

Music to start: God is good, Graham Kendrick https://youtu.be/MzVi_NISKJc

Call to Worship Psalm 107: 1-8

O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
for his steadfast love endures forever.
² Let the redeemed of the LORD say so,
those he redeemed from trouble
³ and gathered in from the lands,
from the east and from the west,
from the north and from the south.^[a]
⁴ Some wandered in desert wastes,
finding no way to an inhabited town;
⁵ hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted within them.
⁶ Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble,
and he delivered them from their distress;

Let us thank the LORD for his steadfast love, for his wonderful works to humankind.
And praise God's Holy name!

HYMN Give thanks unto the Lord our God (tune *Kingsfold*) at R&S 349 recorded by Thora
a version of Psalm 107 from *The Scottish Psalter, 1929* (words in Church Hymnary 4)

1 Give thanks unto the Lord our God.
How good and kind is he
whose tender mercy shall endure
through all eternity.
Let God's redeemed repeat these words
and give him thanks and praise
who rescued them from hostile hands,
preserved them all their days.

2 He gathered them from out the lands,
from north, south, east, and west.
They strayed in desert's pathless way,
no city found to rest.
Their weary soul within then faints
when thirst and hunger press;
in trouble then they cried to God;
he saved them from distress.

3 He made the way before them straight,
and he became their guide,
that they might to a city go
wherein they might abide.
Let all the children of the Lord
now praise him for his grace,
and for the works of wonder done
in every time and place!

Opening Prayers (based on Psalm 107)

God, our guide and our protector,
as we gather today,
open our minds and souls and hearts,
that we may be inclined to hear the gentle direction
of your spirit in our lives.
Help us follow you as you lead us
to the land you have created for us,
where we may dwell with you and in you. Amen.

—written by Robert Blezard

Lord, I have listened to the stories of your legendary deeds:
Some wandered in wastelands lost and lonely.
They sought you and you saved them.
Some despaired in darkness imprisoned and isolated.
They sought you and you saved them.
Some sailed the sea and were stranded in its storms.
They sought you and you saved them.
Some subsisted in sin, conceited and contemptible.
Eventually they sought you and you saved them.
Like those in your Book,
at times I am lost, imprisoned, stranded or contemptible.
Like those in your Book, may you save me when I seek you. Amen

— written by Chris Altrock

Offering

You are reminded to continue to send in your gifts for the work of the church.
God, whose giving knows no ending,
we offer up the treasure that you have entrusted to us;
we offer up the skills and time that you have graciously given to us;
we offer up ourselves in service and praise.
Receive these gifts by your grace.
Multiply and use them through the power of the Holy Spirit
to accomplish Christ's work of love in the world. **Amen.**

written by Joanna Harader, <http://spaciousfaith.com/>

Reading: Numbers 21:4-9

Although it is included in the lectionary, it seems to me that we don't often read from the book of Numbers, perhaps not least because it includes some pretty boring lists and statutes, along with some bizarre things like talking donkeys, the earth swallowing people and bronze snakes with healing properties! Numbers tells the story of Israel's journey through the wilderness to the promised land. As well as the lists and strange things, it includes poetry, songs, wilderness stories and probably the Bible's best-known benediction – the Aaronic blessing (The Lord bless you and keep you...) used at baptisms. We perhaps do not read from Numbers often for good reason, but I read an interesting devotion on just this passage a couple of weeks ago, which I'd like to share. As well as the URC Daily Devotions, I am also signed up for daily devotions from the United Church of Christ in the USA and this is one of those.

"Sometimes we go to great lengths to avoid actually looking at what is causing pain, even death, in our own lives and communities. Why? Is it because if we look at the problem head-on, chances are good that we will have to deal with it?"

