

East Durham Methodist Circuit:

6th March 2022

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Lent Reflection: Finding a new Home

Call to Worship:

God, who never stops calling us back to yourself, Open our ears and hearts that we may hear your beckoning voice again; And strengthen us by your Holy Spirit that we may turn back to find our home in you. Amen.

Hymn: For the beauty of the earth F S Pierpoint StF 102 / H&P 333

1. For the beauty of the earth,
For the beauty of the skies,
For the love which from our birth
Over and around us lies,
Lord of all, to thee we raise
This our grateful hymn of praise.

2. For the beauty of each hour
Of the day and of the night,
Hill and vale, and tree and flower,
Sun and moon and stars of light,
Lord of all, to thee we raise
This our grateful hymn of praise.

3. For the joy of human love,
Brother, sister, parent, child,
Friends on earth, and friends above,

Pleasures pure and undefiled,
Lord of all, to thee we raise
This our grateful hymn of praise.

4. For each perfect gift of thine,
To our race so freely given,
Graces human and divine,
Flowers of earth and buds of heaven,
Lord of all, to thee we raise
This our grateful hymn of praise.

5. For thy Church which evermore
Lifteth holy hands above,
Offering up on every shore
Her pure sacrifice of love,
Lord of all, to thee we raise
This our grateful hymn of praise

Adoration:

When we were lost and alone, O God, You came and found us. When we were homeless and vulnerable, You made a place for us at Your table. When we were stuck in destructive ways of being, You gave us a vision of repentance and Your Spirit to empower us to change.

We praise You, gracious and loving God, for taking the initiative, for making yourself a gift to us, and for bringing us home to You. Hallelujah! **Amen**

We join together in the prayer that Jesus gave us:

**Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name.
Thy Kingdom come; Thy will be done - on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses,
As we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.
For Thine is the Kingdom, the power and the glory,
For ever and ever.**

Amen

Reading: Genesis 9:18-27

New International Version

⁸ Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him: ⁹ “I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you ¹⁰ and with every living creature that was with you - the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you - every living creature on earth. ¹¹ I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth.”

¹² And God said, “This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come: ¹³ I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. ¹⁴ Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, ¹⁵ I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life. ¹⁶ Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth.”

¹⁷ So God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant I have established between me and all life on the earth.”

Reading: Mark 1:9-15

New International Version

⁹ At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

¹² At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness, ¹³ and he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted^[a] by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.

¹⁴ After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. ¹⁵ “The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!”

Hymn: O Love that will not let me go George Matheson **StF 636 / H&P 685**

1. O Love that will not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in thee;
I give thee back the life I owe,
That in thine ocean depths its flow
May richer, fuller be.

3. O Joy that seekest me through pain,
I cannot close my heart to thee;
I trace the rainbow through the rain,
And feel the promise is not vain,
That morn shall tearless be.

2. O Light that foll’west all my way,
I yield my flick’ring torch to thee;
My heart restores its borrowed ray,
That in thy sunshine’s blaze its day
May brighter, fairer be.

4. O Cross that liftest up my head,
I dare not ask to fly from thee;
I lay in dust life’s glory dead,
And from the ground there blossoms red
Life that shall endless be.

Message: Finding A New Home

Some time ago I read a story about two brothers who were raised by an alcoholic father. The father’s life had been one of failure, crime, and ultimately prison. One of the sons had followed in his father’s footsteps, and also ended up doing time in jail.

The other brother had lived a completely different life, working and studying hard to build a stable career, getting married and sustaining a stable and loving home with his wife and children. Both brothers had been interviewed and asked why they thought their lives had followed the course they had. Both brothers responded with exactly the same answer: "With a father like mine, what would you expect my life to become?" For one brother, the horror of his upbringing had driven him to self-reflection, to taking responsibility for his life, and to a deep and positive change. For the other, the result was resignation, a sense of inevitability and no attempt to change at all.

Every human being on the planet knows the pain that comes from changes that we should have made, but have resisted. We have all gone through seasons when we have failed to do the important work of reflection, self-assessment and transformation, and we have all experienced the negative backlash that results.

Yet, we have also all known times when we have embraced the required changes, done the necessary internal work and opened ourselves to new realities and new ways of being and we have enjoyed the benefits that have resulted. We know this to be true. When we embrace change and allow it to drive us into growth, we find life and a sense of 'fit', of 'rightness', of belonging.

