



Birstall and Rothley Methodist Churches



A Service for February 14th, 2021

[This service has been prepared for use at home.](#)

Call to Worship

As darkness gives way to light
and winter sleep to fresh beginnings,

We come today to be reminded of God's love for us.

Like the green shoots of renewed life,
stirring beneath the soil,

We welcome an awakening of God's word in our lives.

In this time of reflection and repentance,

***We affirm our identity, we claim our security,
as children of God.***

Hymn

Tune: *Hyfrydol* (StF 157)

In the bulb there is a flower;
in the seed, an apple tree;
In cocoons, a hidden promise:
butterflies will soon be free!
In the cold and snow of winter
there's a spring that waits to be;
unrevealed until its season,
something God alone can see.

There's a song in every silence,
seeking word and melody;
There's a dawn in every darkness,
bringing hope to you and me.
From the past will come the future;
what it holds, a mystery;
unrevealed until its season,
something God alone can see.

In our end is our beginning;
in our time, infinity;
In our doubt there is believing;
in our life, eternity,
In our death, a resurrection;
at the last, a victory;
unrevealed until its season,
something God alone can see.

words: Natalie Sleeth (1930-92) © 1986 Hope Publishing Company

Prayer

God,
you loved the world so much that you embraced it, in all its suffering.
Your beloved Son, Jesus Christ, willingly entered the wilderness,
knew its temptations,
and felt the sharp hunger for food,
and for human contact.

He walked the way of the cross
that he might come to Easter,
and offer us the way back to you.

As we approach Lent,
we thank you for the weeks that are to come,
and pray that we may become more receptive
to all it has to teach us,
and to the incredible promise of new life:
life to challenge all that is deathly in our world,
life to challenge all that is dull in our hearts.

Help us to use this time,
not just in specific times of prayer,
but in the thoughtfulness in which we go about these coming days,
listening for your voice in all we do.

Challenge the habits that restrict us,
and the assumptions that close our minds.

Help us also to be aware of others
who at this time are examining themselves,
whether from religious duty
or because they have reached a turning point,
in a career, or in a relationship, or in a crisis.

Give us an ear that listens,
that we may find the words to sustain;
and the openness to learn;
through Jesus Christ, our deliverance and our hope.

Amen.

Reading: Mark 1:1-14

The beginning of the good news[a] of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,
“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;
the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.’”

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.

He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

Sermon

Today is the Sunday before Lent, and the set reading for today reminds us about the time when Jesus took Peter, Andrew, James and John up a mountain, and they saw him transfigured. Today, though, I don’t want to go to the mountain. As we stand at the edge of Lent, we go to the edge of the wilderness.

There you go - a picture of the Judean wilderness. Actually, it isn’t all like that. Most of it looks more like this!

“Wilderness” just means the uncultivated places between the towns and the farms. It is scrubby, but it has water, and vegetation. It’s not the most hospitable place, nor is it the most comfortable. It’s sometimes described in the Bible as a “lonely place”, but there is plenty in terms of basic provision, for those who know how to find it.

Throughout the Bible, we hear how people go into the wilderness for a time. It offers a retreat from the distractions of everyday life. In the quietness and solitude, deeper things can be sought, and discovered.

In the ‘wilderness’, Abraham learned the will of God; and discovered how to live it. He received all that he needed to be the founding father of the new people of God.

Isaac and Jacob wandered there; and Jacob, in particular, discovered his true self, and became a changed man.

Moses wandered in the ‘wilderness’ looking after his father-in-law’s sheep. That’s when he discovered the power of God, and, to his surprise, became the one appointed to lead the people.

Later, when Moses led the nation in their wilderness wanderings, they all discovered something of what it meant to be the *‘People of God’*.

Elijah the prophet, wandered in the ‘wilderness’ for three years; waiting for the Lord’s further word. There, he discovered that the promises of God are true; and that all his

needs would be provided for, until the day came for him to return to Israel, and help restore true faith and practice to the nation.

At the beginning of Mark's gospel, we hear how John the Baptist lived for many years in the 'wilderness', and how he discovered much of self, of his mission and purpose, as God spoke to him.

So I suppose that it's really no surprise to hear that Jesus also spent time in the wilderness. What surprises me, still, is that he had to be driven there - he didn't want to go. Yes, he knew that he would face hunger, temptation, and the threat from wild animals - but he was Jesus! He's not supposed to be like us.

