

## **21st Century Disciples: Engaging Scripture**

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### **Gathering**

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*Create a space for worship - perhaps with a small table with a bible, cross and candle.*

*This week, it would be appropriate to find a **purple cloth** or scarf to signify that we are moving into a time of preparation for Easter.*

*Take some deep breaths as you gather your thoughts towards God.*

#### **Gathering**

Welcome!

Whether your life is abundant or you find yourself wandering in the wilderness;

whether you are sure of your faith or have a million questions;

whether you are raring to go or have dragged yourself here today; you are welcome - and I pray that God will meet you where you are and enfold you in boundless love.



*Sea Eagle  
Windang Foreshore  
© John Davey*

#### **Light Candle**

We light a candle to centre us and to draw us towards Christ.

The writer of the gospel attributed to John assures us:

Jesus spoke to them, saying,  
"I am the light of the world.

Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life."

*John 8:12*

#### **Acknowledgement of Country**

As we gather in this place, between the mountains and the sea, we give thanks for the Wodi Wodi people of the Dharawal nation.

We acknowledge the commitment their ancestors made, across the generations, to nurturing this land.

Together, may we walk into the future,

recognising the sacred footsteps that continue to lead us to the promise of [God's Way].

*Amelia Koh-Butler, Wide and Deep, p.11*

#### **Introduction**

So can anyone notice anything about the worship space that is different from last week? we have begun preparing for Easter.

How long? 40 days + Sundays reflecting the story of Jesus' time in the wilderness - after his baptism and before he starts his public ministry - that's the story we will hear today.

This year, over the next 5 weeks or so, we are going to focus on the Psalms - thinking about why these particular Psalms are put alongside the gospel reading each week.

Sometimes they jar, sometimes they cause us to ask questions about our understanding of God, and sometimes they bring us great comfort and hope - perhaps they are, all the time, all three...

And in reading the Psalms alongside the gospel reading each week, mostly from Luke but with a cameo from John, we'll also think about what kinds of practices might help us as we seek to live as 21st century disciples.

So we begin this week with thinking about how we read scripture - not so much about how often, I hope that's regularly, but how do we engage with these ancient texts and ideas that are not so easy to describe?

### **Call to Worship**

The Psalm for today, Psalm 91 begins like this:

- <sup>1</sup> You who live in the shelter of the Most High,  
who abide in the shadow of the Almighty,
- <sup>2</sup> will say to the Lord, 'My refuge and my fortress;  
my God, in whom I trust.'

We pray...

God of the bountiful places, God of the wild places, as we leave what is familiar and find ourselves moving through a wilderness land, may we gather as a community of trust. May we set out holding to your call, to your longing and your love, which will bring us through. Amen.

*Seasons of the Spirit, Resources for Lent 1, 6 March 2022, p.18*

### **Sing - God Is Our Strength and Refuge (TIS 28)**

*The words of this hymn are taken from Psalm 46 and echo the Psalm for today, Psalm 91.*

God is our strength and refuge,  
our present help in trouble;  
and we therefore will not fear,  
though the earth should change,  
though mountains shake and tremble,  
though swirling waters are raging:  
God the Lord of Hosts is with us evermore.

Come see the works of our maker,  
learn of his deeds all-powerful:  
wars will cease across the world  
when he shatters the spear.  
Be still and know your creator,  
uplift him in the nations;  
God the Lord of Hosts is with us evermore.

There is a flowing river  
within God's holy city;  
God is in the midst of her,  
she shall not be moved.  
God's help is swiftly given,  
thrones vanish at his presence;  
God the Lord of Hosts is with us evermore.

© 1982 Hope Publishing Co. Words: R.T. Bewes; Music: E. Coates

### **Reading: Psalm 91 (Jula Szulerowski)**

- <sup>1</sup> You who live in the shelter of the Most High,  
who abide in the shadow of the Almighty,
- <sup>2</sup> will say to the Lord, 'My refuge and my fortress;  
my God, in whom I trust.'
- <sup>3</sup> For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler  
and from the deadly pestilence;
- <sup>4</sup> he will cover you with his pinions,

- and under his wings you will find refuge;  
his faithfulness is a shield and buckler.
- <sup>5</sup> You will not fear the terror of the night,  
or the arrow that flies by day,
- <sup>6</sup> or the pestilence that stalks in darkness,  
or the destruction that wastes at noonday.
- <sup>7</sup> A thousand may fall at your side,  
ten thousand at your right hand,  
but it will not come near you.
- <sup>8</sup> You will only look with your eyes  
and see the punishment of the wicked.
- <sup>9</sup> Because you have made the Lord your refuge,  
the Most High your dwelling-place,
- <sup>10</sup> no evil shall befall you,  
no scourge come near your tent.
- <sup>11</sup> For he will command his angels concerning you  
to guard you in all your ways.
- <sup>12</sup> On their hands they will bear you up,  
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.
- <sup>13</sup> You will tread on the lion and the adder,  
the young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot.
- <sup>14</sup> Those who love me, I will deliver;  
I will protect those who know my name.
- <sup>15</sup> When they call to me, I will answer them;  
I will be with them in trouble,  
I will rescue them and honour them.
- <sup>16</sup> With long life I will satisfy them,  
and show them my salvation.