This is a tough lesson for children to learn, but it is a necessary one. When a childhood home has been happy (and, tragically, even in many cases when it has not) children tend to want 'home' to remain the same, with the same house, traditions, people, and values in place. This remains true even when the child leaves home to study, travel or enter their work life. They may want to change, but they often want their home to remain as it was when they left it, so that when they return, it still 'feels like home'.

It is often in this 'memorialising' of home that the home is lost. Brothers and sisters grow up, new relationships are formed, children are born, parents die, houses are sold and traditions are replaced. If 'home' is only defined according to the old pattern, then home dies when the pattern changes - as it must. However, when the changes are recognised and embraced as a necessary part of life and growth, home can be continually redefined according to new realities. And then the sense of being at home, with its safety, belonging and love, can be sustained pretty much forever.

The Call To Change

Embracing change, though, requires a practice that is rather unpopular in our world today: repentance. We have come to think of repentance as an occasional, distasteful task that may have to be endured if we do something wrong. This view of repentance, though, is rather unhelpful, and it often keeps us from entering full and vibrant life.

It may be more helpful to think of repentance simply as the choice to change. The Greek word **metanoia** essentially means a change of mind that results in a new course of action. In truth, the process of repentance requires us to do 'Living in the Promised Land': the slow, hard work of reflection and assessment of ourselves and our world that leads to new choices and new behaviour. The essence of repentance is to release what hurts, what no longer works, or what is damaging and to embrace new healing, effective, and creative ways of being.

Repentance was, of course, at the heart of Jesus' message. In the Gospel reading that is set for today in the Revised Common Lectionary, we read of Jesus beginning his ministry.

His first sermon as recorded by Mark is simply this: “Now is the time! Here comes God’s kingdom! Change your hearts and lives and trust this good news!” (Mark 1:15 CEB)

What is significant about this message is that it comes after Jesus has done just this himself. After a quiet life in a small town, occupied in a simple trade, Jesus has come out of obscurity and joined the throngs being baptised by John. This marks a decision by Jesus to repent, to change his life and move into the public, itinerant ministry of a travelling rabbi. The implication, of course, is that Jesus must have had to make his own, reflective choice.

As his understanding of God’s Reign grew, and as his awareness of his potential role in manifesting God’s Reign became clearer, Jesus must have faced the question of his response. He could have ignored it and continued to live as he had, but he embraced his call and set out to preach and live the vision of God’s Reign that he had received. He had learned to change his idea of ‘home’ from Nazareth to the Reign of God, and now he invited others to join him.

This invitation remains for us today. God offers us a new, eternal home: the “Promised Land” of God’s reign. We need simply to decide whether we are willing to make the necessary changes, to do the work of repentance, to make this Promised Land our home.

The Work Of Repentance.

The Gospel of Mark does not take a lot of time over the start of Jesus’ ministry. There is no birth narrative, and only a very brief mention of the baptism and temptation here. But, even in this sparse account, there are significant elements. Jesus’ public ministry begins with his baptism by John.

Mark 1:4 makes it clear that John’s baptism was about repentance. For the multitudes who went out to the Jordan, this repentance was a turning from their sin to a new, God-honouring life. For Jesus, however, the repentance is about leaving the protected life of carpentry he has known and embracing the call of God to manifest God’s Reign on earth.

This is why, in the act of baptism, when Jesus demonstrates his commitment to the people God loves and to the new life he has been called to lead, the voice of God speaks a powerful affirmation: “You are My dearly loved Son, and You bring Me great joy.” There are echoes here of the affirmation of Isaiah’s “Servant of the Lord” in Isaiah 42:1, and the empowering of God’s Spirit. The message Mark is trying to communicate is clear: Jesus is now taking on the role of Isaiah’s Servant.

But the act of repentance, of commitment, inevitably leads to a time of testing, and Jesus is driven into the wilderness by God’s Spirit. Mark doesn’t go into detail, for that we have to rely on Matthew and Luke, but what is clear is that before he can begin his ministry in earnest, Jesus’ resolve must be put to the test. This is as much for Jesus’ own sake as for anyone else. He needs to know that he will be capable of staying faithful for the long haul.