Actually the whole point of his life is that he was just like us. It's almost a cliché to say that we all know the wilderness - places of howling loneliness, silence, devastation. But clichés are only clichés because they are true.

We all know the wilderness. And none of us willingly spend time there. Where we feel alone, bereft of contact, even with God, and out of communion with our true self?

I don't want to trivialise this, or skip over it on the way to a promise of comfort and restoration. The wilderness is not a pleasant rest stop.

But when you are in the wilderness, you discover that there is sustenance, and that you are not totally alone.

This is one of my favourite pictures of the wilderness. There is water, and there is vegetation. And there are people. There are about 40 people in this picture.

Once you have been in the wilderness, you know that you can survive if you are there again. You know that there is enough to keep you, and there are people who are beside you.

Later on, we read that Jesus chose to go back into the wilderness at various times - clearly he found something there that he couldn't survive without.

Freedom from distraction?
From the incessantly clamouring voices demanding his help and healing?
Freedom to think, and pray, and focus on God?

The wilderness can be a place to discover what is important. In the wilderness we find what gives us nourishment, and strength, and who is there alongside us. We can find new life and direction: an experience, both of God, and of ourselves.

Jesus was served by angels, and angels, in my experience, often look like ordinary human beings. He emerged from the wilderness with a clear purpose, and he began his ministry with a ringing call to believe the Good News.

The wilderness may be a place of grace, and renewed purpose.

Reflection: *Words about Wilderness*

Christianity began in a culture
where “desert” and “wilderness” were familiar environments,
both respected and feared as the place
where angels and demons might be found.

In wild, desolate places God’s people
have been shaped by their struggles,
and have found that rocks have yielded water,
and manna has appeared on the ground.

Beware of the comfort of our lives,
where we grow complacent and over-confident,
and where discernment is limited
to choosing which products to buy.

In this country of plenty,
may we not forget the metaphor
of wilderness and desert.

Our journey may be into an inner desert:
a place where motivation and desire is purified,
and we find ourselves refined
and strengthened in spirit.

Jesus, whose formation included wilderness,
will be at our side,
will wipe away our tears,
and place bread
into the hands which have clutched at stones.

*written by Ann Siddall, and posted on the website of the **Stillpoint Spirituality Centre.***
<http://www.stillpointsa.org.au/>

Prayer

God of love
hear the cry of those who yearn for love;
fractured families, broken homes
neglected, unwanted, alone.

God of love
hear our prayer

God of justice
hear the cry of those who yearn for justice;
persecuted and oppressed,
exploited, ill-treated, broken.

God of justice
hear our prayer

God of peace
hear the cry of those who yearn for peace;
in battle zones and broken states,
frightened, fearful, anxious.

God of peace
hear our prayer

God of healing
hear the cry of those who yearn for healing;
physical and spiritual
hurting, weakened, depressed.

God of healing
hear our prayer

God of mercy
Hear the cry of those who yearn for mercy;
convicted, in need of your Grace,
contrite, humble, bowed down.

God of mercy
hear our prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven

Hymn

StF 626

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death
your perfect love is casting out fear
and even when I'm caught in the middle of the storms of this life
I won't turn back
I know you are near.
And I will fear no evil
for my God is with me
and if my God is with me
whom then shall I fear?
Whom then shall I fear?

*Oh no, You never let go
Through the calm and through the storm
Oh no, You never let go
In every high and every low
Oh no, You never let go
Lord, You never let go of me*

And I can see a light that is coming for the heart that holds on
A glorious light beyond all compare
And there will be an end to these troubles -
but until that day comes,
we'll live to know you here on the earth.
And I will fear no evil
for my God is with me
and if my God is with me
whom then shall I fear?
Whom then shall I fear?

Oh no, you never let go

Yes, I can see a light that is coming for the heart that holds on,
and there will be an end to these troubles,
but until that day comes
still I will praise You, still I will praise You. *(repeat)*

words: Matt Redman and Beth Redman

Blessing

May we find the road that leads to life;
may we take the turns that brings right relationships;
may we pause to accompany others on the way;
and as we journey with God through Lent,
see the dawning horizon.

And the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God
and the fellowship if the Holy Spirit, be with you forevermore.

Amen.