

East Durham Methodist Circuit:
Service 13th March

Prepared by Rev Alf Waite

Theme: Lent 2 - A Question of Trust.

Call to Worship.

Loving God, you have promised us a home, a place of peace and freedom, a place to belong, to be loved and to love. May we glimpse this Promised Land in our worship, and we pray that your Spirit will empower us again. So, as we draw near to you, O God, draw near to us, and fill our hearts with a new vision of your Reign. **Amen**

Hymn: The God of Abraham praise

Thomas Olivers

StF 91 / H&P 452

1. The God of Abraham praise
who reigns enthroned above;
the Ancient of eternal days
and God of love!
The Lord, the great I AM,
by earth and heaven confessed,
we bow before his holy name
for ever blessed.

2. To him we lift our voice
at whose supreme command
from earth we rise to seek the joys
at his right hand:
we all on earth forsake,
its wisdom, fame and power;
the God of Israel we shall make
our shield and tower.

3. Though nature's strength decay,
and earth and hell withstand,
at his command we fight our way
to Canaan's land:
the watery deep we pass
with Jesus in our view,
and through the howling wilderness
our path pursue.

4. He by himself has sworn —
we on his oath depend —
we shall, on eagles' wings upborne,
to heaven ascend;
there we shall see his face,
his power we shall adore,
and sing the wonders of his grace
for evermore.

5. There dwells the Lord our King,
the Lord our righteousness,
victorious over death and sin,
the Prince of peace:
on Zion's sacred height
his kingdom he maintains,
and glorious with his saints in light
for ever reigns.

6. Triumphant hosts on high
give thanks eternally
and 'Holy, holy, holy,' cry,
'great Trinity!'
Hail, Abraham's God and ours!
One mighty hymn we raise,
all power and majesty be yours
and endless praise!

Prayer of Adoration:

We shout Hallelujah, to you, our God. We give glory, to you as your children. We adore you. You have never let us down, never looked the other way when we have cried out to you. You have been right there, listening.

Here in our gathering for worship we have discovered the joy of a praise filled life. And we honour you, give you the glory due to your name. Down-and-outers sit at GOD's table and eat their fill. Everyone on the hunt for God is here, praising him. "Live it up, from head to toe. Don't ever quit!"

From the four corners of the earth people are raising their voices in praise. GOD is sovereign in this place and you will always have the last word. So Lord receive our worship we praise as we come to you in honesty. **Amen**

Prayer of Confession:

Though you have invited us to journey to a new, a promised land:
We still try to cling to the old world we know.

Though you have offered us a new, a healing, home:
We still try to settle in the wilderness of our pride, selfishness and fear.

Though you have welcomed us as your children, as citizens of your Kingdom:
We still live as tourists in your grace and love.

Forgive us when we are too short-sighted to let go of what keeps us from life, when we are too afraid to embrace the new possibilities you give us, and when, in our unbelief, we block others from entering your Promised Land.

Silent confession is offered.

It is because of Jesus, who willingly gave himself to the cross so that all people could find eternal, abundant life, That we now know that we are forgiven, and that your welcoming home is open for us still. Thank you! **Amen**

Reading: Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16 New International Version

¹When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, "I am God Almighty; walk before me faithfully and be blameless. ² Then I will make my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers."

³ Abram fell facedown, and God said to him, ⁴ "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. ⁵ No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. ⁶ I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. ⁷ I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you.

¹⁵ God also said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah. ¹⁶ I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her."

Hymn: Your words to me are life and health George Currie Martin **StF 164 / H&P 482**

1. Your words to me are life and health;
Pour strength into my soul;
Enable, guide, and teach my heart
To reach its perfect goal!

2. Your words to me are light and truth;
From day to day they show
Their wisdom, passing earthly lore
As in their truth I grow

3. Your words to me are full of joy
Of beauty, peace, and grace;
From them I learn your blessed will
Through them I see your face

4. Your words you have fulfilled on earth
Yourself, the living Word;
Within my heart your image print
In clearest lines, O Lord

Reading: Mark 8:31-38 New International Version

³¹ He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. ³² He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

³³ But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. “Get behind me, Satan!” he said. “You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.”

