



Wilderness

Gathering

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 as we journey towards Easter in a time of preparation called Lent.*

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



Light Candle

We light this candle...

Light the candle

And we breathe...

and we turn towards the one who is the Light of the World, Jesus the Christ.

We seek the light.

We celebrate the light.

We allow ourselves to be drawn to the light.

We wonder at what the light reveals to us.

Acknowledgement of Country

The Ancient of Days, God our Creator, breathed life into this land and its peoples.

The land we gather on,

the land we live, work, play and worship on,

has been cared for since time immemorial by the Wodi Wodi people of the Dharawal Nation. It has never been ceded.

We pay our respects to their Elders past and present.

We commit ourselves to building relationships with those who carry the sacred stories today.

And we commit ourselves to pursuing justice for their communities, so that our reconciled life reflects the way of God here in this place.

Introduction to Lent

Each year, 7 Sundays before Easter, the lectionary, the Church's guide to readings for each Sunday, points us to the story of Jesus' time in the wilderness before he begins his public ministry. Then over the course of the next 6 Sundays we journey with Jesus towards Jerusalem.

So today we meet Jesus in the wilderness and we are reminded of God's covenant, God's promise, God's commitment to all of creation, sealed in the sign of the rainbow.

Call to Worship (based on Psalm 25:1-10)

Creator God in you we trust:

We gather to worship.

Make known your ways,
make known your paths:
We gather to worship.

Surround us with your love,
as we come to bring you praise:
We gather to worship.

Opening prayer

Creator God, as we gather to worship,
we lift up our souls to you.
We ask once more, with the psalmist,
that you will teach us your ways,
and lead us in your truth.

Your paths are loving kindness and faithfulness.
Teach us to live lives that embody your love, kindness and faithfulness,
that your way will be known in our midst,
and your Love known to all we meet. Amen.

Sing - Called By Earth and Sky (Seasons 6-12)

This song reminds us that God calls each one of us, and that we are deeply connected to all that God has created.

*Called by earth and sky,
promise of hope held high.
This is our sacred living trust,
treasure of life sanctified,
called by earth and sky.*

Precious these waters, endless seas,
deep ocean's dreams.
Waters of healing, rivers of rain,
the wash of love again.
Called by earth and sky...

Precious this gift, the air we breathe,
wind born and free.
Breath of the Spirit blow through this place,

our gathering, and our grace.
Called by earth and sky...

Precious these mountains, ancient sands,
vast, fragile land.
Seeds of our wak'ning, rooted and strong,
creation's faithful song.
Called by earth and sky...

Precious the fire that lights the way,
bright the dawning day.
Fire of passion, sorrows undone,
our faith and justice one.
Called by earth and sky...

Words and Music © Pat Mayberry SOCAN

Reading: Genesis 9:8-17

⁸ Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, ⁹'As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, ¹⁰and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. ¹¹I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.' ¹²God said, 'This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: ¹³I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. ¹⁴When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, ¹⁵I will remember my covenant

that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. ¹⁶When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.' ¹⁷God said to Noah, 'This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.'

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 of Praise and Confession

God of all Creation,
God who set the planets spinning and scattered the stars,
God of every living creature - birds and animals and the fish of the sea;
God who sculpted the mountains and set the rivers in their courses;
God of the sun and the wind and the rain,
how can we show our gratitude and praise for the wonder of creation
and for our part in it?

God of the Covenant,
you invite us into relationship with you and with all your creation.
You promise to be with us,
and you call us to live as you show us.

God of compassion,
we acknowledge that we have not always walked in your way,
we have not always lived with gracious courage,
and we have not always sought justice and flourishing for all.

So often we seek our own comfort and advantage without heed to the people around us,
we shrink back from pursuing justice when it means we have to make an effort,
we turn away when the challenge to our routines becomes uncomfortable.

Forgive us, we pray.
We ask for your grace and we commit to try again to follow after Jesus. Amen.

Words of Grace

God's Spirit is at work making all things new,
even us, even here.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Sing - O Love That Will Not Let Me Go

The words of this song will be familiar to many. They were written in the mid-late 1800s. So the language is a little dated in places - but it expresses a timeless truth - that God's love holds us always, that God is with us - always. The tune maybe not so familiar - it has been updated a little - I hope you like it.

O Love that will not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in thee:
I give you back the life I owe,
that in your ocean depths its flow

it's flow may richer, fuller be.

O Light that follows all my way,
I yield my flickering torch to thee:

my heart restores its borrowed ray,
that in your sunshine's blaze its day
its day may brighter, fairer be.