On their wilderness journey, the Hebrew people complained long and loud about their situation. They accused Moses of bringing them out of slavery in Egypt only to kill them in the wilderness. Their lack of faith led to an invasion of poisonous snakes. Moses received a strange instruction from God. "Make a serpent of bronze and put it on a pole. If people are bitten, they are to look at the bronze serpent and they will be healed." They were to look at the source of the pain and death. Lent is a good time to come clean about the things that are the real sources of pain and death in our lives and relationships, and to ask God's help to be delivered from them. Grudges we carry and

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refuse to release, addictions we don't admit, anger we've allowed to eat away at us, sin we have failed to own. We may point to, even treat, the symptoms - fatigue, irritability, deadness in relationships - but avoid looking at the source of the pain. But when we look directly at the source of pain in our lives and take responsibility for action, a wondrous thing can happen. That source of pain may become a source of healing."

The pandemic has forced us to look into the eye of the serpent, to look at the death, illness and loss of livelihoods and education, and take action. It hasn't been action we've wanted to take – stuck alone in our homes for months unable to see friends and family, but we have done it for the greater good. The current climate crisis should also force us to look at the situation head-on and see what we can realistically do about it – changes in our own lives like consuming less, eating less meat, recycling, trying to shop locally and ethically, and how we might persuade others to take action through signing petitions, writing to MPs, raising awareness of the issues by talking to people and posting information on social media. The quinquennial survey has caused us at Christ Church, to address the issue of building maintenance work that needs doing and how at the same time we might seek to discern what else God wants us to do to make our building more open, welcoming and useful to the wider community, to save energy and make the building sustainable for the future and to use the wonderful gift we have of a building with halls and space and solar panels to grow the kingdom of God through social justice and outreach. And I'm sure, as the UCC devotion says, we all have our own snakes to look at and address. Lent is a good time to let go of old bitterness and regret, get rid of the baggage of relationships that have changed, accept what we ourselves need to work on and move on, with the glorious resurrection of our Lord before us, as the everlasting light at the end of the tunnel, the silver lining to every cloud of doubt and trouble that comes our way. And let me remind you of the warning from Numbers - lack of faith leads to an invasion of poisonous snakes! Or, for a more positive view, as someone said in the first focus group on the building - we should see what God wants us to do and not worry about how to do it, or where the money will come from.

HYMN To God be the glory, R&S 289 recorded by Thora

To God be the glory, great things he has done
So loved he the world that he gave us his Son
who yielded his life an atonement for sin
and opened the life-gate that all may go in.

*Praise the Lord, praise the Lord! Let the earth hear his voice!
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord! Let the people rejoice!
O come to the Father, through Jesus the Son;
and give him the glory - great things He has done!*

O perfect redemption, the purchase of blood
to every believer the promise of God!
and every offender who truly believes,
that moment from Jesus a pardon receives:

Great things he has taught us, great things he has done,
and great our rejoicing through Jesus the Son
but purer, and higher, and greater will be
the wonder, our beauty, when Jesus we see:

Reading: John 3:14-21

This well-known passage in John's gospel is linked to our reading from Numbers by the lifting up of a serpent. The passage begins with a play on the word "lift up." It describes God's command to Moses to lift up the serpent in the wilderness and the lifting up that is in store for Jesus. The passage makes little sense without the background story from Numbers. In that narrative, the people became impatient. Still in the wilderness after their departure from Egypt and despairing of being able to survive in a land with no food and water, they complained against God and Moses. Consequently, terrible serpents appeared, bit the people, and killed them. When they repented, the Lord told Moses to make a serpent and set it on a pole so that anyone who had been bitten might look at it and live. The serpent was a mark of God's anger and God's mercy. God's people might be saved by the God of life, if they only looked at the image of the thing which had brought about their death.

To see the Son of Man lifted up calls for belief for the sake of eternal life, not simply a restoration of earthly life. God once saved the people by calling upon them to gaze on the serpent. Now, God saves the people by having them gaze in belief upon the Son, lifted up.

Next comes John 3:16 – "for God so loved the world", in which the "so" is often misunderstood. The Greek *houtos* means 'so' in the sense of just so, or in this way. We could translate the verse as 'This is the way God loved the world, with the result that he gave his only Son, in order that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.' John 3:16 is not about how *much* God loved the world. It is about *what way* God loved the world.

