I read suggested that there may have been a series of smaller exoduses from Egypt to Canaan, over a hundred years or so. These smaller journeys were remembered and eventually were combined into one magnificent story.

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What might be some fruitful ways we can interpret today's reading.

First, the Israelites went "all in," committing everything they owned and their very selves to follow Moses. This is like betting all your chips on one number coming up on the roulette wheel in a casino, or staking all your money on your hand in poker. They took a big risk. They got to the point where life in Egypt was so unbearable and the future there so dire, that leaving – with all its unknowns – was the better option.

I was born in New Zealand, as were my mother and father. But my grandparents and great grandparents choose to migrate to this country from England in the mid-1800s to early 1900s. They bravely opted for an unknown future on the opposite side of the world, rather than remain in Victorian and Edwardian England, with its class system, crowded housing, pollution and difficulty finding meaningful work.

Perhaps you, your parents or grandparents made the decision to move here, taking a risk like the Israelites.

Our faith also calls us to take risks, to try out new visions of what it means to be a follower of Jesus here today.

• • •

The reading tells us that the people became impatient on the road. They grizzled and complained. Can you imagine not just children in the backseat of a car chanting, "Are we there yet?" but a host of people asking this for years and years and years. Nonetheless, Moses endured and stayed true to the mission entrusted to him by God – to lead his people to a better place and future.

The Israelites could have stayed in Egypt. They had free will and made a choice. Their choice to leave with Moses had consequences and required a commitment to follow through to the end.

Our life choices also have consequences. Being a follower of Jesus has consequences.

The people go a step too far in their complaining – they speak not only against Moses, but also against God. The God who miraculously provides water from the rock to drink and manna to eat, all through their exodus.

God's response is to punish the people. Poisonous snakes appear and bite them and some people die.

The people then get the message. This long journey will not be easy, it is not comfortable, but they will be provided with food and water and enabled to reach the end, if they respect Moses and stay true to their God.

The people ask Moses to pray to God for them. The people need Moses to intercede with God on their behalf. They cannot access God directly themselves. Think about this for a moment...

Enabled by the Holy Spirit, **we can** access God through prayer and meditation, both as individuals in our daily lives and as we gather together each week for worship. May God be praised!

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After Moses intercedes for the people, God responds with a strange instruction. Make a model of a poisonous snake and place it on a pole. Moses makes this snake from bronze. (We are not told how it is possible to make such a large bronze object encamped in the middle of the wilderness. Another pointer to this being a symbolic story.)

Now when they are bitten by snakes, people can look at the bronze snake and they will live. Note that people will still get bitten and that some people died, so they are continually reminded to stay true to God and endure their journey.

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Our reading from John chapter 3, includes one of the best loved Bible verses.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

We will sing a lovely song by Jonathan Berkahn based on this verse and the following one, after this sermon.

In *The Crucifixion* oratorio by John Stainer there is another lovely setting of the words “God so loved the world.” I first sang the oratorio here with the Wesley Church choir, conducted by Malcolm Rickard, in the 1980s. When I heard that Festival Singers was going to perform the oratorio for Easter 2000, I decided to join them, just for the opportunity sing it again. Heather and I are still singing with Festival Singers, 24 years later. Decisions have consequences.

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There is a danger in focussing on a single verse. We might miss the fuller meaning we can glean when we read the verses that come before and after it, and the whole chapter in which the verse appears. It is also helpful to consider the nature of the whole book in which the verse occurs, and to bear in mind when the whole book was written and for what purpose.

John's gospel was written after Mark, Matthew and Luke, probably in the 90s of the first century – 60 to 70 years after Jesus. It is thought that the writer of this gospel was also the writer of Revelation, and that he lived as part of a small Christian community on the island of Patmos, off the Mediterranean coast of Turkey.

The theology – ideas about Jesus and God – in this gospel, are different to the earlier three gospels. For example, in Mark we find the messianic secret – where many times Jesus tells his disciples not to say he is the messiah, until the time is right. In John's gospel we have Jesus making bold "I am" statements: I am the bread of life • the light of the world • the good shepherd • the resurrection and the life • the way the truth and the life • the true vine.

Add in the Prologue, at the start of John's gospel, and we find Jesus being thought of as closer to God, and God, through Jesus, being closer to the world. This gospel is a step along the way to formulating the idea of the Trinity, of God being three-in-one, that would take the next 200 years to develop.

The first verse of our reading makes one of the most direct links between an Old Testament scripture and a New Testament scripture that I have seen in the lectionary series of readings we follow.

"And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness" takes us straight back to the complaining Israelites on the Exodus 1400 years before Jesus. It continues, "so must the Son of Man be lifted up..." The writer of John's Gospel wants us to think of the Son of Man as Jesus being crucified for us on the cross. Lifting up puts us in mind of Jesus being nailed to the cross and hoisted up on a pole to die, and the resurrection and Ascension where he is lifted up to heaven

The key ideas in this passage from John are that we can have eternal life with God and so, in some sense live forever. And that the world will be saved through belief in Jesus.

The idea that faithful people will have eternal life after we die, brings hope to people for whom this life is hard, and comfort to those who believe they will be re-united with faithful loved ones who have died.

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We should expand the idea of the world being saved through Jesus to more than just people. The whole of God's creation is under threat, due to our actions in the last few hundred years. The climate crisis is upon us, and will soon threaten humanity's survival.

Like the Israelites in the desert, if we can abandon our selfish, petty concerns, and work together towards solving the challenges the world faces, then there is hope for our children's and our grandchildren's futures. The alternative is unthinkable.

Faithful people, such as Reverend Syliva Prudie who spoke to us at a Café church last year, will lead the way. Check out the Eco Church NZ online resources and join in.

And also check out the new NZ Methodist resource- *Earth, Our Parish* booklet. Our church has started a decade of focused reflection and engagement with climate justice. I hope we hear much more about this initiative soon.

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Light and darkness are major themes throughout John's gospel.

Will we stay in the dark, ignore the mess the world is in, and keep our faith, and the Good News of God's love for us, hidden.

Or, will we do the hard and scary work of learning about the climate crisis and start responding to it, taking the first steps of what promises to be a long journey with an uncertain outcome?

And will we step into the light and share our faith, and the hope it brings, with those around us?

With God's help we will.

Amen.

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## **Sermon: Casting the net**

**Sunday 21 January 2024**

**Epiphany 3**

**Bible Reading:**

**Mark 1:14-20** (New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition)

“As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea, for they were fishers. And Jesus said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people.” And immediately they left their nets and followed him.”

Let's pray:

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts and minds be acceptable to you, O God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

I have titled this sermon: Casting the net, Casting the net.

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Mark's Gospel was the first of the four gospels that made it into the Bibles we read today. The writer of this gospel was the first to collect together and organise the stories about Jesus, that had been circulating by word of mouth, for the 40 years since Jesus' death. It was probably written in the early 70s of the first century, soon after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans, at the end of the 66-70 Jewish war.

Mark's gospel may have been written in Antioch in what is today part of Southern Turkey, or in Rome. The writers of Matthew's and Luke's gospels included much of the text of Mark in their gospels. They also by, and large, followed the structure of Mark's gospel. So Mark's gospel is an important starting place to learn about Jesus.

Note that there are no stories about Jesus birth or childhood in Mark. The narrative starts with the adult Jesus, aged in his mid-to-late 20s.

Mark's gospel gets off to a busy start. In the first 13 verses we have:

- A prophecy from Isaiah about a messenger preparing the way for the Messiah.
- John the Baptist (who is the prophesied messenger) baptises people in River Jordan in the wilderness out from Jerusalem in Judea.
- He then baptises Jesus' (who is the prophesied Lord or Messiah.) A voice from the heavens affirms this by saying, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”
- Jesus spends 40 days in the wilderness resisting the devil's temptations, and mentally and spiritually preparing himself to start his ministry.

