

Worship Sunday 10 January

Don't often start this way but I feel it will help to share a bit about my week to put the full service into perspective.

Local Covid figures rising dramatically,

Feeling rubbish myself,

watching events unfold in America as I turned on the news to here the results of vote for Senate in Georgia,

Exhaustion, Possible Ear and Throat infection, a bit of temp,

Getting a test for peace of mind, which was thankfully negative)

Joke I saw online on Thursday – saying my 7 day trial for 2021 is up and I want a refund. Part of me

wishes I could return 2021 - and start again, or take another route! But as CS Lewis said, "**You can't** go back **and change** the beginning, **but you can start** where **you are and change** the ending."

So, I hope we can plod on with the brave young mother Mary and the little donkey and the majestic wise men boldly with hope in our hearts trusting that things can only get better. Now back to the story of the Three Wise Men, through a slightly different lens.

Clip from Susan Brown about the Three Wise Men

See video on page.

We Three Kings - Click on link below for music and words

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zNBbCkDMSLw>

Prayer

Loving God, may we hear the movement in the kingdom,
the turning of the page, shifting from one chapter to the next;
alive in its renewing each day for each day.

And may we trust that the companionship of faith
of which we are all part is always moving, growing, evolving,
through the freedom we give it as we bring your words into the world and let them respond in this world.

And may the invitation we accept to place your love
within our neighbourhood invite the movement
that is the Kingdom: alive in the world,
engaged with the world, a Word for the world.

And as we pause here, may we draw breath as we seek the space to confess and let go of that which
we can no longer hold,

that hurts too much, that corrupts our relationships,
that tarnishes our communities and seek that place
where fresh starts are possible and blessed.

May that space be here and that time, now. PAUSE

As we journey with the Wise Men to Bethlehem, to see the newborn king and journey forward in
faith with Jesus as his identity is revealed to the waiting world, through his life and later his baptism,
as God's beloved son, the Saviour, who taught us to pray together saying

LORD'S PRAYER

The Magi Visit the Messiah

2 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi^{1a} from the east came to Jerusalem² and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

³ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah

was to be born. ⁵“In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written: ⁶“But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.”^[b]”

⁷Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.”

⁹After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Reflection

On Wednesday morning, Epiphany, I woke up full of hope, with the vaccine on the way, and the votes I was waiting to hear about going to the minister of Martin Luther King’s church in Atlanta, and a ne I could have easily torn up what I was planning to say about the hope and courage of the wise men and the promises of baptism and how they inform our identity, but I decided that all of these are important despite the events of the week, here and back in the States, and so I turned to some of the authors and theologians and historians I trust must, for hope and courage and promise for the day, and for the weeks ahead.

(Words shared by Diana Butler Bass, author and Theologian)

At the very beginning of the Christian story in Matthew 2:1-12, we are warned that the birth of the peace and justice is intertwined with the reality of imperial violence. As the beloved community comes into the world, evil kings will lie and murder — do anything — to stop the possibility of God’s dream made manifest here and now.

So what do we do? Be like the magi. And do not give in to Herod.

The best wisdom I have tonight is that the wise men were, indeed, wise. This is the time to pause amid the yelling (and I’ve been doing a lot of yelling on Twitter!) and remember the light of the star. Remember the angelic song of peace. Remember the longing of our hearts for a governance of grace. And remembering, we continue on following the star. It will stop. We can kneel, worship, be overcome with joy. Even through Herod lies, God’s presence does not absent itself. Love is still here.

And then — once we let that truth fill us — we do not go home the way we came. Because there will always be some Herod whose fear leads to violence and death. We will leave this Epiphany by another road.

I don’t know where that other road will take us. But we can’t continue on the road we’ve been traveling. If nothing else, I’m glad we’re on this journey together. There are many who see more clearly today than yesterday, and many who will be searching for the star. Look up. Salvation is at hand.

And so I quickly decided, that the hope I felt on Wednesday morning will not be diminished by the actions of a few, that those attempting to wield their power in such a way, will not steal my joy, but rather deepen my resolve to continue to work and pray for peace and justice for all.

Hymn The Kingdom of God is Justice and Joy

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vqCOqgQhFyo>

Susan Brown, posted this on Wednesday night, as a prayer from the Church of Scotland for America,

Peace be with you. Not 'just' the absence of violence -
but soul reaching risk taking peace
that respects even those with whom it disagrees....
Let that peace reign.
Without anger or the need for retribution.
Peace be with you on Capitol Hill...
watching in from across that land
and from across the world.
Our prayer is....Peace be with you.