The single most important thing to notice about this verse is that God loved the world. God deeply loved the world that God had created, and God longs for this creation to live. It is not only God's own people whom God will save, as in the Numbers story. It is the whole cosmos that God has loved, precisely by having given the only son.

Yet God's action was not disinterested. The purpose of God's having sent the Son was to save the world, just as the purpose of commanding Moses to erect a serpent on a pole was to save the people from death. The son came to save, to grant eternal life because God loved the world. That was Jesus' announcement - I'm here because the God who loved you of old, still does. He sent me to tell you, to show you, to gather you up into life with him forever.

Jesus' coming is like the bringing of a light into a dark space, but the people loved the darkness more than the light, like the Israelites who complained to God even though God had provided them with food and water throughout their long journey in the wilderness.

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John tells us that while Jesus is God's unconditional gift, in our belief or our doubt lie real consequences in our daily life and our everlasting relationship with God. But he tells us in order to help us see the contrasts, look clearly at our lives, appreciate the gracious gift of God as a gift of love, and live in fearless confidence of that love.

Prayers of Intercession (inspired by Psalm 107)

Our gracious, eternal God, we bow to you who are from everlasting to everlasting. We thank you for that seed of uneasiness which you have placed within us which causes us to hunger and thirst for an inner peace which endures. Yet we often wander on life's journey and fail to find peace. And we know that our lack of peace is due to the many ways in which we misdirect our inner discontent.

We keep our eye upon those who are more successful and we become consumed by envy. We carry resentment that someone else has more than we do and we rail against life's unfairness. We long for a security which money might bring but fail to see that there is no way money can cure our inner discontent. Bend your ear to us this day. Provide your healing touch and help us to redirect our search for security and peace.

Help us always to remember that it is you who lend us life and that life is a gift.

Help us to remember that the purpose of life is always greater than knowing that we have enough for tomorrow.

Help us to remember that our resources also are only a gift and that we are only caretakers with a responsibility for the well-being of our sisters and brothers.

Help us to remember that true riches do not lie in abundance but in being rich toward you who alone offer a peace which passes all understanding.

God our Mother and Father, on this Mothering Sunday with give thanks for our church, for our mothers and for all women who have nurtured us. Grant peace and comfort to those whose mothers are no longer living and to those who are separated by country, the restrictions of lockdown or the fog of dementia. In the silence we bring to mind all those we know of who are ill, recuperating, and the bereaved. Grant them your love and comfort that knows no bounds – in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ, who you gave because you love the world so much, we pray. **Amen.**

Lord's Prayer

HYMN The Church's one foundation R&S 566 recorded by Thora

1 The church's one foundation
is Jesus Christ her Lord;
she is his new creation
by water and the word:
from heaven he came and sought her
to be his holy bride;
with his own blood he bought her
and for her life he died.

2 Elect from every nation,
yet one through all the earth;
her charter of salvation
one Lord, one faith, one birth:
one holy name she blesses,
and shares one holy food;
as to one hope she presses
with every grace endued

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3 Mid toil and tribulation,
and tumult of her war,
she waits the consummation
of peace for evermore:
till with the vision glorious
her longing eyes are blessed;
at last the church victorious
shall be the church at rest!

4 Yet she on earth has union
with God the Three-in-One;
and mystic, sweet communion
with those whose rest is won:
O happy ones and holy!
Lord, give us grace that we,
like them the meek and lowly,
on high may dwell with thee.

Blessing for Mothering Sunday

May the God who brought us to birth by his Spirit,
strengthen us for the Christian life.
May the God who provides for all our needs sustain us day by day.
May the God whose steadfast love is constant as a mother's care,
send us out to live and work for others.
And the blessing of God Almighty, the Parent, the Child, and the Holy Spirit,
be with you and remain with you always. Amen.

Amended from a collection of *Mothering Sunday Prayers* produced by Mothers Union

Music to end: Hymn Tune Kingsfold (I heard the voice of Jesus Say) played by Michael T.C. Hey,
Assistant Director of Music at Saint Patrick's Cathedral in Manhattan www.michaelhey.com
<https://youtu.be/L0VmpNq4IDg>

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