³⁴ Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵ For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. ³⁶ What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? ³⁷ Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? ³⁸ If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father’s glory with the holy angels.”

Message:

Christopher Parkening is one of the world’s leading classical guitarists. His mentor, the famous guitar virtuoso Andrés Segovia, praised him as “a great artist, one of the most brilliant guitarists in the world.” He has played with the best orchestras and has won numerous accolades and awards. But, there was a time in his life when he gave up the guitar almost completely.

His inspiration for learning the guitar at age eleven was his uncle, Jack Marshall, who was staff guitarist at MGM studios. Marshall recommended to the young Christopher that he begin by learning classical guitar technique. This led him to recordings of the great master, Segovia, and birthed a deep love for the music in his heart. He dedicated himself to his instrument and worked hard, finally getting the opportunity to study with Segovia himself at age fifteen. By the time he was nineteen years of age, he had signed with Capitol Records and was on his way to becoming a world-renowned classical guitarist.

Throughout his life, though, he had nurtured a love for the outdoors, and for trout fishing in particular. He dreamed of retiring to his own ranch and spending his days fishing and resting. His music became the means for him to achieve this goal and at age thirty, he turned his back on his gruelling schedule of concert appearances and recording, to retire to the ranch in Montana that his music had enabled him to buy. For four years he lived a life of leisure, fishing all over Montana, and returning to California in the winter months to escape the snow.

After a while, though, he began to feel an emptiness within him. His success had not brought him a fulfilling life, and he found himself searching for more. Through the invitation of a friend, he found himself at John MacArthur’s Grace Community Church, where the message he heard led him to a commitment to Christ. As he grew in his new faith, he discerned God’s call to give his life in service of Christ. As he reflected on this new sense of purpose, he wrestled with what he should do, since all he had to offer was his ability to play guitar. Finally, he realised that this was exactly what God wanted him to do, and so he returned to the stage, but this time he played with a deep,

abiding sense of purpose. His music now became his mission, and his life had found the fulfilment and purpose for which he had longed.

The pull of 'Bright, Shiny Objects'

Many of us live with this nagging sense that life is about more than just eating, sleeping and working, but all too often we find ourselves distracted in our search for more. Each day we are offered thousands of invitations to chase 'bright, shiny objects' - things and experiences that offer immediate gratification and that promise satisfaction but fail to deliver. Even those of us who find our way into some kind of religious community can still feel this subliminal sense of lack, since we often do little more than "paste" our faith on top of our existing lives and values. Somehow, we struggle to recognise the startling, challenging truth - before we can find the deep, fulfilling life we long for, we need to lose the distracted, surface life we have.

The Old Testament story of Abram describes this journey into a whole new way of doing life. Who knows why Abram was the man God called to leave his home in Ur and travel to the land God had promised him? Perhaps there had been others who had refused the call before God found this one who would accept. But, even in his acceptance, it is clear that Abram did not really grasp what was required of him. Yes, he did leave behind his country and family and travel to a new place, which was no small decision, but, when he received the promise that he would have a son in his old age, it was too much for him to imagine. With a wife who was beyond childbearing age, he had not yet developed the capacity for approaching life in the radically new way that God was trying to teach him, and so he thought he should take the matter into his own hands. He slept with his slave girl who was still capable of giving him a son and sure enough she gave birth to a baby boy. The problem was not that Abram lacked trust in God's promise. It's that he believed he could use the old, human ways that he knew, to achieve a divine vision that was radically different from anything he had experienced before. He had not yet released the old life he had known - he had simply carried it with him into the new country.