The start of today's reading - verse 14 - tells us that John has been arrested and Jesus' has returned home to the Galilee region.

Now the drama continues.

Since returning to Galilee, Jesus has been making big claims to anyone who would listen, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

We aren’t told how this message has been received by the locals. Perhaps small groups of 3 or 4 or 6 people stopped to listen. Maybe some stopped and talked to him. We can guess that Jesus wasn’t yet gathering crowds of people, who walked with him from village to village. Maybe Jesus’ used this time to hone his message, to see what turns of phrase get the best response. He is learning the craft of being a travelling rabbi. I don’t think Jesus had his ministry all figured out from the beginning. He had to work on it.

Let’s imagine the scene. Jesus is on the shore of Lake Galilee, a big freshwater lake. He is clothed simply in a plain robe with a tunic underneath and leather sandals. He might have a small bag over his shoulder, but nothing more.

It’s mid-morning on another fine, clear, hot day. There are a dozen fishing boats visible on the lake. Each boat has a sail, oars and a crew of 2, 3 or 4 men. They started fishing before dawn. Some fishermen who haven’t caught as many fish as they hoped, are casting their nets again. Other boats are returning to the shore to unload their catch. Women on shore will help the men prepare the fish for sale, by scaling, gutting and cleaning them.

The boats are owned by family groups. Fathers and sons, brothers, uncles. Some of the crew are hired men.

Herod Antipas, the local ruler of the area, imposed taxes on the fish caught. Wealthy land owners around the lake often held the rights to fish in their local area, and would lease these rights to the family fishing concerns. Herod’s taxes and rental for leases took more than half of the value of the fish caught. Fishing was becoming commercialised. It was becoming harder to make a living from fishing.

20 metres from the lake shore, brothers Simon and Andrew are casting their net again. They haven’t caught enough fish yet.

Jesus observes them for a few minutes. Something about them catches his eye. Jesus has a feeling that these men can help him with the ministry he is starting. He has a vision that Simon and Andrew can be much more than just fishers. What is it that Jesus sees in them?

Jesus waves his arm. He gestures for them to come closer so he can speak to them. Simon and Andrew row their boat into shore, up onto the sandy beach.

Jesus says, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people.”

What would have happened if Simon and Andrew refused Jesus’ offer? That would have been the logical response. Fishing wasn’t an easy way to make a living, but it was what they had grown up doing and they were getting by. Simon was married, and his mother-in-law lived with them. He had people who depended on him.

But maybe they were sick of fishing and the thought of spending the rest of their working lives doing it was depressing.

Mark tells us, “immediately they left their nets and followed him.” Picture the scene. Simon and Andrew walk away from their boat and the nets, that are the tools they use to make a living. They walk away from the fish that they caught that morning, that weren’t as many as they hoped for that day, but would generate some cash for them and their family when it was prepared for sale and sold.

We aren't told why. We aren't told what they saw in Jesus, that made him special.

Jesus keeps walking, now with Simon and Andrew beside him. Further along the beach Jesus calls James and his brother John. The same thing happens. James and John also accept Jesus offer.

Their father Zebedee is astonished, then angry. He waves his arms in the air and shouts, "What are you doing, where are you going? This is our family business, how are we going to survive without you?"

The two sets of brothers leave the scene with Jesus, and walk with him to the next village. Simon, Andrew, James and John have left home. The next part of their adult lives is beginning. It's a venture into the unknown and it is exciting.

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I was pleasantly surprised when I re-read the modern translation of Jesus' words, "...I will make you **fishers of people**." My memory was of the earlier King James Version text, "Come ye after me, and I will make you to become fishers of men." "People" is an inclusive word. It includes women and men and children.

I have just read a book titled *Women Remembered: Jesus' Female Disciples* by Joan Taylor and Helen Bond.

It's a fascinating and revealing exploration of the stories of women disciples of Jesus, hidden just below the surface in the text of the New Testament. The book is changing my ideas about the importance of women leaders in the Christian church's first century.

Take Joanna who is mentioned in Luke's gospel. She was the wife of the steward in Herod Antipas' court. As such, we can imagine that she had disposable income and the leisure time, to help financially support the other disciples travelling with Jesus, and to join them as they walked from village to village in Galilee.

In the 50s of the first century when Paul was founding churches around the eastern Mediterranean, and then writing letters to encourage their work, women had equal roles as leaders alongside men.

An example is Prisca, the wife of Aquila. Prisca and Aquila worked with Paul as apostles in his mission. In parts of Acts, Romans and 1 Corinthians Aquila is mentioned first followed by Prisca. But in other parts of Acts, Romans and 2 Timothy, Prisca is mentioned first, that is "Prisca and Aquila." This was unusual in a society where men as leaders was the norm.

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Today's reading from 1 Corinthians sounds strange to our ears. Here it is again:

I mean, brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short; from now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no possessions, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away.

If you are married, act as if you aren't. If you are grieving, act as if you are happy. If you are rejoicing, act as if this is an ordinary routine day. If you love buying stuff, act as if you have no stuff. If are successful in business or involved in local politics, act as if you are just an ordinary worker or citizen.

Why should you do and be these things? Because when Jesus returns, the world you know will be turned upside down, and the things that gave you security, and your sense of self and identity, will be upended too.

Paul believed and taught that Jesus' was going to re-appear and set the world to rights in Paul's lifetime. But Jesus didn't return by the time Paul died in Rome in the mid-60s of the first century, and still hasn't returned 2,000 years later.

I think that today we are entitled to challenge Paul's teaching. Being married is good. Healthy grieving will take the time and the shape it needs to. If you have joy in your heart, you should express and share it. Within reason, buying and acquiring stuff is OK. Our community needs successful and responsible business people, and people of wisdom and good heart as our political leaders and decision makers.

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Paul's letter carries the urgent message, "the present form of this world is passing away."

Marks Gospel, written 20 years later, is full of hurry. The word "immediately" appears often in this gospel. But this gospel finishes abruptly after the empty tomb of Jesus' is found.

There are no promises that Jesus' will return soon to put the world to rights.

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How can we bring today's New Testament readings together?

If we choose to follow Jesus, our lives will change. We can't follow Jesus and continue our old way of living.

We can retain our family loyalties, but need to expand our whanau to include our "church family."

The things that underpin our sense identity, need to expand.

Simon Peter might have said, "I used to identify as a fisherman. Now I also identify as a follower of the Way of Jesus."

Our faith and the things we do together, to further God's Kingdom as a congregation and in our daily lives, are added into us. We become bigger people. More adult, wiser and more effective.

As we transform ourselves we might feel off balance.

But God is our foundation and Jesus' is our redeemer.

We will not fall and fail.

So we sing praise to God. We sang a lively setting of **Hail to the Lord's Anointed**.

In a moment we will sing **E te Atua**, about God's closeness to us.

I don't think Jesus had his ministry all figured out from the beginning. He had to work on it,  
**and so do we.**

We ask ourselves the same question, that Simon and Andrew, and James and John must  
have asked themselves,

"What is it that Jesus sees in us?"                      Amen.

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## **Sermon: Who speaks for God today?**

**Sunday 12 November 2023**

**Pentecost 23**

### **Bible Readings:**

**Joshua 24:1-3.** (New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition)

**1 Thessalonians 4:13-18** (New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition)

Then Joshua said to the people, “You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the LORD, to serve him.” And they said, “We are witnesses.” He said, “Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your hearts to the LORD, the God of Israel.”

