

### **Call to worship**

Pilgrims, we are invited to journey through this season of Lent towards the One who calls us each by a new name.  
Disciples, we walk with Jesus wherever he leads us, pulling our fears, our doubts, our longings behind us.  
Believers, we seek to trust the God who always surprises us, whose promises take on flesh and blood in the good news called Jesus.

Come to us even now, O Lord of Life,  
and fill this place with your presence!  
We praise your name and rejoice in your love,  
we stand in utter amazement of who you are!  
Everyone who calls upon you will find fulfilment,  
They will rejoice forever, because you are God!  
Rejoice and give thanks! Halleluiah! Amen!

**Hymn** All my hope on God is founded MP 16

### **Gifts**

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.**

### **Opening Prayers**

Though people may turn their backs on us,  
you do not hide your face from us.  
Though others may try to take away our hope,  
you assure us of that future waiting for us.  
You speak your name, Inscrutable Creator, and it is enough.  
When we try to dictate our fears to you,  
you invite us to follow you into self-denial and service.  
As we struggle to shape our lifestyle to yours,  
you carry us with you wherever we go.  
You speak your good news, Teacher of open hearts, and it is enough.  
Though we have done nothing to earn them,  
you pour out the gifts of grace and mercy upon us.  
When we stumble over our lack of trust,  
you set us back on our feet, to follow you into the kingdom.  
You speak your peace, Breath of Holiness, and it is enough.  
God in Community, Holy in One,  
it is enough that you hear us as we come here to worship you. Amen

And a prayer for Lent – URC Prayer Handbook p18

**Hymn** My hope is built on nothing less MP 473

**Bible readings:**      **Psalms 22:23-31**  
                                 **Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16**

One of the daily devotions I read this week said we're sometimes asked what we would die for, but it asked if a better question wouldn't be who or what would we live for? It went on to

say that to live in the key of life is to live in alignment with God – the writer was quoting the eulogy for a singer. And the closing suggestion was for us to live our lives in the key of love. I also visited Steve and Valerie this week and heard a bit about Frank's love for people and how he took care of people, which brings me back to that question, who would you live for? The obvious answer for a minister, and hopefully for all Christians is for God and for others. Today's reading from Genesis talks about the covenant between God and Abraham and Sarah. Last week's reading from Genesis, gave us the covenant between God and Noah that God would never again send a flood to destroy the earth with that promise sealed by the rainbow in the sky. Today's covenant is sealed by the promise from God that Abraham, despite being 99 years old will have many descendants. God promises to Abraham and all the following generations to be their God. Interestingly, the lectionary misses out the following verses that say what Abraham's side of the bargain is – he and all his male offspring are to be circumcised so that so "my covenant shall be in your flesh an everlasting covenant" and anyone who does not do it, shall be cut off from his people for he will have broken the covenant with God. This seems a bit harsh, and of course we learn in the New Testament, especially in Paul's letter to the Romans, that Gentile Christians do not have to do this. The Old Testament talks a lot about the covenant between God and the people of Israel and what will happen if they break it. Most of the stories about the exile imply it is punishment for the people breaking their promises to God. I find it interesting that these promises are shown in very physical, embodied ways – God's sign is granting Abraham and Sarah a child, even though they are way too old for that to be possible, and the descendants that follow have a sign of the covenant physically signed on their bodies. As Christians, unless you wear a cross, we have no outward sign of our faith. We don't wear any special clothes, or cover our heads, or pray in a visual way as Muslims do with their prostrations. We can only really show our faith through our actions.

Genesis is a book about beginning: the beginning of humankind, the beginning of Israel (that's the Jewish people, not the modern country of Israel), and the beginning of the relationship between God and a particular people.

Genesis 17 tells the story of the election of Abraham as the leader from whom many nations would descend. Abraham was the father of three great faiths: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. It also tells the story of the selection of Sarah as the woman through whom Israel, the chosen people in their telling of their own story, will be born. At the same time that Genesis focuses on one particular family it also draws connections between all the peoples of the world. The rest of the scriptures will claim that while the God of Israel has a special relationship with Israel, the God of Israel is also the God of all the world. Ishmael,

the son Abraham had with the slave woman Hagar, went on to become an important figure in Islam, the Muslim faith and nations.

Abraham is a man with many flaws, not least marrying his half-sister. Sarah too has serious character flaws. She forces her slave to marry and have sex with her husband to make a baby since God takes too long and she begins to doubt the promise made earlier about her having children. Though it is difficult to see when reading in English, the Hebrew text makes it clear that Sarah abuses Hagar quite violently. God's deliberate choice of deeply flawed human beings characterizes God's relationship with humanity. And it provides an opportunity to remember that deeply flawed human beings are always more than their worst actions past or present.