But then, in the passage set for today, God came to clarify things. He renewed the promise, but this time he made sure that Abram - now to be called Abraham - knew that the promise included his wife, Sarai, who was now to be called Sarah. In spite of what appeared to be impossible to the old couple, God intended for them to have a child **together**, and for this child to be the foundation of God's saving work in the world. It's a divine promise, and they had to learn to let go of all they'd known, of the life they'd had, and to trust in divine methods for bringing the promise to fulfilment.

In Mark's Gospel, Peter had a similar journey to undertake. Having just grasped through divine revelation the truth of who Jesus was, Peter was astounded to hear Jesus speaking about death. He had seen Jesus as the Christ, but he had not yet released all the baggage that the word carried for him as a Jew, and so he reprimanded Jesus, telling him to stop such foolishness. But then it was his turn to be rebuked as Jesus pointed out that he needed to release the ideas he had about Messiahs - the old life of God's promises that he had known - in order to discover the new life, the new truth, that God had for him and all of the disciples. This story represents a challenge not just for Peter, but for Jesus himself. Like the temptation in the wilderness, Jesus faced the attraction of a life that he could have, a life lived according to the systems and values of the world he was in. But, the test was for him to reject that life - to completely and irrecoverably lose it - in favour of the life that God called him to - a life in a new world, the Promised Land of God's Reign, where true abundant life is found in radically different values and systems from the human world.

It's a life that can only really be found on the other side of the cross, and it would take a resurrection and a dramatic restoration before Peter really grasped it enough to embrace it for himself.

Receiving a radical Faith

God's call is always to this radical faith - to believe that true, divine, abundant life is found in the most radical of ways, losing the life we have in order to enter the life we long for. It's as if God desires for us to be so completely, freely, and vibrantly alive that we would rather die than live a half-life outside of God's Reign. But, at its heart, this priceless call boils down to a simple question of trust.

Faith is the capacity to see a vision of the new world God calls us to such that it becomes the directing force of our lives. When Abram first responded to God's call, in Genesis chapter 13, he was taken to see the land that had been promised to him. In order to settle a dispute between his herdsmen and those of his nephew, Abram had given Lot some of the best-looking land in the new country. In spite of this, God still assured him that it would all belong to his descendants and instructed him to walk through it - to 'see' the promise, to allow it to sink into his soul. The events that followed would indicate that it worked, the vision did take hold of Abram, and he began to believe that he would have descendants who would possess the land. What had not yet captured his heart was the way it would happen.

But God was not yet finished with him, and so, after the very human attempt on his part to get the promise going, God stepped in again to take Abram's faith deeper. He gave both Abram and Sarai new names (as Martin Buber points out, adding into their old names the 'H' from the divine Tetragrammaton YHWH), affirming that they both participated in the promise. Then he gave them a new sign - circumcision - which was both an act of trust that God could work in the very organ that was incapable of fulfilling the promise, and an indelible mark of God's promise in Abraham's own being. Now, for the first time, the old couple knew that they were incapable of bringing the promise into being on their own. The vision had expanded from simply a new land, to include a new way of being. Now they were no longer asked to simply believe. They were called to live from the basis of their faith, from the promise that was as yet unfulfilled, as if they were already enjoying the fulfilment.

It seems that this process is a common way for God to work as God grows faith in God's daughters and sons. It was certainly the same process for Peter as he learned to recognise both who Jesus was, and what that meant for him and others as they sought to follow Christ. After all the time of witnessing Jesus' teaching and miracles, of asking again and again who this man really was, Peter had a moment of insight - he got the vision of what God had done, and he believed it. This man was the Christ, the awaited Messiah, who would bring God's Reign into being in the world of women and men. Peter's proclamation was a moment of seeing the new world that God was manifesting in Christ, but his reaction to Jesus' prediction of his death, reveals that he had yet to understand how to live in this new world. His faith was, in a sense, incomplete.