SKIP FORWARD THIRTY YEARS IN JESUS LIFE

OR FIVE DAYS IN MINE TO THE SERMON I PREPARED EARLIER

Song As I went down to the river to pray Allison Krauss

*Setting the scene: three fugitives, having spent an uncomfortable night sleeping outside and
breakfasting on squirrel are mid argument when, through the forest, a group of people, all dressed in
white and singing this song, make their way past them to the river. There they are baptised and one
of the fugitives has 'a moment' and runs to be baptised.*

Clip from Brother Where Art Thou? (copy and paste link below)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fztz_Vr9uHk&ab_channel=Phishfunk78

Mark 1:4-11

New International Version

⁴And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. ⁶John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷And this was his message: "After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. ⁸I baptize you with^[a] water, but he will baptize you with^[b] the Holy Spirit."

The Baptism and Testing of Jesus

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

Redefining Belonging

During the global pandemic in many parts of the world within theological circles there was considerable debate about whether the sacraments could be authentically officiated from a distance. Could you have communion via live-streamed service with everyone at home with their own glasses of wine and piece of bread?

In many parts of the church the answer to this question was: aye, get on with it! Fewer conversations have been had about the possibility of baptism via Zoom, with a parent dousing or

dipping their child in water while the minister intones from a nearby iPad. But why not? (Answers in a thesis to the team...)

When we see baptism as symbolic of a new start, of a fresh beginning, as both John the Baptist and Paul see it, then it does inevitably make us second guess the stranglehold we, the Church, place on the sacrament and to whom the sacrament is offered. While for some still a rite of passage— getting the wean 'done' in common parlance—it is also for others a deeply moving moment recognising the journey of transformation they are undergoing with Jesus as their companion on that way.

Inevitably over the last nine months there has been considerable enforced re-evaluation of what makes church 'church'. We have asked ourselves how much buildings do or do not matter, what makes up a church family, how we uphold one another even when we cannot meet with each other, and what resources do we bring personally to enable God's work within our communities in a time when we had to find new ways of working, of reaching out in compassion, of worship and spiritual development. Amidst all of that we have recognised the need for and capacity that exists for great patience, resilience and fortitude.

Part of that journey is redefining what it means to belong to a community. Baptism has long been a symbol of that sense of belonging, whether of a child baptised into a church community that vows to care for and help that child grow

in faith, or of an adult making a commitment to join with others in the great adventure of faith: following our Lord Jesus. Many congregations during the period of lockdown have found themselves with worshippers gathered online from across the world, a whole new community, and with the realisation that the Spirit is moving amidst that new community to foster a sense of welcome amongst the rich diversity of faith explorers.

Jesus did not need to be baptised in a technical sense (if there is such a thing). And yet Jesus does take the opportunity to declare himself as part of the community of God's people, as part of a new faith community, a fresh start for him and for all those who choose to join him. It is a moment of solidarity with all those who know only too well that they need a fresh start in life. It is a glimpse in these early verses of Mark's gospel into the servant-like nature of Jesus as he offers himself to the will of God. Jesus places himself into the prophetic tradition that had come before him and from which John had mined a rich seam of authority. Jesus is granted the assurance of God for the ministry into which he is about to embark.

Which all leaves us with the constant question about who we follow. In whom do we place our trust? Do we fully commit ourselves, living out our baptismal promise of a new start, each and every day, as we promise to follow the One in whom God was well pleased?

Prayer

Loving God,
may we broaden the circle of the kingdom; let it increase
in our words and acts, in our dreams and prayers,
in our renewing of community, in this hope of new years.
May all that has been shaken up find a new way of being,
may our relationships with others be reshaped again on justice,
may our renewing of community and nation be

renewed on words of grace and belonging,
may these early days know of hope and possibility and
a way of being together for each other's sake.
Loving God, of fresh starts and belonging,
may we be blessed with such gifts in our world;
may we be that blessing and may we find it in others
beyond our normal circles
and within the great diversity of the kingdom.
May all that has been happening shake us up,
shake out the prejudice and renew the harmony,
shake out the fear and renew the trust,
shake out the mistrust and renew the hope.
Loving God, in the blessing that is your community may we find you
among us and between us in the place we are right now,
and know such a presence is your renewing, your reclaiming,
your forgiving and calling into what is yet to be.
So be it. Amen.

Closing Words

As a cherished part of God's family, we are called to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. (Ephesians 4:1-2)

In what ways can we seek to live this out this week and every week?

Sending

Beloved, forgiven and cherished, may you go in the peace and hope, the joy and justice of Christ which surpasses all our human understanding, Go in the knowledge that you are a treasured member of God's family, a companion with Jesus along life's journey, remembering that we are forever accompanied by the Holy Spirit.

Blessing