For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call and with the sound of God’s trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first.

Let’s pray:

May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts and minds be acceptable to you, O God, our font of wisdom and our truth-teller. Amen.

I have titled this sermon: Who speaks for God today?, Who speaks for God today?

When I looked up the lectionary readings for today, I noticed that Joshua is not just speaking for himself but is the mouthpiece of God. God is speaking to the Israelites through Joshua. Joshua’s voice is God’s voice.

Let’s recap the Moses / Exodus and the Joshua / Promised Land stories.

The Israelite people were slaves in Egypt, making mud bricks and doing other exhausting construction work. God identifies and calls on Moses to lead God’s people, the Israelites, out of Egypt to a promised land, a paradise where milk and honey are abundant.

The Egyptian Pharaoh won’t agree to let the Israelites leave. God causes many plagues to befall Egypt, but still Pharaoh won’t agree to let the Israelites leave. So God tells Moses that he will bring one last plague on Egypt. An angel of death will kill all the first born boy children in Egypt. But God will spare – pass over – the Israelites, if they kill a lamb or kid and smear its blood on their doorframes.

Pharaoh lets the Israelites go, but then has his soldiers chase them in chariots to the Red Sea, which miraculously parts to let the Israelites pass, but then closes and drowns the Egyptians.

Moses leads the Israelites for 40 years through the desert. Along the way, God gives Moses a set of 10 Commandments, and then has Moses carve a second set, after Moses broke the first in his frustration at his people worshipping the golden calf.

At the end of the 40 years, Moses dies within sight of the promised land, but never enters it.

Joshua then becomes the leader. The Israelites cross the River Jordan – another miraculous parting of water that lets them cross safely into the promised land. Over many years the Israelites conquer the various kingdoms and take over the whole territory of modern Palestine and Israel. The land is divided between the 12 tribes of Israel.

The Exodus story and the colonising of the promised land are foundational myths of the Jewish people, that become part of their shared identity. They explain away the forced colonisation of the land and the killing of many of the people living there. In essence the justification for the Israelites occupying the promised land was that God said it was OK. We might ask at what point does individual moral responsibility come into play?

One book I have read suggests that the Exodus probably didn't happen in exactly the way it is described in the Bible. It is more likely that small groups of Israelites migrated from Egypt to Palestine over several decades. They could fairly easily wade through the swampy land around the Suez Canal, and certainly wouldn't take 40 years to make the journey. A few weeks is more likely. And some Israelite people may have just been resident in Caanan already.

In any case, the distressing violence that is happening in Israel / Palestine today has a very long history. Both sides can point back to events in the last 3,000 years to justify their claims to the land. And both sides pray to the same God.

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Let's turn to our reading from Joshua chapter 24. The key question being addressed is which God will Joshua's people serve? Will they worship and serve the local Amorite gods, or will they serve the God who helped Moses lead them out of Egypt. It was common for people living in an area to have many local gods. God's of wind, rain and storms. Fertility gods. God's who could ensure a good harvest or good catch of fish. There are many gods in Māori mythology that we are familiar with. The Jewish insistence that there is only one almighty God, an idea that Christians also have today, was unusual.

Joshua's people do promise to only serve and worship one God, and Joshua documents the covenant.

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What does it mean to serve God today? Serving God might be quiet, behind the scenes, enabling, supporting work. There is also a place for overt public action and advocacy.

What does serving god look like? What, if anything, will people observing us, see from the outside, that makes us different from other people? A song lyric says hopefully, “And they’ll know we are Christians by our love.”

The song *Love Grow Within Us* that we sang earlier has a similar sentiment.

Serving God is a choice. Bob Dylan’s song *Gotta Serve Somebody*, captures this. “Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord, But you’re gonna have to serve somebody.” We perhaps would not choose the devil, but what other God’s do we serve today? What other things do we give energy, time and loyalty too, that would be better directed to serving others on behalf of God?

I’ve posed a lot of questions today. I invite you to help us find some answers. Would you please move closer to other people in your pews, and take a few minutes to discuss these two questions – to which there are no right or wrong answers:

1. **Who for you, has the mana, the authority, to speak for God today?**
2. **How does their message encourage you on your faith journey or inspire you to serve God?**

[Move down aisle with mic. Ask for sharing. Thank them.]

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Let’s look briefly at the reading from Paul’s first letter to the church he established at Thessaloniki in Greece. It is thought that this is the earliest of his letters that appear in the New Testament, and that it was written somewhere between the years 48 and 52, about 20 years after Jesus died.

The followers of Jesus in Thessaloniki are concerned about a practical faith issue. In the middle of the first century, Paul and his followers believed that Jesus’ second coming would happen in their lifetimes. But, what will happen to baptised believers who have already died when Jesus returns? Paul reassures them that those **“in Christ”** who have already died will be raised to heaven first, that is before people who are still living at the time.

The phrase **“in Christ”** stands out for me. Paul used it frequently. For him it had the extended meaning of “in Christ, and him crucified.” It was his shorthand for the communities of believers being united in Christ’s name and saved through Jesus’ resurrection.

There is a short chorus in Handel’s *Messiah* that expresses this well. We will listen to it in a moment. *Messiah* is a baroque oratorio written in 1742, 300 years ago. In this style of music phrases are often repeated with different musical settings. I have sung this chorus with Festival Singers and it is exhilarating. Here are the words.

[Speak them]

Since by man came death  
By man came also the resurrection of the dead

For as in Adam all die,  
Even so in Christ shall all be made alive.

[Now change to next slide where audio will play automatically]

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So, who speaks for God today?

Do **we** dare to do so?

[Pause]

Amen.

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## Sermon: The Fruits of Compassion

Sunday 17 September 2023

Pentecost 16

Bible Readings:

Romans 14:1-12. (The Message Bible)

**Matthew 18:21-35.** (New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition)

“Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’”

“O let us see another day!  
Bless us all this night, I pray,  
And to the sun we all will bow  
And say, goodbye – but just for now!”

Let’s pray:

May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts and minds be acceptable to you O God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

I have called this sermon The Fruits of Compassion, The Fruits of Compassion.

Eugene Peterson in his *The Message Bible* paraphrase of Romans 14 offers us clear and engaging prose. The next time someone at your table is reluctant to eat their greens, you can tell them they should, “eat vegetables to the glory of God and thank God for broccoli. It’s in the Bible!”

The apostle Paul, the writer of this letter to the followers of Jesus in Rome in the early 60s of the first century, is making a more important point. We should be tolerant about those who have different views to us. We shouldn’t assume that we know all there is to know on a topic and that our views are the correct ones.

Here is some of Paul’s wisdom.

“Welcome with open arms fellow believers who don’t see things the way you do.” I find this hard. I think of myself as a Progressive Christian and I don’t take all the stories in the Bible literally. I’ve read a lot of books, listened to a lot of podcasts and watched a lot of videos to reach this point on my faith and theological journey. A part of me thinks, why don’t others think the way I do, isn’t it obvious...?

Some Christians in my extended family have a different theology, which is just as important to them as mine is to me. Are they going to change their views – no! Am I going to change mine – no! So, what then?

Look for the things that we have in common and focus on them. On one notable Sunday recently, my brother-in-law Kevin was leading the service at his church in Christchurch, my brother-in-law Glen was leading the service at the church which he and Leila are establishing from scratch in Oxford, and I was leading worship here at Wesley. We have in common a faith in God and a desire to share the message of the Good News of the Way of Jesus with others.