But then, Jesus started to take his disciples deeper into the mystery. He explained that true life is found only when we are willing to lose our lives, by taking up the cross. As Marcus Borg explains, the cross was an instrument of execution used only for those who committed treason, not for 'ordinary' criminals. The call to take up the cross, then, is to break free of the life-threatening, fear-based control of Empire, and live freely in the

new order of God's Reign, which undermines the principles, power-plays, injustices, and violence of the world's imperial systems. Shortly after this encounter, Jesus gave Peter, James, and John a deeper vision of this new world as he was transfigured before them, discussing his coming death (literally 'exodus') with Moses and Elijah. It would still take some time, and the experience of the cross and the resurrection to drive this new faith into the hearts of the disciples, but there is no question that Jesus was sowing the seeds that would ultimately bear fruit in their complete commitment of their lives to this new way of being. It was the cross- and their willingness to embrace it - that would become both the sign that God works through the very instrument that seems to deny the possibility of life and the mark of God's promise on their lives.

The faith that God seeks to grow in our hearts is exactly that of Abraham and of the disciples. It is a faith that is born of a vision of a new world of promise - the Reign of God - and that leads us to live out of this vision even while it remains hidden. In South Africa we had the privilege of living this kind of faith during the traumatic apartheid years. The nature of the separation laws was such that it was essentially illegal for black and white Christians to worship together, but many Christ followers had a vision of a non-racial nation, and the faith that they could begin to live that new reality within the old. As result, it was fairly common for Christians to ignore the law and meet together to worship, celebrating our hope that ultimately God's justice would prevail which, of course, it finally did in 1994.

The fundamental trust question

When we are faced with God's promise, the fundamental question we must answer is whether we are willing to pay the price. We humans have a natural tendency to hedge our bets - trying to retain our safety and fulfilment in the old world, while simultaneously seeking to enjoy the benefits of the new one. The far-reaching changes that the work of repentance creates in us are often frightening, and so we are easily tempted by the idea of a 'crossless' Christ.

In his book **The Power of Minds at Work**, author Karl Albrecht compares the stages of dying in an organisation with the stages of dying as proposed by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross. The stage of 'bargaining' (which correlates with 'rationalising' in organisations), he suggests, is when organisations believe that simply talking differently is enough. So, they speak about change and about new systems and structures while never actually changing anything. This is what it is like for anyone who tries to find life without losing life - in the end, we are so desperate to cling to the life we know, that we lose the true life we long for. In a similar way perhaps, the disappointing commitment of world powers to implement changes to curb climate change reflects a wish to retain the destructive life we know while still hoping we can enjoy the life we long for without sacrifice. Unless this motivation changes, we might find, by the time we're ready to take the necessary steps, that it's already too late to save ourselves.

The difficult truth that we must recognise and learn to trust is that we cannot have the new life of God's promise unless we are willing to lose the old life we have known. Abraham had to leave Ur and give up trying to create a family with slave girls. Jesus and his disciples had to be willing to face execution on a Roman cross. In some ways the losing of life for us may seem far less radical, but when we begin to take the call of God's Reign seriously, we will soon realise how deeply Empire has entrenched itself in our psyches, and how hard it is to let go of the old life and embrace the new. One way or another, we will find ourselves journeying through the crushing of our old selves before we can discover our new life in God's Promised Land. Being alive really does mean being prepared to die - and this is where our basic trust in the God who calls us on this journey is tested. Without a basic trust in God's life, without a robust hope in

the resurrection, it is pretty much impossible to welcome the cross and the death it brings.

Once we have embraced the inevitability of losing our life, and have learned to trust the life beyond death, a whole new world of possibilities opens up to us. It is impossible to measure the life-giving benefits that the human race has received from those who have been willing, literally or figuratively, to lose their lives. One amazing example of this life-giving self-sacrifice is the physician Jesse William Lazear who, in order to confirm the theory that yellow fever was transmitted by mosquitos, allowed himself to be bitten by one of the disease-carrying creatures. His death at age 34 brought the confirmation he sought, and with it, ensured life for numerous men and women. In honour of his sacrifice, John Hopkins University named a dormitory after him.