This testing is not a once-off event. Jesus will be tested again (as with Peter’s rebuke when Jesus predicts his death in the reading for next week). The important thing for

Mark is that Jesus comes through his temptations successfully and stays committed to God's call. There is a glimpse here of the new, unified world that Jesus is to bring into being and Mark notes that "wild animals and angels" took care of him. Human and animal, natural and supernatural worlds all come together in this moment after the siren-song of the adversary has been silenced. Then, with this vision in his heart and with a new 'Living in the Promised Land' confidence in his call, Jesus can begin his work and start inviting others into the real Promised Land - the Reign of God.

For Mark's readers, this vision may well have had resonances with an ancient story from the Old Testament that they knew well. In the Old Testament reading for today, Noah and his family finally leave the ark to begin a new life, and to reconstruct a new world.

It's a moment of repentance for the humans, leaving behind the ways of a world now gone and committing to a new order. But it's also a moment of repentance for God. The sign of the rainbow indicates a covenant with all creation, not just human beings, and it marks God's promise to never again destroy the world through a flood. There are hints of baptism here, as is noted in 1 Peter 3:18-22, and also glimpses of the new, unified world that Jesus calls God's Reign. And of course, Noah is also a called person, who now has the task of rebuilding a world which can become a home for his family, and for their descendants.

The journeys of Noah and Jesus are archetypal, and we are called to walk this road, too. At some point in every life we will have to make a choice. We can either ignore the realities around us and within us, pretend that all is well, and go on as we are. Or we can embrace the call of God, do the work of repentance of honest reflection and radical change and commit to a life aligned with the values, priorities, and purposes of God's Reign.

Inevitably, when we choose the latter, we will find our resolve tested. We will be confronted with our own self-interest, laziness, and reluctance to make the far-reaching changes that are required to find a home in this new world. We will face pressure from the world as it is, enticing us with its 'bright, shiny objects' and from those who are invested in keeping things as they are. But, as we allow God's affirmation to keep us strong and call us onward, we will learn to overcome these temptations, and then we will discover that we have become participants in the work of invitation, calling others into the Promised Land and the life and joy it offers.

I recently read Michael J. Fox's autobiography in which he describes his journey from famous actor, through destructive attempts to deny his oncoming Parkinson's Disease, to joyful acceptance and gratitude for the new life, peace, and joy that he discovered through his disease. What struck me as I read this story, was how it was his disease that finally drove him to do the tough work of reflection and repentance. It was his disease that drove him to become mindful that how he lived his life was a choice and that he needed to be mindful of how he made that choice. And finally, although he would never wish the disease on anyone, Fox discovered that he would find himself grateful for what his disease brought to his life. As he wrote: "...these last ten years of coming to terms with my disease would turn out to be the best ten years of my life, not in spite of my illness, but because of it."

The Power To Repent

It's all very well to speak about repentance, but there's a reason we reflect so knowingly on our struggles to change. Essentially, we really only change when one of two situations arises. Either the pain of staying the same becomes greater than the pain of changing, or the potential benefit of the change becomes far greater than whatever pay-off we receive from staying the same. When it comes to the call of God, it definitely appears that God favours the latter as a strategy. As Paul writes: "Don't you realise that God's kindness is supposed to lead you to change your heart and life?" (Romans 2:4 CEB).

But even once we have been drawn to make changes, it can be tough to follow through, which is why God offers us exactly what we need to empower us. The two qualities we need in order to change thoroughly and effectively are a willingness to leave behind what we know and embrace the new world, and a capacity to actually live according to our new convictions. In both cases, God provides the necessary resources.

What we witness in the start of Jesus' ministry resonates with our own experience. Before Jesus has even begun to live out his calling, before he even feels at home in this new world he is to proclaim, God steps in and affirms him, welcoming him from the start. For Noah, a similar pattern plays out, with God offering the promise and the sign of the rainbow as a pure gift, with no condition attached at all.

For us, the same is true. Like parents who adopt a child, learn to love it and give it a place of belonging long before the child even knows it has a home, so God welcomes us into God's heart, providing us with a place at God's table, in God's Realm, and adopting us as God's children, long before we even know what this means. And it is in this amazing welcome, that we discover our hearts awakening and a longing growing within us to find our place and live as true citizens of this Promised Land.