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Paul goes on to say, “Remember, they have their own history to deal with. Treat them gently.” The word “remember” is key here. We are starting to open up what it means to be compassionate. We have to imagine ourselves in the shoes of the other person. We don’t know what hardships they have endured. Over time, if we make the time to listen, another person might share with us some of their life story and faith journey.

Were you surprised when you heard Paul say in the reading that it is OK for one person to set aside a day as holy – like our sabbath day, Sunday – but for another person to treat all days as the same and not observe any holy day. Paul says we are all free to follow the convictions of our conscience on this matter.

Several pacifist members of this church in the middle of the last century, were conscientious objectors who refused to take part in war, because of their faith and were jailed because of this. They followed the convictions of their conscience. I wonder how each of us would respond today if our country was at war, and the government called on us to join in the fighting.

The second half of the reading from Romans 14, tells us that we are answerable to God, not to each other. And that we will all end up, side by side, kneeling before God in the place of judgement.

I think we are entitled to challenge that theology. Is it healthy to assume that God is in control of our lives, and that the purpose of our lives is to get a favourable judgement from God when we die, so that we can enter heaven?

Nonetheless, there is some good advice here. We should stop petty squabbles. We should stop criticising our brother or being condescending to our sister. Stop all that nonsense. Free yourself from it. Focus on what really matters. Listen to, support and encourage other people, mentor them, be concerned for their welfare. Show them the compassion we would like them to show us.

We also need to show compassion to the earth. The big picture is that we are failing in our duty to be guardians of God’s creation. Our weather will get more extreme. In this country we have seen in the last year lots of flooding caused by high rainfall, in a short time, where we don’t want it. Farmers in dry parts of the country are already worried about drought this summer and whether they will have enough grazing to feed their livestock.

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Let’s turn now to our reading from Matthew’s Gospel about forgiveness.

First some comments. The ten thousand talents that the king lent to his slave is a vast sum – millions of dollars. A hundred denarii is much less, say \$100. And Jesus says we must forgive one another “Not seven times, but, seventy-seven times.” Master storyteller Jesus is using exaggeration for affect.

Notice also that Jesus does not criticise the system of slavery, as we would today. Masters having slaves was a vital part of the Roman economy during Jesus’ time. It is the accepted background against which this story is told. Paul is often criticized for the same thing in his letters. Apart from Paul’s short letter to Philemon, challenging him to treat as an equal in Christ, his slave Onesimus, who has also now become a Christian, Paul doesn’t have much to say about slavery.

It is interesting that the slaves in Jesus’ story have some personal agency. They can borrow money from their master or king and spend the money on whatever they wish to – just so long as they can pay the loan back when they are called on to do so.

Also, the writer of Matthew’s gospel was a Jew writing for a Jewish audience, trying to convince them to start following the Way of Jesus. Jewish people do not name God directly as we do. So Matthew uses the phrase “kingdom of heaven”, not “kingdom of God” as you will find in the other gospels.

• • •

What response did Jesus want his audience to have to his telling of this parable. I think he wanted them to say – “that’s not fair.” I softened the harsher parts of the parable for the drama we acted out during Storytime. But I hope the message was still clear – “that’s not fair.”

The parable follows the expected story line. King lends money to slave. Slave can’t pay it back when the king asks him to. The king is going to sell the slave, his wife and children and all his possessions to recoup the debt. The king is perfectly entitled to do this. Slave begs for more time to repay the money.

Now the story takes an unexpected turn. “And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt.” Instead of just giving the slave more time, the king forgives the whole debt. The slave walks out of the palace, still a slave, but freed of the debt that was weighing him down.

Why did the king do this? The king put himself in the shoes of the slave. He imagined what the slave’s life was like, and this brought a change of heart and a compassionate response.

The story moves on. The slave who has just had his massive debt cancelled, demands with menaces and violence that the slave to whom he had lent 100 denarii, immediately pay it back – or else. The second slave asks for more time. The first slave throws the other into prison, to be locked up until he can repay the debt. I do wonder how, stopping the man from working, by putting him in jail, is going to help get the debt repaid?

Now comes the climax of the story. Other slaves report to the king what has happened. The king calls the first slave back before him and castigates him. I showed

you compassion, why didn't you follow my example and show compassion to the one who owed you a small sum? Exit first slave to be tortured, with the debt reinstated.

• • •

How does this story challenge us today? What should we do? We should show compassion to other people and forgive them when we think they have wronged us.

But where does compassion come from, how do we become compassionate.

I'm convinced that being able to imagine yourself in some else's shoes is the key. And one way to learn this skill is to read books. (Yes, I'm a publisher and bookseller, so of course I would say that!)

But seriously, when a child has a picture book read to them, or when we as adults read novels, we will be attracted to and identify with one character, either the heroine or the villain. While we read the story we start to think like that character, we take their side as the narrative develops.

I have a lot of books by Agatha Christie. The eccentric detective Hercule Poirot is the hero in many stories, and sharp, hyper-observant, spinster Miss Jane Marple is the heroine in others. Poirot solves murder cases by using method and logic. Miss Marple solves her cases by remembering archetypes of people in her past who are like the suspect today. These books are all rather delicious and engaging, because I identify with the characters. Remember though, that in real life people don't fit into neat boxes with tidy solutions to their problems.

I'd like to tell you a little about the remarkable life story of Barbara Walker, whose book *Purple Hands* I published in 2020. Barbara has a strong Christian faith. She demonstrated practical compassion towards others, by serving in many countries with international aid agencies over a 20 year period up the mid-1990s.

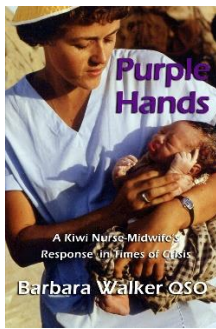
[slide - Barbara the midwife. St. Helen's, Auckland – 1974.]



Barbara decided in her teens that she wanted to be a nurse and felt a call to serve others. She has dyslexia and found study hard, but became a nurse, midwife, Anglican chaplain and priest and gained a Masters' degree based on research she did in Africa. Barbara learned how to perform trachoma operations to restore sight to women in rural Kenya. Barbara has retired to Invercargill and is currently a rural chaplain in Southland.

Barbara's first posting was the Sakeo One Refugee Camp in Thailand, where she cared for those fleeing Pol Pot's regime in Cambodia in a make-shift bamboo-framed field hospital. Her last placement in Mozambique ended due to a death threat.

[Slide – book cover]



One of her toughest posts was to the Las Dhure Refugee Camp, in Somalia in 1980. On the book cover is a photo of Barbara holding the first baby she delivered in the camp. The story behind the title of the book is that before delivering a baby one night there was no water available to wash her hands. So in her medical kit, she found a bottle of gentian violet, a bright purple antiseptic dye, and washed her arms and hands with that.

[Slide - Las Dhure Camp, Somalia – 1980, after being there a number of months. It was tough.]



The next photo shows Barbara after several months at the camp. You can see how she is being worn down by the work and the desperate plight of the children there.

[Slide – Barbara, hospital chaplain at Hawkes Bay Fallen Soldiers' Memorial Hospital, Hastings – 2019]



Here's a 2019 photo of Barbara in her role as a chaplain at Hastings Hospital.

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I'd like to close by listening to a choral setting of the *Sunset Poem* from Welsh poet, Dylan Thomas's radio play *Under Milk Wood*. It is also known as "Eli's Prayer." Welsh male voice choirs sing it at funerals when a choir member dies.

The recording is from Festival Singers concert in St Mary of the Angels church in August. I had covid and was disappointed not to sing this prayer.

I have in mind an image of a old priest standing at his front door looking down over his town and asking a blessing from God to keep the people safe until morning.