The question of trust then, that we all have to face, is this: What is the Promised Land worth to us? What is true, divine life worth? And what do we have to die to in order to enter the Promised Land of God's abundant life?

Now to live the life

Abundant life sounds like the opposite of death, but, as with much in the upside-down world of God's Reign, the two are, in fact, two parts of one mysterious reality. If we cling to life, we lose it. If we lose our life, we find it. It hardly sounds like a promise, but once we've glimpsed the life that lies beyond the cross, we know that it truly is. The promise that God made to Abraham, God makes to us: there is a Promised Land awaiting us. It can't be known by staying in the old country and dreaming. It can't even be known by travelling as tourists around the new country, while still calling the old-world home. It can only be experienced when we are willing to die to the old world - to burn the bridges, scuttle the ships, and transfer our citizenship completely and irrevocably to the new world.

But, there is still more to the promise. If we can find the courage to accept the call, and embrace our death, we, like Abraham, discover that we are blessed in order to be a blessing. It's not just that we begin to live in the Promised Land, but others begin to see it in us. We become the vision they need in order for faith in the promise to be born in their hearts. We begin to reveal the true nature of the 'bright, shiny objects' that distract us and we allow those who encounter us to taste what the new world is really like. Then, little by little an entire exodus begins to happen as more and more people leave the old world to enter the new. And once that happens, the old world itself begins to change as its values and systems dissolve in the flood of manifestations of God's life-giving Reign.

On May 6th, 1954, a runner by the name of Roger Bannister accomplished what up to that point had been considered an impossibility. He ran the mile in under four minutes, breaking the tape in 3 minutes, 59.4 seconds. It required training and sacrifice for Bannister himself, but also for his fellow runners who had helped to make the feat possible. In order to ensure that he stayed on course throughout the race, Bannister employed the help of two friends, who were willing to give up their own hope of glory, in order to get Bannister across the line in time. From the start of the race, Chris Brasher ran out front, keeping the pace at the required speed, and allowing Bannister to simply follow. When Brasher grew tired, a second friend, Chris Chataway took over, until, on the last lap, he too fell away allowing Bannister to make the final effort to break the record. But, while these three friends were the first to break the four-minute barrier, their work opened the way for others to follow. In the next three years another

sixteen runners ran the mile in under four minutes. Bannister's 'blessing' became a blessing for them as, having seen the 'Promised Land' in his historic run, they were able to enter it for themselves.

All this talk of death may sound depressing - anything but life-giving. However, as we continue to travel deeper into the promise of God, the nature of this amazing new world that God offers us becomes increasingly clear. All that remains is, once again, the basic question of trust: what is life - true, vibrant abundant life - worth to us? And are we willing for God to give us the faith to go for it? **Amen**

Hymn: When I survey the wondrous cross Isaac Watts **StF 287 / H&P 180**

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| 1. When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride. | 3. See from His head, His hands, His feet,
Sorrow and love flow mingled down!
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet,
Or thorns compose so rich a crown? |
| 2. Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast,
Save in the death of Christ my God!
All the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to His blood. | 4. Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all. |

Prayers of Intercession:

Dear God, who is always beckoning us into the Promised Land of your grace and love:
May the prayers we speak be a means through which that new world is revealed among us.

May the love and faithfulness of your Reign:
Fill our families and friendships;

May the humility and service of your Reign:
Fill our churches and communities;

May the inclusivity and goodwill of your Reign;
Fill our towns and regions;

May the peace and justice of your Reign:
Fill our nations and continents;

And may we all know the courage and commitment of your Spirit, to release everything in our lives that keep us from life, and embrace your life-giving presence and purpose.

Amen

Hymn: My Jesus My Saviour Darlene Zschech **StF 363**

My Jesus My Saviour
Lord There Is None Like You
All Of My Life I Want To Praise
The Wonders Of Your Mighty Love
My Comfort My Shelter
Tower Of Refuge And Strength
Let Every Breath
All That I Am
Never Cease To Worship You.