For the Word of God in Scripture,  
for the Word of God among us,  
for the Word of God within us,  
***Thanks be to God!***

### **Prayer - Confession**

O God our refuge in times of need, you led your people out of bondage in Egypt and set before them the promise of a land of milk and honey. And yet the people grumbled and fell away.

Forgive us, O God, when we have looked upon your promises with impatience and ingratitude.

Forgive us, O God, when we have taken your bounty for granted, discarding what you offer us and wasting your creation.

Forgive us, O God, when we have been tempted by the lure of wealth and possessions. We have sometimes forgotten that we were not made to live by bread alone.

Forgive us when we decide how we think you should act and then get disappointed when you surprise us with something different.

Forgive us, O God, when we have used our circumstances in pursuit of self-glorification..

Forgive us, O God. Cleanse and renew us, so that we may worship and serve you with our whole hearts.

## Assurance

Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. "With long life I will satisfy them," God says, "and show them my salvation."  
Friends, know that God loves you, and will care for you always. Amen.

## Sing - You Who Dwell In the Shelter (TIS 48)

*The words of the verses come from Psalm 91 - with the chorus echoing Isaiah 40*

You who dwell in the shelter of the Lord,  
who abide in this shadow for life,  
say to the Lord: "My refuge,  
my rock in whom I trust!"

*"And I will raise you up  
on eagle's wings,  
bear you on the breath of dawn,  
make you to shine like the sun,  
and hold you in the palm of my hand."*

Snares of the fowler will never capture you,  
and famine will bring you no fear,  
under God's wings your refuge  
with faithfulness your shield.

*"And I will raise you up..."*

For to the angels God's given a command  
to guard you in all of your ways;  
upon their hands they will bear you up,  
lest you dash your foot against a stone.

*"And I will raise you up..."*

*Words and Music: Michael Joncas*

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## Listening for God's Voice

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### Reading: Luke 4:1-13 (Julia Szulerowski)

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, <sup>2</sup>where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. <sup>3</sup>The devil said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.'<sup>4</sup> Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone." '

<sup>5</sup> Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world.

<sup>6</sup> And the devil said to him, 'To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. <sup>7</sup>If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.'<sup>8</sup> Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him." '

<sup>9</sup> Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, <sup>10</sup>for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you",

<sup>11</sup>and

"On their hands they will bear you up,  
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone." '

<sup>12</sup> Jesus answered him, 'It is said, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." ' <sup>13</sup> When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

For the Word of God in Scripture,  
for the Word of God among us,  
for the Word of God within us,  
**Thanks be to God!**

## Reflection

Let us pray...

God of angels and devils, God of Jesus, as we join Jesus in the wilderness with the 40 days of fasting stretching before us, may we gather as a community of trust. May we set out holding to your call, to your longing and your love, which will bring us through. Amen.

*Adapted from Seasons of the Spirit, Resources for 6 March 2022, p.18*

Angels and devils - we don't talk about either of them very much - and often, when we do, it is with language and beliefs that are pretty loose.

We talk about "angels in heaven watching over us" or "the devil made me do it!"

Neither of which assists in helping understand what we are really talking about.

Let's start with angels - the Bible describes a number of "beings" as angels - but always they come with the role of being God's messengers.

Sometimes the Scriptures give them human bodies - like when the men who visited Abraham in Genesis 18 are described as "angels" in Hebrews 13:1.

Sometimes we use the term to describe "heavenly beings" like the seraphs in Isaiah 6 or the cherubim placed at the entrance to the Garden of Eden in Genesis 3.

Sometimes, like here in Psalm 91, there is no description - what they look like or how they are experienced seems to be assumed knowledge.

And then there is the devil - who appears in several parts of the Scriptures but perhaps most well-known here in Luke 4 in the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness.

In the telling of Jesus' temptations, Luke and Matthew both use the Greek word, *διαβόλου* (*diabolou*) which is translated for us as "devil". It is the word from which we get *diabolical*. The writer of Matthew, in recording these same events, uses a different word translated for us as "tempter" (in 4:3) interchangeably with *διάβολος* (4:5).

Mark, on the other hand, uses the term *Σατανᾶ* (*Satana*) - Satan (Mark 1:13).

It is a similar word that is used in John's gospel, when Judas betrays Jesus, *Σατανᾶς* (John 13:27).