O Joy that seeks me through the pain,
I cannot close my heart to thee:
I trace the rainbow through the rain,
and feel the promise is not vain,

that morn, that morn shall tearless be.

O Cross that liftest up my head,
I dare not ask to fly from thee:
I lay in dust life's glory dead,
and from the ground there blossoms red
life that shall endless, endless be.

*Words: George Matheson
Music: Burwood Uniting Church Evening Congregation*

Listening for God's Voice

Reading: Mark 1:9-15

⁹ In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptised by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰And 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. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

¹² And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

¹⁴ Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'

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...
Christ Jesus,
you called your disciples to go forward with you
on the way to the cross.
Since you first walked that road,
countless millions have followed you
and we include ourselves in their number.

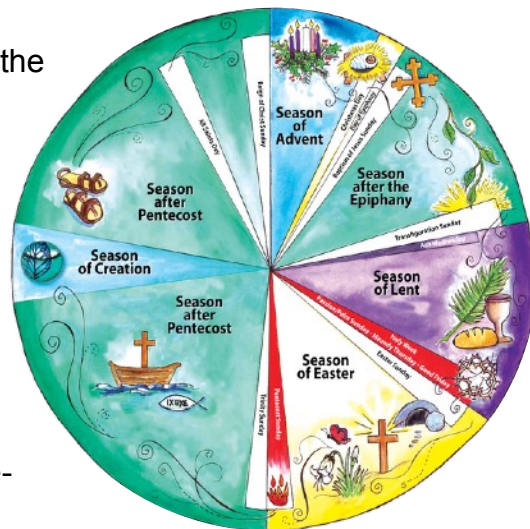
In all that we do as your disciples,
save us from false familiarity out your journey.
May we never presume to step into your shoes,
but make us small enough to fit our own,
and to walk in love and wonder behind you. Amen.

Adapted from The Wild Goose Worship Group, Stages on The Way, Glasgow, 1988, p.59

Our preparations for Easter, beginning last Wednesday, Ash Wednesday, are intended to reflect that time of reflection and prayer that Jesus spent in the wilderness - the 40 days of

fasting. But there is a catch, Sundays are not included in the 40 days because Sundays are feast days, celebrations. We call this time of preparation, “Lent”, which in Latin means “Spring” - which works for our friends in the northern hemisphere - not so much for us southerners(!) - but it does reflect the idea of new life emerging after the winter.

There is no doubt that Lent is a creation of the church. In the early Church, the preparation for Easter was about preparing people for baptism or, if someone had been excommunicated for any reason, for preparing them for re-entering the Christian community.



And like the other seasons of the Church year, its themes should never be confined to just this time, rather it offers a focus for this time, that hopefully strengthens and grows our discipleship for all times.

The purpose of Lent, as with the other Seasons, always, is to point us towards God - in particular towards God’s love shown to us in Jesus the Christ.

The invitation of Lent to prayer and fasting is extended from the example of Jesus - as he spends time in the wilderness, fasting and praying although the gospel attributed to Mark doesn’t say as much about the fasting as Matthew and Luke do.

Sometimes during Lent we focus on the “fasting”, the discipline of “giving something up” - something perhaps that we don’t need - like coffee or chocolate or buying something new; something perhaps that distracts us from spending time with God like devices and social media, perhaps restricting our television viewing in order to spend time reading the Scriptures or a devotional book. The people of the early Church believed that in simplifying our lives, in refraining or restraining ourselves from things that were really indulgences, that we are better able to focus and improve our spiritual health.



The extreme examples of this were the stylites - people who went and lived in the desert up a pole for long periods of time. Simeon was the first and probably best known - he lived near Aleppo in Syria in the 5th century and spent 37 years living and praying on top of a pole. It is said that crowds of people flocked to visit him and seek his wisdom. And there are plenty of more contemporary example of people who withdraw from the world’s trappings in order to more fully focus on prayer and engagement with God.

But that is certainly not the only way to deepen our relationship with God.

Rather than giving something up, perhaps we might focus on how we can grow as disciples - perhaps growing our devotional life - adding a time of quiet reflection or reading or prayer to our day, or adding a walk or ride each day in the “wilderness” to give ourselves time to reflect and pray and be refreshed.

Whatever you choose to do, the intention of the invitation is not to make you feel terrible, it is intended to help us enrich our relationship with God, and grow as followers and learners, disciples, of Jesus...

Rohan Williams, a now retired Archbishop of Canterbury said this about Lent: ¹

It's not about feeling gloomy for forty days; it's not about making yourself miserable for forty days; it's not even about giving things up for forty days...
It's [about] preparing for ...Easter – new life bursting through death. And as we prepare ourselves for Easter during these days, by prayer and by self-denial, what motivates us and what fills the horizon is not self-denial as an end in itself but trying to sweep and clean the room of our own minds and hearts so that the new life really may have room to come in and take over and transform us at Easter.