[Play recording via Powerpoint – slides for each verse]

A song to listen to: Sung by Festival Singers:

*Sunset Poem*, (Eli's Prayer) from Dylan Thomas' radio play *Under Milk Wood*

Every morning when I wake,  
Dear Lord, a little prayer I make,  
O please do keep Thy lovely eye  
On all poor creatures born to die.

And every evening at sundown  
I ask a blessing on the town,  
For whether we last the night or no  
I'm sure is always touch-and-go.

We are not wholly bad or good  
Who live our lives under Milk Wood,  
And Thou, I know, wilt be the first  
To see our best side, not our worst.

O let us see another day!  
Bless us all this night, I pray,  
And to the sun we all will bow  
And say, goodbye – but just for now!

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Sometimes compassion just looks like praying for another person or situation.

We can all do that.

Amen.

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## **Sermon: Learning the Unforced Rhythms of Grace**

**Sunday 9 July 2023**

**Pentecost 6**

**Bible Reading:**

**Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30** [The Message Bible]

“...I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.”

Let’s pray:

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts and minds be acceptable to you O God, our life-force and our burden carrier. Amen.

I have titled this sermon: Learning the unforced rhythms of grace, Learning the unforced rhythms of grace.

When I’m preparing to lead a service and preach, I go online to the Bible Gateway and copy and paste the text of the four or five lectionary Bible readings for the day into a Word document. I get the text in two translations, the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition – the latest version of the NRSV – and also The Message Bible by Eugene Peterson. I then read through all the readings in both translations and make notes about what comes to mind. Generally one or two of the readings in either the NRSV or The Message will grab my attention. I then stop and put the readings to one side.

Over the next day or two I let the readings rest in me, and let my subconscious mind process them.

I then sit down at the computer, choose the one or two readings I’m actually going to use, jot down some more notes and start writing my sermon.

For this Sunday I was going to use the NRSV translation of the reading from Matthew. It has the familiar phrase “my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” This is the text of one of the choruses in Handel’s *Messiah*, which I have sung with Festival Singers.

But then... I noticed this in Eugene Peterson’s text, “Learn the unforced rhythms of grace.” What a stunning, beautiful phrase! And what depths of meaning it contains. It’s our theme for today.

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There are a cluster of keywords I want to explore with you: Learn • Unforced • Rhythms • Grace. To which we add: Work • Rest • Sabbath.

### **Learn**

How do you learn? How do you acquire new skills?

I'm good at reading and following instructions. In the days when computer software came in a box with CD ROMs and an thick instruction manual, I was in my happy place, exploring the new things the software would let me do. Later, if I got stuck, I would go to the index or table of contents to find the section of the manual I needed to re-read.

These days I learn a lot by watching instruction videos online. It is many years since I sat in a classroom being taught by a teacher or expert at the front of the room.

Yet, this is how Jesus taught people. In the countryside or in a public space in town, Jesus would sit and talk to people who gathered round him. His over-arching idea was the establishment of the Kingdom of God or God's Realm here on earth. It is a big idea and can't be taught all at once.

Matthew's gospel is full of instances of Jesus teaching people who gather around him. He said different things to different groups of people as he travelled around. He tailored what he said to the audience in front of him. He was the master of telling parables to challenge people's attitudes. And there are short one-liner aphorisms, that were remembered after he journeyed on.

The reading from Matthew is a different sort of instruction. Jesus is sharing his best wisdom. He is holding nothing back. If you are exhausted by life, if your religious faith and church give you pain, then follow me and I will teach you a better way to live. This is an active sort of learning. Jesus invites the people (and this includes us today) to walk with, work with and watch him. To accompany him.

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## **Unforced**

You really can't change the way people think and act by forcing them to do something.

An example. When I was a part of the young adults group here in the early 1980s and our group led a service, we thought it would be a great idea if the congregation would sit closer to the front of the church. So we roped off a few rows of the back pews and encouraged people to come forward. Some people who usually sit at the back did come forward. But others ducked under the ropes and sat in their usual place. Next week when the minister led a normal service, people sat where they were most comfortable – just as we do today. The congregation didn't take up the new learning the young adult's group offered them.

Jesus invites us to follow his way. We are free to do so. And we are free not to do so.

The Roman Empire offered peace through victory, peace through violence, through force. Jesus strategy is to strive for a peaceful and just society through non-violent resistance.

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## **Rhythms**

One of the patterns in the gospel stories about Jesus is that he would engage with a group of people, healing and teaching them, then retreat to a quiet place to pray and rest, before continuing his ministry the next day. Act, pray and recharge, ready to act again.

In Matthew 11, Jesus is frustrated with the people who just don't get the message he is trying to share with them. So he turns to prayer – in public this time. He then comes back and teaches simply and with compassion, and probably more effectively. Note that prayer is the reset button, the circuit breaker.

Many people find the discipline of daily devotional reading - either first thing in the morning or in bed at night – is a helpful part of the pattern of their lives.

Words can have rhythms too.

I want to read you a poem I wrote in 2016. Writing it was an unusual experience. I picked up my pen and the words just flowed through me and onto the page. It's a work of the Spirit. There is a strong rhythm to the poem. Note in the second stanza a variation on the usual carrying the burden phrase: All people share it, lighten God's load. Here's the poem:

**Jesus is risen, the people rejoice**

Jesus is risen  
the people rejoice  
Clapping and singing  
jubilant noise

The cross is no burden  
one man to carry  
All people share it  
lighten God's load

Hold ideas closely  
process and ponder  
Head links to heart  
with glorious wonder

Death cannot stop  
passionate justice  
Vision and fury  
pulsating life

Here and now, catch it  
open-mouthed stare

Diminished, the devil  
slinks back to his lair

Death overcome  
by passionate heart  
Story still spinning  
we've just made a start

Tell out the wonder  
spell out the joy  
Craft image and music  
all talents employ

Invited to follow  
step firm on The Way  
Gentle the prodding  
to be still and pray

Open the big book  
what did they say?  
First babe, then adult  
faith boosted today

A clarion call  
can it be good news?  
Yes, say the people  
and stamp in the pews

Mystery, misery  
unbidden truth  
Open to all  
both refined and uncouth

The whole earth vibrates  
the bow string aquiver  
Myth mingles with fact  
God's love to deliver

Yes, Jesus is risen  
the people rejoice!

• • •

## Grace

An important Methodist idea is that salvation comes through God's grace. We have been saved; we are being saved, we will be saved – not because of our own merits or actions – but because God offers this to us.

At the end of our services, we say the grace together:

The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God,  
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all. Amen

When Nicola or Hugh lead services, we say the grace in Māori, which adds another layer of richness to our worship.

Here is a key to lightening our burden. We don't need to worry about being personally saved by Jesus, through our actions or meeting some artificial, impossible standard. God has taken care of this already. We are saved. It's a charism, a gift from a loving God. We are invited to turn around, face the light, and live the best lives we can. What a relief.

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Let's address the last three keywords together: Work, Rest and Sabbath.

Even when our daily paid or unpaid work is fulfilling and brings us joy, we get tired and need to stop for a rest.

The Jewish custom of taking a break from work one day a week, and keeping that day as a Sabbath, as holy, is a very good idea. Jewish people observe Sabbath every week beginning at sunset on Friday evening and ending after dark on Saturday evening.

I'm currently reading Diarmaid MacCulloch's book *A History of Christianity*. Heather and I have recently watched the six part BBC documentary series of the same name presented by him. The way that Christianity has spread throughout the world is remarkable. As is the great diversity of ways that Christian faith is expressed. It's a fascinating series.