So, even in the Gospels, we can see a movement between a more descriptive, almost general, term (*διάβολος*) to giving this idea a name (Satan).

And that is precisely the challenge for us in trying to understand some of the Scriptures - like the term "God", "angels" and "devils" are kind of shorthand descriptions of ideas, of experiences, of things, that simply can't be captured entirely by our language. The writers of the Psalms and the gospels are often reaching for something, reaching for words to describe something that is not easily described.

That is not to say these ideas, experienced or things are not real - they are!

But it will always be a struggle to describe them to a world that is bound by the images we can see or hear or feel or touch or taste.

The challenge for us is to wrestle with the images used by the writers of the Scriptures and to try and imagine for ourselves what it is they are describing, and perhaps even try to find images that make sense to us today.

There may be no such things as white beings with wings on their backs - but there are plenty examples of God's messages being shared with us, plenty of examples of times when a person or people have appeared to assist in times of need - we only need to look at the rescue effort in Lismore and Queensland to know that to be true.

There may be no such thing as a little red beast with horns and a trident - but we know how hard it is sometimes to quieten that voice inside us that tells us that being selfish is OK or that encourages us to walk on the other side of the street to avoid a person or situation that

might be inconvenient or difficult. And there are plenty of examples in our world where we see people and groups of people being led by messaging that is far from the way of Jesus.

Wrestling with the images is the first challenge for us - the second is that reading the Scriptures in English and taking them on face value can often lead us to an understanding that may not always be helpful.

If we read Psalm 91 on its own, it seems to be a promise that we will never be injured or hurt - we will always be protected under God's wings (91:4).

And yet our own experience tells us this isn't the way we experience the world.

At first glance the language seems to be a promise, but most of the commentators suggest this Psalm is actually a Psalm of praise and thanksgiving, from an individual, someone who has experienced God's protection and wants to praise God for it. So it is not so much as a promise for everyone for all time, but a recollection of someone who has had a particular experience of protection or refuge and wants to give thanks for it.

The last challenge is that today's readings give us a great example of the contradictions that are held internally within the Scriptures.

As Jesus is confronted by the devil, after Jesus has affirmed the importance of God's word, the devil says, 'come on, then - the Scriptures say the angels will protect you, rely on that and prove it.' To which Jesus responds quoting Deuteronomy 6:16, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test".

So, no, we can't use Psalm 91 as a kind of shield or bubble of immortality.

There is a subtlety here, that holds all of the Scriptures with their inadequate language, translation issues and even witness or transcription errors, in the context of God's ultimate intent for the whole of creation.

As we embark on our preparation for Easter, we are reminded that Jesus embodies that intent. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus reveal to us the immense love of God for all of creation, and that while there are parts of the Scriptures that contain images and words that we struggle to understand or interpret, at the end of the day, it is Jesus who reveals the how, what and why of God's way of love.

So it is important that we wrestle with the Scriptures - all of it - not just the bits we like.

It is important we find ways to speak of the Scriptures in language and concepts that might be grasped in today's world.

And it is important we continue to find ways to describe our own experiences of God.

Traditionally, the time leading up to Easter is used as a way of refocusing, re-calibrating, or re-aligning our discipleship practices. It is not necessarily about giving something up, but perhaps it is about developing a new spiritual practice or something that will grow your discipleship. Perhaps, now is a good time to think about where your study of the Scriptures is at and whether it is time to delve into them more deeply. I am always happy to help you do that!

I am always grateful to a Baptist pastor I met in my late teens, when I had just started my first university degree, who challenged me to study my faith and the Scriptures with as much commitment as I was prepared to study for my career. Her encouragement, along with my mother, who encouraged me from a very early age to read the scriptures for myself and to explore the depth and variety of meaning that could be ascribed to the stories and poetry and wisdom - gave me the foundations from which to build a love for the Scriptures - not to be afraid of wrestling with the sometimes dense manage or ancient images, but to be curious.

What commitment do you make to the study of the Scriptures?  
Will you wrestle with the language and images and stories of the Scriptures alongside your own experiences of God in your life and do the hard work of figuring out how to speak of these things in today's world?

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### Responding

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*Commissioning of the Church Council*

Today we commission our Elders, Church Council Members and Pastoral Partners.  
If you would like to know more, please contact Rev Kath at the church office.

**Prayer for Others** (Rhonda Back)

**Sing** - Rest and Wait (Seasons 8-28)

*Come rest and wait in the wilderness,  
listen and see with your heart. (repeat)*

God of the wilderness,  
we give thanks for the people in this congregation who have responded to the call to serve you as Elders, Church Council members and Pastoral Partners.  
We give thanks for the gifts they bring and the wisdom they offer and share.  
May your Spirit of Grace fill their lives and guide their tasks,  
may they be attentive to the moving of your Spirit,  
and may we all work together to grow your kingdom amongst us.