The writer of Mark's gospel tell us that first, God affirms God's love for Jesus at his baptism (1:11).

And then "immediately", the Spirit *drove* him into the wilderness (1:12). Mark's gospel is always in a hurry - the action moves quickly. But perhaps sometimes it moves so quickly we miss the detail the writer does include.

Did you notice, the Spirit *drove* Jesus into the wilderness. Jesus wasn't led gently or nudged, he was *driven*. Now I am sure that when we think about how the Spirit moves in our lives, we are comfortable with being led by the Spirit, partly because we still feel we have a choice - we can choose to follow, or not; we perhaps don't mind the nudging occasionally, we all need that from time to time; but the idea of being *driven*, compelled, forced in some way into the desert - well, that's just a little more uncomfortable, isn't it? Have you ever felt *driven* by God's Spirit? Even more discomfoting, this isn't about being driven into some exciting, fun, joyous space - Jesus, here, is driven into the wilderness. So just maybe, there are times that God takes us into discomfort in order that we might learn again how to depend on God's grace.

So what does Jesus find in the wilderness?

First of all, it is clear that this is not a silent retreat!

And he is certainly not alone...

He is "tempted by Satan" and accompanied by the wild beasts and the angels waited on him (1:12-13).

"Tempted by Satan" - tested or tried by "the adversary".²

The embodiment of evil in the figure of Satan is not an easy concept to grasp. It is language that is really not known or used outside the church and inside the church it is language that has often been misused. It is too easy to blame the troubles of the world on an external figure like the Satan and not own our own participation or contribution to those troubles.

Interestingly, in the prayer Jesus taught his disciples, he teaches us to pray, "lead us not into temptation" or as we translate it today, "save us from" or "in the time of trial"?

¹ <http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/pages/lent-video.html>

² I am grateful once more to Rev Fran Barbar and Rev Dr Robyn Whittaker for their reflections in: <https://bythewell.com.au/episodes/b209-lent-1>

This temptation in the wilderness seems to be an experience Jesus either doesn't want us to share or is concerned enough about for him to encourage us to be praying regularly about it.

Some commentators suggest that the inclusion of the wild beasts in Mark's description here is a reference back to the prophet Isaiah 34:8-17 where wild beasts are given possession of the wilderness along with the demons - so there is this belief (not entirely unfounded) that the wilderness is a place of danger both physically and spiritually.

And then, the angels "wait on" Jesus - the Greek word is *δῆκόνου* (*diakonoun*) - the same word we heard a week or so ago when Simon's mother-in-law attends to Jesus - she *ministers* to him, the angels *minister* to him, attending holistically to his needs.

What then becomes clear is that in this wilderness experience is held both challenge and grace, danger and protection. And isn't that the reality for us also, in our everyday, and in our wilderness experiences, we live in the complexity of questions and challenges, the reality of danger, and yet in the midst of all that, God comes amongst us, ministering to our needs - and calls us to be those angels too - to offer love and comfort to others in the midst of their challenges.

Jesus emerges from this experience to announce good news, and here we have a summary of what the gospel is all about - "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe in the good news." (1:15)

The reign of God has arrived - this is good news.

But we need to turn towards it - that's what "repent" means. These days that word still carries significant negative connotations, and in a world where most people, us included, generally believe that we are fundamentally good and just need to be reminded to be nice or kind sometimes... the idea of repentance is a bit hard to swallow.

What Jesus invites us to recognise is that we all need to reorient ourselves to the ways of God, and when we do, the life we find, for ourselves and in our communities, is good news!

Lastly, it seems to me that there is a thread through the gospel reading and the reading from Genesis of the embrace of God for all of creation.

In the wilderness, the wild creatures are Jesus' companions - for better or worse.

In the story of Noah, God makes explicit God's commitment to the whole of creation - all living creatures.

Whatever today holds, whatever practices you choose to give up or take up during this time of preparation, however you engage with depending your faith and discipleship - or not, God's embrace, God's love for you, is certain.

God's reign, God's dream for the world is within reach.

Will you turn towards it and believe it is possible?

This is good news!

Let us pray...

God in your grace, you draw near to us,
so we turn once more to you.

Spirit of Life - drive us along the path that Christ has shown,
teach us, lead us, inspire us,

that our lives might more clearly reflect the reign of God in the world. Amen.

Responding

Sing - Did You Ever See A Kookaburra Laugh? (TIS 175)

This is a fun song, that invites us to think about the things we enjoy from God and give thanks.