Talking about Jesus' often cavalier attitude to obeying the finer details of Jewish laws, MacCulloch in his book notes:

"Maybe the answer is that Jesus did not care a great deal about being consistent on the issue, given his concentration on the imminent coming of the kingdom, in which all laws would be made anew. So he was not especially worried about special observance of the Jewish weekly holy day (the Sabbath), or various rules for ritual purity, but he cared a great deal about oaths, in particular about an agreement to enter marriage."

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Jesus encourages us to adopt the underlying principle, that we all need regular times of rest. He isn't worried about the details of how we do this.

How do we in this congregation honour the idea of the Sabbath? We come to church to worship on most Sundays.

Our family is now spread over three households and three generations. We usually gather on Sunday evening for a shared meal. I tried to avoid doing business related work on Sundays.

Marva Dawn in her book, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly: Ceasing, Resting, Embracing, Feasting*, makes a broad and deep study of what the Sabbath can be about for us today. She focusses on the Sabbath as adding to our lives. She says:

“To choose to reserve for Sabbath times some things that are exceptional in our families merely requires a little planning. To have cocoa for breakfast instead of tea, to eat out with friends or host a dinner party or plan a potluck for a congregational care group, to enjoy one's favorite foods only on Sunday, even to use especially precious bowls or mugs—these are a few simple examples of intentional ways to mark the Sabbath as a time for feasting, as a day of delight.”

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In a statement that links with the idea of salvation through God's grace, she also says:

“It grieves me that our Christian communities get tied into the world's value system and forget this constant message of the Scriptures: that we are worthy because we are loved by God.”

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Walter Brueggemann, in his book *Sabbath as Resistance*, notes:

“In our own contemporary context of the rat race of anxiety, the celebration of Sabbath is an act of both resistance and alternative. It is resistance because it is a visible insistence that our lives are not defined by the production and consumption of commodity goods.”

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Gathering to worship each Sunday is important. It is a gentle signal to the rest of our community, that business and competition are not the only values that are important.

Jesus says, “My yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

He invites us to, “Keep company with him and learn to live freely and lightly.”

Will we accept his invitation?

Amen.

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**Sermon: Finding our watchwords**

**Sunday 11 June 2023**

**Pentecost 2**

**Bible Readings:**

**Genesis 12:1-9** [New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition]

**Romans 4:13-25** [The Message]

“God’s promise arrives as a pure gift. That’s the only way everyone can be sure to get in on it, those who keep the religious traditions *and* those who have never heard of them. For Abraham is the father of us all. He is not our racial father—that’s reading the story backward. He is our *faith*, father.”

Let’s pray:

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts and minds be acceptable to your O God, our foundation and our life-force. Amen.

I have called this sermon “Finding our watchwords”, “Finding our watchwords.”

The lectionary readings I have chosen for today both focus on Abraham and his interactions with God. They are an example of the tight link between the Old and New Testaments. God’s call to Abram in Genesis chapter 12 occurred about 3800 years ago, around 1800 BC. The second reading is from Romans, which was written by Paul at the end of his missionary activities in the early 60s of the first century.

Abraham was born in Ur in Babylon, which is today in southern Iraq. A Jewish website suggests that Abraham’s father, Terach, was a merchant who sold idols – figurines that people would worship in their homes. Abram disagreed with his father and believed that people should only worship one God. Eventually, God called Abram to leave his homeland and travel to the Holy Land. The former city dweller Abram, his wife Sarai, and their household took up a nomadic lifestyle, travelling around what is today modern Israel.

The Genesis reading is headed “The Call of Abram.” Two things to note. At this stage in the narrative, Abram is not yet named Abraham, and his wife Sarai is not yet named Sarah. Those name changes come later.

How did Abram receive the call from God? There is no mention of a messenger bringing a clay tablet or a letter on parchment. No mobile phone or email. Perhaps Abram received the message in a dream. Some dreams we forget when we wake up in the morning. Others stay with us, and we remember and act on them.

I am working on a memoir by Presbyterian minister Marg Schrader, in which she explains how God has called her to different ministries and paths throughout her life. Dreams have been one way she has received these calls.

Abram was 75 years old when God told him to uproot his extended whanau, household and possessions and go to an unspecified land that God would show him. That’s a big deal in your old age. It shows how much trust Abram had in God. I’m 63 and I doubt I would have the courage or energy to follow a call like that. Would you?

The God in this story is a “hands on” God. God tells Abram what to do. God is going to make Abram’s name great. God is going to bless those who bless Abram, and curse those who curse him. God promises that “in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” That’s a big promise. It includes us today. We too can claim that blessing given to Abram and his descendants.

Abram and his entourage arrive in Canaan. The Canaanite people are already living in that land. They are the indigenous people. God promises to give the land to Abram’s descendants. This is the Promised Land that Moses will lead the people to after the Exodus. Remember that Abram’s story takes place before the Israelite’s were slaves in Egypt.

Notice also that Abram sets up altars to worship God wherever he stops and pitches his tent. In Abram’s time, God can be worshipped wherever faithful people gather – just as we can worship God wherever we gather today. People do not yet focus their worship on the Temples built by Solomon and Herod. Those Temples with all their rules and hierarchies come much later.

Twice in this reading we are told that God “appeared to Abram.” Again we have a “hands on” God who is talking openly to Abram. Contrast this with Moses’ time when, if you looked directly at God, you would die. Even Moses was only permitted the briefest glimpse of God’s back. Ideas about God and how we can experience God change over time.

[pause]

The Abram story in Genesis is telling us history. This happened, then that happened. Paul, writing his letter to the followers of Jesus in Rome 1,900 years later, is commentating on the earlier history story and drawing meaning from it for his readers. 1,900 years after Paul, we today draw meaning and encouragement from both texts.

Paul asks us to put our faith and trust in God. Our relationship with God can’t just depend on us ticking all the boxes on a checklist and doing whatever we perceive as the right things. This is God making a promise to Abraham and to us. It’s not a business deal, a negotiation or a give and take transaction. It’s all or nothing. An important Methodist idea is that salvation comes through God’s grace. We have been saved; we are being saved, we will be saved – not because of our own merits or actions – but because God offers this to us.

Paul tells us that God’s promise is a completely free gift for both those who practice the religious traditions (attend church, receive communion, read the Bible) **and** for those who have never heard of them. A useful reminder that we are not the gatekeepers who give or deny other people access to God’s love. We need to encourage and uphold other people on their faith journeys, which might look nothing like ours.

Nor should we feel threatened by people of other faiths. Muslim, Jewish and Christian faiths all claim a lineage back to Abraham as a common ancestor. I like the way Eugene Peterson phrases this in his Message Bible translation: “He is not our racial father—that’s reading the story backward. He is our *faith* father.” Greg Hughson, a retired Methodist minister from Dunedin, helped to bring together the Dunedin Abrahamic Interfaith Group, after 9/11 and he has been involved with it ever since. Marg Schrader has also been involved in Interfaith groups.

God offers us a pure gift. Reciprocity is an important idea in Pasifika culture. A gift given by someone with a surplus to someone in need, will be reciprocated later when the position is reversed. What do we offer God in return? Is worship enough? Perhaps this is a silly question?

Former Anglican Archbishop Rowan Williams said, “We should find out what God is doing in our communities and join in.” Our next hymn is Like a River Glorious. I like the idea of God’s spirit flowing like a river. Will we stand aloof on the shore, dip our toes in at the edge, or launch our waka into mid-stream and go where the current takes us?

[pause]

The story of Sunday School teachers Margie and Gene Jurgenson and the new minister Mike is from a book titled: “**When Church Stops Working**: A Future for Your Congregation Beyond More Money, Programs, and Innovation,” by ministry researcher Andrew Root.