Then, once the longing, the willingness to change has taken hold of us, God empowers us to follow through with a gift of the Holy Spirit. In Noah's case, the empowerment came through a sign, the rainbow that would reappear from time to time and remind them of God's promise. For Jesus, the Spirit's empowerment happened at his baptism, simultaneously with God's affirmation.

For us the sequence may be different, it may take more than one step on our part, or it may be a slower, longer journey, but the same empowering Spirit comes to us as came to Jesus (See Romans 8:15,16).

So, as we face the call to repentance again this Lent, we need to remember that we already belong in the Promised Land of God's Reign. God has already given us a place; we need simply to accept it and learn to live in it. And for that, God has given us all the strength we need.

Coming Home

Mother Teresa is famous for saying: "The greatest disease in the West today is not TB or leprosy; it is being unwanted, unloved, and uncared for." The good news of the Gospel, of Jesus' message and life is that we are not unwanted - no one is. God has a home for us if we will just believe it and receive it.

The power of this gift to bring life and wholeness, meaning and purpose to our lives is inexpressible, but our belonging in God's Realm is not just a gift to us. It changes both how we live in the world, and the world we live in.

When we know that we truly belong, we lose our need to prove ourselves. We grow relaxed and peaceful in the world, no matter what circumstances we may face. And we grow more accepting and welcoming of others, which puts them at ease, and provides a place of belonging for them, too.

We only reject others when we fear that we will be rejected. We only fight when we believe that our place must be won by conquering others. We see this malady at work in every sector of society, in every corner of our world today. But, when we know that our place is secure, we are no longer threatened by others.

This is the gift of God's Reign, and it's available to all who are willing to embrace it. The only question that remains is whether we are ready to find our new home in the Promised Land of God's Reign.

Amen

Hymn: My God, I am Thine Charles Wesley StF 80 / H&P 563

1. My God, I am Thine,
What a comfort Divine,
What a blessing to know that my Jesus
is mine!
In the heavenly Lamb
Thrice happy I am:
My heart it doth dance at the sound of
Thy name.

3. Yet onward I haste
To the heavenly feast;
That, that is the fulness: but this is the
taste.
And this I shall prove
Till with joy I remove
To the heaven of heavens of Jesus's
love.

2. True pleasures abound
In the Rapturous sound,
And whoever hath found it hath paradise
found.
My Jesus to know
And feel His blood flow,
'Tis life everlasting, 'tis heaven below.

Intercessions:

We thank you for the gift of prayer, Jesus, and for the security and hope it brings us. We thank you that as we pray, we can rest in the knowledge that your Spirit works in and through us for the sake of our world.

And so wherever people are homeless and displaced, we pray that they may find their home in you.

Wherever people are rejected and marginalised, we pray that they may find a place to belong in your family of faith.

Wherever people are suffering and grieving, we pray that they may find comfort in your love, and in those who seek to share it.

Wherever people are at war or in conflict with one another, we pray that they may find a way to celebrate their differences and reach out to one another in peace.

Wherever people are struggling to find you or see the influence of your Reign at work. we pray that we may become the manifestation of your glory to them.

Because you have welcomed us into your presence and have lead us out of darkness into your marvellous light,

We bring our prayers for the sake of the world you love. In your all-embracing name.

Amen

Hymn: O God our help in ages past

Isaac Watts **StF 122 / H&P 358**

1. O God, our help in ages past
Our hope for years to come
Our shelter from the stormy blast
And our eternal home.

5. The busy tribes of flesh and blood
With all their cares and fears
Are carried downward by the flood
And lost in following years.

2. Beneath the shadow of Thy throne
Thy saints have dwelt secure
Sufficient is Thine arm alone
And our defence is sure.

6. Time like an ever-rolling stream
Bears all its sons away
They fly forgotten as a dream
Dies at the opening day.

3. Before the hills in order stood
Or Earth received her frame
From everlasting Thou art God
To endless years the same.

7. O, God our help in ages past
Our hope for years to come
Be Thou our guide while life shall last
And our eternal home.

4. A thousand ages in my sight
Are like an evening gone
Sure as the watch that ends the night
Before the rising sun.

Benediction:

Go now to make a home in this world that God loves, and to open its doors to all who seek for grace.

We go to love and be loved, to serve and be served, and to welcome all people in the name of Christ.

Amen.