Did you ever see a kookaburra laugh?
Did you ever see a giraffe?
Did you ever ride in on a wave?
Did you ever see a puppy act brave?

Did you ever hold a fluffy new chick?
Did you ever see a clown do tricks?
Where do all the good things come from...

*Where do all the good things come from?
Good things great and small.
Where do all the good things come from?
God made them all.*

Have you ever been in a fight?
And maybe cried all night?
Did you ever make up and be friends?
It's good the way broken things mend!
Where do all the good things come from...

Did you ever keep a cocoon?
Did you ever see a full moon?

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Notices

- *welcome and connect - morning tea*
- *reminder to pick up parking cards - groups will be issued cards with the group name on them*
- *Tonight - Jamberoo - 5.30pm*
- *This week - craft on Monday, Mens Mate Meet on Tuesday, Meditation on Wednesday*
- *Friday - Palestine film at Berry - see Helen if you would like a lift*
- *Saturday - Working Bee at Kiama*
- *Next Sunday - 25 February - 9.30am at Jamberoo (Communion)*
- *Planning - 3 Sundays - 3, 24 March and 14 April*
- *Jazz and Blues - hosting Auburn Tongan Choir - 10 March - lunch after Church*

Prayer for Others

God in community,
Trinity of love,
today, we pray for those who feel alone
and for the earth that you love.

May we offer friendship to those around us.
May we learn to listen to the stories of others, even when they are different to us.
May we even learn to hear and to respect the voices of creatures and creation.

God, we pray for people in parts of the world where violence in the streets is a tragic reality.

We pray for people in Ukraine and Palestine, central Africa, so many places where criminal cartels control people's lives. In the loneliness of their fear, may they know they have not been abandoned.

We pray for people who work for peace and justice in these places - give them strength and courage to meet each day.

Comforting God, we pray for people who feel alone in their illness or health struggles.

And we pray for medical professionals and volunteer carers who work to provide healing and wholeness.

Faithful God, we pray for your Church - with all its joys and frustrations - a kaleidoscope of personalities and beliefs, of doctrine and grace. Teach us to live abundantly in harmony with each other as we seek to share your love with the world we serve.

We give thanks that we are part of the whole earth community.
Teach us to care for the earth and to strive for its healing,
as we seek justice and wholeness for the earth and all its creatures.

In the name of the Christ,
who was with the wild beast in the wilderness.
Amen.

Offering

This part of our service is not about the money.

It is about considering how we will respond to what we have seen and heard and experienced this morning, or perhaps throughout the week - how is God prompting you, nudging you, inspiring you - and what will you do about it?

Each one of us is precious.

Each one of us has something to offer in terms of resources - time, energy, skills, money.

How will you respond?

As part of this, we offer our financial gifts - either here or by electronic transfer.

But if this is your first time with us or if you are visiting, please don't feel obliged to give.

You are our guests, and we want you simply to enjoy the blessings of worshipping God together.

May our gifts be used for the flourishing of all things, the human and the other-than-human, so that God's world might be renewed. Amen.

Sending

Sing - Highways and Byways (Seasons 6-18)

This song sends us into the week, into the streets of our town, painting a rainbow - a sign of God's love for all creation - wherever we go...

*Go into the highways and byways,
far beyond the safe and secure.
Gather in the lost and the lonely,
listen to the cries of the poor.
Go up to the skyways and flyways,
paint a rainbow all across the sky.
Living out the love of Christ Jesus,
shining out God's glory in our lives.*

God, make us ready to listen,
ready to worship, ready to pray.
Make us a people of mission,
willing to hear your word and obey.

Help us to welcome the stranger,
reach out to others in need.
Make us a people of holy hospitality.
Go into the highways and byways...

God, make us ready to follow,
ready to go wherever you say.
Guide us through all our tomorrows,
meeting the needs of every day.
Help us encourage each other,
striving for unity,
building a rainbow of different personalities.
Go into the highways and byways...

God, make us ready to lead and
ready to shoulder some of the load.
Give us the courage we need and
faith to explore a different road.

Give us a spirit of service in our
communities.
Teach us to labour in love,
and live responsibly.
Go into the highways and byways...
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Sending

In the wild places, in the wilderness,
in worship and at home,
you are never alone.
God is present with you,
God's creatures surround you.
May you have eyes and ears to notice your companions
in the days ahead.

Blessing

And the blessing of God - Creator, Saviour and Sustainer - is with you now and always.
Amen.

Liturgy adapted from Rev Dr Bec Lindsay, writing for Mediacom L3, Lent 1, 2024.

Rev Kath Merrifield
18 February 2024