The phrase that their church adopted as a guiding principle, “nothing can separate us from the love of God” is a **watchword**. A watchword is more than a slogan or a statement in a strategic plan. The watchword in the story had a powerful foundation – helping bereaved parents cope with the death of their son. Starting with minister Mike, everyone else in the congregation decided that this watchword would help to unify their community, and underpin their activities and ministries.

A watchword evolves for a congregation after a period of waiting and watching for a lead from God. A watchword has a shelf life. It may be effective for a few years, then need to be replaced with a new watchword. Andrew Root says in the book that after a few years, Mike’s congregation stopped using the watchword. The ministry team, lay leaders and congregation spent a year doing less ministry and fewer activities. Like letting farming land lie fallow for a season to regain fertility. Being less busy gave them a chance to reflect on where their church was heading and what they wanted to do in the future. A new watchword came to the surface, “Never alone.”

Paul reminds us that God’s promise to Abraham wasn’t given because of something Abraham did or would do. God put everything together for Abraham, and Abraham accepted the offer. God charted a course for Abraham. Do we have a sense as individuals and as a faith community that God has charted a course for us? How will we discern that course?

Our congregation’s leadership team has been carefully working on a Strategic Plan for us. They have offered us a vision, “Living God’s Love, Acting for the common good.”

Is that our Watchword?

Will we take it to heart?

Let’s try it.

Amen.

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## **Sermon: Lamb of God – Exercising Soft Power**

**Sunday 26 February 2023**

**Lent 1**

### **Bible Readings:**

**Psalm 32** (The Message Bible)

**Matthew 4:1-11** (The Message Bible)

“Jesus’ refusal was curt: “Beat it, Satan!” He backed his rebuke with a third quotation from Deuteronomy: “Worship the Lord your God, and only him. Serve him with absolute single-heartedness.”

The Test was over. The Devil left. And in his place, angels! Angels came and took care of Jesus’ needs.”

Let’s pray:

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts and minds be acceptable to you, O God, our strength and our refuge. Amen.

I have titled this sermon: Lamb of God – Exercising Soft Power, Lamb of God – Exercising Soft Power.

We are now in the church season of Lent. A time of preparation for Easter. The Bible stories about the events of Holy Week and the days immediately afterwards are the most important, the most crucial stories for our faith. Christmas is joyful, but Easter is at the heart of Christianity, at the heart of our faith as Christians – as followers of the Way of Jesus.

Every Easter as we hear the stories read aloud, and see them acted out in church, as we do our own reading, and as we thoughtfully take part in a study group, we are challenged to find meanings and principles that we can apply in our daily lives. We need to give ourselves permission to discover new and deeper meanings, to feel again the emotional pull of the stories, and allow new feelings to come to the surface.

The books I have read and audio recordings I have listened to in recent years, by scholars such as Marcus Borg, John Spong and John Dominic Crossan, have led me to question whether Jesus was divine and whether his death on the cross can really have been a deliberate act of God; intended to atone for our sins – the things we know we shouldn’t have done but did, and the things we know we should have done, but didn’t. I find it hard to worship a God who would deliberately cause a man to suffer as Jesus suffered.

And yet..., as I get older, experience more of life, joyfully become a grandparent, the world seems less black and white, and I feel a shift in the way I regard the stories and experiences of Easter. Words in books call to my intellect. Sacred music calls to my heart.

Later in the service we are going to sing a response to the stanzas of prayer in our intercessions. The tune is my adaptation of a section of Jonathan Berkahn’s *A Hopkins Gloria*. The English words are in the New Zealand Anglican Prayerbook and are translated

from the Latin Mass of the Catholic church. They are part of the Christian tradition and have been spoken for many centuries. The Latin text has a lovely ring to it:

“Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis.” “Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis.”

In English, “Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world, have mercy on us.” “Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world, have mercy on us.”

The “Lamb of God” is Jesus. What does Jesus do for us? We ask God to have mercy on us through Jesus, and Jesus takes away our sin. There is a softer tone to this teaching. We don’t need to believe – 100%, hard and fast, without doubt, totally for certain – that God made Jesus die on the cross for us, and if we can’t sign up for this understanding, we are not real Christians.

We should claim the freedom to re-think and re-feel the meaning of Easter for us as individuals, and perhaps as a congregation and faith community. There is not just one right answer, one correct response to Easter. And what we feel is true and affirming for our faith today, will change over time. We are on a faith journey.

I’m enjoying our Wednesday night study over Zoom that explores the meaning of the events of the 8 days from Palm Sunday to Easter Day. Each episode of the study has an audio recording of John Dominic Crossan talking with the host, followed by 4 or 5 questions for our group to discuss. Our discussions have been respectful and helpful. We are finding new meanings in the Easter story as told in Mark’s Gospel.

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Let’s turn to Psalm 32. The psalm writer is writing several centuries before Jesus was born. The writer says, “You (that’s us as readers of the Psalm) get a fresh start, your slate’s wiped clean.” Does that message sound familiar? Can you see a parallel with the Easter message that Jesus’ death and resurrection gives us a fresh start too? The 3<sup>rd</sup> verse of our last hymn also picks up this idea: “Matariki’s spirit guide us, rise within us all the year. Help us live and speak forgiveness, your people want to hear.”

The Psalmist goes on to say:

“Then I let it all out;  
I said, “I’ll come clean about my failures to God.”

Suddenly the pressure was gone—  
my guilt dissolved,  
my sin disappeared.”

If we are honest with ourselves, and honest with God, our emotional burdens will be lifted. We are then free to make a fresh start in our lives.

The Psalm ends with a call to celebration.

“Celebrate God.  
Sing together – everyone!  
All you honest hearts, raise the roof!”

Easter Sunday awaits us...

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And what of exercising soft power?

In the story of the temptation in Matthew's gospel, the Devil offers Jesus an opportunity to exercise hard power. If he will just kneel before the Devil and accept his overlordship, Jesus will receive unlimited power over the earth and its peoples. Jesus could be a cruel dictator, serving his own ends, answerable only to the Devil.

The Devil doesn't really have such power to give to Jesus. It's an illusion, a mirage. To each of the Devil's three temptations Jesus simply says, "No."

Jesus frames each refusal with a lesson for us about how we should relate to God. Food is not enough. We need the words God writes on our hearts to sustain us. Respect God. Don't play games with God. We are to worship God – and no one or nothing else – and serve others in God's name. In doing this we exercise soft power.

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Jesus must have frustrated his followers. They longed for a strong Jewish Saviour / Messiah who would eject the Roman invaders and set the world to rights. We know what that sort of power looks like. We are all too familiar with violence, weapons and bombs, war and senseless killing.

Jesus was a saviour to his followers in his day and offers us a path to salvation today. It's a different way, a softer approach, that includes and involves everyone.

Using our soft power, we offer a quiet word of encouragement to a struggling new parent.

Using our soft power, we make a gentle suggestion of a new direction to someone who can't see a way forward.

Using our soft power, we talk out our disagreements and conflicts and seek to build a consensus.

Using our soft power, we encourage our governments to use diplomacy and not resort to war in our name.

In the Lent and Easter seasons, we are still left with difficult faith questions, for which there are no easy answers:

- What does it mean to act like a Lamb, not a Lion.
- In what sense does Jesus take away the sin of the world?
- What does Holy Week mean for us?
- What does Jesus dying on the cross mean for us?
- What have we done that means we need to ask for a merciful judgement?

Jesus was a different sort of Messiah. Will we follow his Way?

Amen.

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## Sermon: Let It Be

Sunday 29 January 2023

Epiphany 4

Bible Readings:

Matthew 5:1-12 (New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition)

Matthew 5:1-12 (The Message)

“You’re blessed when you care. At the moment of being ‘care-**full**,’ you find yourselves cared **for**.”