Abraham chooses to answer God's call, trusting in a God he may not have previously known, a God who was one of many gods in his homeland (modern-day Iraq). The text makes clear that Sarah is not a silent partner in this venture. She has strong opinions and speaks her mind, and she chooses to accompany Abraham on the journey of a lifetime following the voice of God. She is a full partner in the journey.

When we find them in chapter 17, Abraham is ninety-nine and Sarah is ninety – ages when you might expect people to give up, or at least be living an easy life. In our world, some people spend their entire lifetimes trying to figure out how to leave the hopes and hurts, dreams, and schemes of the past behind so we can live into who we are called to be. A person can spend a lifetime putting abuse and trauma behind them, unlearning destructive patterns, responses and behaviours, and relearning how to live and love as a whole and healthy person. Life lessons take a lifetime to accrue and perhaps Abraham needed seventy-five years before he could follow God's voice and leave his ancestral home.

However, since we are told that Abraham lived to be one hundred and seventy-five, he had another hundred years, an entire lifetime to live into his fullest self, apply the lessons he learned, make mistakes along the way and try again. Perhaps one lesson we are to learn from the length of Abraham's life is you're never too old to leave behind that which will not bless you and start over. Or, in other words, to think about what you will live for. Sarah and Abraham are not the only people who have needed to leave home to become fully who they were called to be. If we take this lesson to heart, we too will leave ignorant and harmful ethics and practices behind. Perhaps this Lent we need to think about what, or who we will live for, not what we'd be willing to die for. What good things we will take on, not only what bad things we might try to give up or correct. Perspective is everything.

We also heard read verses from Psalm 22. You may know that Jesus said the words from the start of Psalm 22 on the cross – "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Those

are not the words the lectionary gives us today. Like many psalms, Psalm 22 turns from lament, from crying out in anguish to God, to praising God, to recognising that God is the only one who can help and to remembering the covenant God made with humanity, to always be our God. Not that nothing bad will ever happen to us, but that God will always be with us through the good times and the hard times. The psalmist tells how God did not hide from him but heard when he cried out to God in pain. "All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations shall worship before the one and only God." As God made a promise to be faithful to us, so we must be faithful to God; align our ways with God's ways and try to live our lives in the key of love.

**Hymn** The God of Abraham praise MP 645

**Prayers of intercession**

Long before the change of name, before the first signs of new life  
showed the beginnings of promises fulfilled,  
You asked Abraham to make his home among foreigners,  
and share the blessing that was to come.

And now, O God, you ask the same faith of us:  
The faith to count ourselves among the least,  
to find our place alongside the poor and broken;  
The faith to trust in your mercy and your promises,  
and to share what we have received;  
The faith to wait expectantly for your reign of justice and equity,  
together with those who most need its gifts.

Teach us to be children of Abraham, sharers of the blessings we enjoy:  
The blessing of plenty shared with those who have need,  
The blessing of healing shared with those who are sick and wounded,  
The blessing of joy shared with those who celebrate  
and the blessing of tears shared with those who grieve,  
The blessing of friendship shared with those who are excluded,  
and of solidarity with those who fight injustice,  
The blessing of peace shared with those in conflict,  
and of confrontation shared with those who bring harm;  
And in some small way, may our faith and our sharing,  
help to bring your promises into being in our world.

Holy One, we pray for all people who are in trouble and fear today:  
For those who are sad because someone they love has died  
For those who are anxious because someone is ill or in pain  
For those who are lonely because someone they love is not there for them. In SILENCE...

Lord bless: Those who are tired because they have too much to do  
Those who are struggling with financial difficulties  
Those who are unhappy because of an unkind word or action  
Holy One, surround those in need with your wisdom, your spirit,

The Bridgwater Drive Church, 25 Feb. 2024

your healing and your life-giving peace.  
Shape us and transform us by your grace,  
that we may grow in wisdom and in confidence,  
never faltering until we give you the steadfast love that you desire,  
and we bring your realm of peace and love to fulfillment. Amen.

### **The Lord's Prayer**

**Hymn**     Forth in thy name MP 159

### **Blessing**

Go now, and live before God in openness and integrity.  
Set your minds on the ways of God, not clinging to your own life,  
but taking up your cross and following Jesus.  
And may God give you a share in the eternal covenant;  
May Christ Jesus be proud of you when he comes in glory;  
And may the Holy Spirit make you grow strong in faith  
and lead you in the ways of righteousness. Amen

The Bridgwater Drive Church sung Blessing.

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