*Come rest and wait in the wilderness,  
listen and see with your heart. (repeat)*

Week by week, day by day perhaps,  
we pray to you, dear God,  
asking for your name to be honoured, for your kingdom to come,  
and for things to be done here on earth the way you want them to be.  
Day by day, hour by hour,  
we see the prayer and the reality growing ever further apart.

The rich nations grow richer at the expense of the poor;  
wars are fought over land, resources and religion;  
people are evicted from their homes or flee in terror of their lives  
and no-one will take them in.  
We talk endlessly about what needs to be done to reverse the process of climate change, and words never seem to turn into action.  
And the church, which should be different,  
a shining example of kingdom values put into practice, is the same as all the rest.

*Come rest and wait in the wilderness,  
listen and see with your heart. (repeat)*

God of endless patience and steady hope,  
we remind ourselves that the prayer which Jesus gave us was for daily use.  
He knew that it would not be answered instantly with a thunderclap from heaven,  
it would be needed day by day, hour by hour, moment by moment,

as people just like us tried and failed and tried again;  
as we lost our way and had to be found again;  
as we gave in to the same old temptations;  
as our vision faded and had to be rekindled.

So we pray not for the world so much as for ourselves,  
as part of a system that can only be changed by those who are part of it,  
one choice at a time.

Help us, when temptations come our way, to recognise them for what they are  
and hold fast to what we most truly believe.

If we are unsure about the right way to go,  
may we not rush but take the time we need to reflect and pray and ask for help.

If we have made poor choices,  
may we not compound them by keeping going regardless.

And may there be joy as well as duty in doing the right thing,  
as we discover that peace which is beyond all human understanding and which comes  
directly from you.

*Come rest and wait in the wilderness,  
listen and see with your heart. (repeat)*

But we also cannot ignore the cries of ordinary people in Ukraine.

We join with them in crying out for relief from the violence of war.

And we pray for families who have lost their homes or been separated,

for young people forced to fight for their homeland,

for neighbours who have received those who have fled and given them refuge,

for leaders whose decisions impact us all.

And we pray for people here in this part of the world whose homes and livelihoods have  
been devastated by floods.

We pray for the many who bring help - food, shelter, spiritual and emotional support.

We pray for the many who grieve and who now face long months and years of  
rebuilding.

*Come rest and wait in the wilderness,  
listen and see with your heart. (repeat)*

So many other petitions we could make, so many people and situations that need the  
support of our prayers,

but we take our guidance from Jesus who gave us deceptively simple words to use when  
our own words failed us: "Our Father in heaven...

may your kingdom come here on earth

and may things be done your way, not ours."

And to his prayer we give our heartfelt... Amen.

*Adapted from Spill The Beans, Issue 42, Resources for 6 March 2022, p.17*

## **Offering**

*So we gather up our prayers, what we have seen and heard this morning,  
and we take a moment to consider how we might respond.*

*As the stewards gather our financial offerings, so we also offer ourselves,  
responding to the call of Christ to join him on the journey to Jerusalem and beyond.*



With gratitude, O God,  
for your commitment to us,  
we bring these gifts to be used for the church's work in the world.  
Much more hesitantly,  
and with more than a little trepidation,  
we offer our commitment to following in the way of Jesus,  
with his unwavering commitment to doing your will.  
We know where that took him;  
we fear where it may take us;  
and yet we are here, O God,  
and this is our prayer. Amen.

*Spill The Beans, Issue 42, Resources for 6 March 2022, p.17*

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### Sending

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#### **Sing** - Companions on the Journey (Seasons 8-8)

*We are companions on the journey,  
breaking bread and sharing life;  
and in the love we bear is the hope  
we share  
for we believe in the love of our God,  
we believe in the love of our God.*

by the strength of those who care.  
*We are companions on the journey...*

No longer strangers to each other,  
no longer strangers in God's house;  
we are fed and we are nourished  
by the strength of those who care,

We have been gifted with each other,  
and we are called by the Word of the  
Lord:  
to act with justice, to love tenderly,  
and to walk humbly with our God,  
to walk humbly with our God.

*We are companions on the journey...*

*Words and Music: Carey Landry*

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#### **Benediction**

"Do all the good you can,  
By all the means you can,  
In all the ways you can,  
In all the places you can,  
At all the times you can,  
To all the people you can,  
As long as ever you can."

*John Wesley*

And be blessed in the name of the God who holds you and protects you;  
be blessed in the name of the Christ who entered the wilderness before you;  
and be blessed in the name of the Spirit who guides your living and breathes life in to all  
the world.

Rev Kath Merrifield  
6 March 2022