“You’re blessed when you get your inside world—your mind and heart—put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.”

“You’re blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That’s when you discover who you really are, and your place in God’s family.”

Let’s pray: May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts and minds be acceptable to you, O God, our strength and our freedom giver.

I’ve call this sermon **Let It Be, Let It Be**.

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I was surprised to find myself crying at the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> part of the Get Back documentary. They were tears of joy and relief. What was going on?

As you can tell by now, I’m a big fan of the Beatles. I love their music. I can sing the melodies to most of their songs, even the tricky ones. They made a big impression on me in my late teens when I discovered them. I carry their music in my head.

I knew quite a bit about the band’s history. But I carried with me the impression they the band broke up acrimoniously. I read somewhere that George Martin – their sound engineer and recording producer – found the sessions recording the double White Album in 1968 very hard. The band members were pulling in different directions. Their work didn’t have the cohesion of earlier albums like Rubber Soul or Sgt Peppers. He didn’t enjoy these sessions and was worried that the band were going to split up.

The Beatles are musical heroes of mine. I admire the creative genius they showed in composing and performing songs. I was sad to think that their last 2 or 3 years as a band weren’t happy. So why the tears?

The documentary showed me for the first time that the band did still enjoy working together. There are lovely clips of the band in the recording mixing room hearing a track they have just recorded and grinning as they realise that yes, “that’s good”,

“that’s a keeper.” The film of the band performing on the roof of their recording studio is wonderful. They sang 5 or 6 songs. This was the first time they had played in public since 1966 and ended up being the last time they ever played in public.

I didn’t realise that I had deep within me a grief about the band that I had been carrying for 40 years. The documentary told me another story, a story of the joy the band still found in working together. And I could let go of my grief because I heard and saw that new story.

Napier Anglican priest Alister Hendery in his book *The Grief Walk* calls this disenfranchised grief. “For whatever reason, we are denied the right to grieve and our loss isn’t recognised. ... We experience loss, but we come to believe we do not have the right to grieve that loss.” Disenfranchisement occurs when our loss and grief isn’t validated.” Alister is talking about more serious losses like the grief of being forced to leave the family home to live in a rest home, of a loved one developing dementia or of having a mental illness and grieving for your own lost life opportunities that result from it.

We need to find a way to work through and deal with such grief. Our faith can be a part of the answer. Jesus said: “You’re blessed when you feel you’ve lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.”

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I’d like to share with you some reflections that arise for me out of the documentary, that may be good for us to keep in mind as we worship and work together as a faith community.

Alexander and Charlie gave us the gift of a one month subscription to Disney + online streaming, specifically so that we could watch the documentary. Heather and I enjoyed watching the documentary during the Christmas / New Year break. A good way to unwind after a very full 2022.

The gift was kind and chosen thoughtfully.

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There are two ways of recording pop songs. You can record a drum and percussion track first, then add the bass, then guitars, then keyboard, then lead vocals and backing vocals. The producer then mixes everything together at the end.

The other way is to have all the musicians and singers perform together live in the studio. We have done this with Festival Singers’ CD recordings. You run the risk of needing start again if someone makes a big mistake. But the energy that comes from singing and playing together results in a much better recording.

The Beatles were jammed into a studio with mics and wires everywhere, a real jumble. But they could eyeball and listen to each other and the recordings are great. Three of the takes of the tracks that made it onto the final album were from the

performance on the roof of the studio – which added the extra element of performing for an audience.

All working together at the same time can be messy but it's worthwhile.

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The band was struggling to finish writing and arranging the song Get Back. Billy Preston an American keyboard player and friend of George Harrison was in town, and George invited him along to the studio. The band then asked Billy to improvise and play along on electric piano while they performed Get Back one more time. Billy's playing gave the song a big lift. It was the missing piece they needed.

Its good to invite someone with new ideas and new energy to join in.

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One of The Beatles would write the words for a song and come to the studio with an idea for the tune and accompaniment. The band would then workshop the song, add to and edit the words, add musical ideas, a guitar riff and create an arrangement. But they never wrote down the musical score – the sheet music for the songs – because they didn't need to. They left that task to a music publisher to do after the album was finished.

While it is likely that Jesus could read Hebrew scripture scrolls in the synagogue, there is no record of him writing down his parables and other teachings. He didn't need to. He was too busy healing and teaching to bother writing them down. Others would remember what he said, pass it on by word of mouth to the next generation and in time the gospel writers wrote it down for us.

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The version of a song that makes it to an LP or a CD or Spotify is just a snapshot of the state of the song at the time. The best songs evolve and have another life. For example our son Christopher's jazz band takes a composition, plays the opening verse and refrain fairly straight, improvises in the middle, taking turns with solos, then goes back to the theme to play out the song. Every performance of a song is different.

Our understanding of scripture also evolves over time. Scripture doesn't change, we change. Our insights into its meaning develop as we mature and gain more life experience.

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John Lennon says to George Harrison at one point in the documentary, if you haven't worked out all the words to a song just sing some nonsense words in their place, until the right words come to you. That was a revealing insight into John's and Paul's creative process. If you've got most of the words together just, "fake it till you make it." In another recent interview with Paul McCartney he said that he and John

probably wrote 300 songs together. Right from the start of their song writing collaboration, either John or Paul would bring an idea for a song and they would work on it until the song was finished. Paul said that they always finished the song that session.

If you've got a good idea, work on it and be confident that you'll get the end result you want.

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Peter Jackson and his team here in Wellington did technically brilliant work with the film footage and recordings that were made in 1969. They took 16mm film and somehow created high resolution wide screen video from it. They created a pioneering new way of editing the audio recordings so that we can clearly hear each person speaking and singing. They can isolate Paul's voice or John's from all the background noise. They then moulded 60 hours of footage into a coherent 8 hour story narrative for the three-part documentary. A story which I found so moving. Stories are important.

Bible scholars, archaeologists, ancient document restorers and theologians are continually making new discoveries about scripture. These give us new insights into the Bible and our faith, if we are open to exploring and responding to them.

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I learned the Beatitudes as a child, in the form they appear in the NRSV we heard earlier. I checked Eugene Peterson's The Message translation and like his new version, but wanted to be able to match up the traditional words with his words. So you have in your orders of service two translations. Hold on to your order of service and look at both versions this week.

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The word "Amen," is an affirmation. It means "make this be so" or "Let It Be."

I want to end by returning to The Message translation of the beatitudes. After each verse I read out, will you please join me saying, **And we say Amen, Let It Be.**  
[Repeat]

"You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule." **And we say Amen, Let It Be.**

"You're blessed when you feel you've lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you." **And we say Amen, Let It Be.**

"You're blessed when you're content with just who you are—no more, no less. That's the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can't be bought." **And we say Amen, Let It Be.**

“You’re blessed when you’ve worked up a good appetite for God. He’s food and drink in the best meal you’ll ever eat.” **And we say Amen, Let It Be.**

“You’re blessed when you care. At the moment of being ‘care-**full**,’ you find yourselves cared **for**.” **And we say Amen, Let It Be.**

“You’re blessed when you get your inside world—your mind and heart—put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.” **And we say Amen, Let It Be.**

“You’re blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That’s when you discover who you really are, and your place in God’s family.” **And we say Amen, Let It Be.**

“You’re blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God’s kingdom.” **And we say Amen, Let It Be.**

I finish with words of hope and reassurance from 15<sup>th</sup> century English mystic, Julian of Norwich: “All will be well. All manner of things will be well.”

**And we say Amen, Let It Be.**

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