Call to Worship

People of God!
Come, gather with all creation to praise God,
our loving creator – the Eternal One
in whom grace, mercy and love abounds.

Come, let us give thanks to God,
our Redeemer, who keeps our feet from stumbling,
and who raises us up when life’s hardships have us bowed low.

Come, let us be inspired by God’s presence on earth,
the Spirit of all Life, whose power is made known
in acts of love, justice and peace
signs of God’s eternal reign.

People of God!
Come, let us worship the Living God.
Amen.

(based on Psalm 145:8-14)

Prayers of Praise, Confession and Forgiveness

God of all creation, with the hands of an artist,
you weave beauty and life throughout all you create;

from the splendour of the mountains,
to the delicate flowers of the valley,

from the fathomless depths of the seas,
to the soaring song of the birds of the skies

from the blessing of food reaped from the earth
to the embrace of a loved one’s arms –

in all this that we see and hear,
taste, smell and touch,
we can discover you, O God,
for your persistently loving and creative presence
infuses all reality,
ever further from our experience
than the next unfolding moment.

Short pause

Too often, we dull our senses
to the beauty that surrounds us,
we deny your divine light,
within and without,
we seek shortcuts to acquiring
the things we believe will bring happiness,
all the while riding roughshod
over the earth, its creatures and people.

Forgive us.

Short pause

God made flesh and blood,
in the beauty, mystery and wonder of incarnation,
you have revealed yourself most fully –
offering grace upon grace upon grace.

May we, by the power of your Holy Spirit
be enabled to live from your divine light within,
and like Jesus, in union with you,
reach the fullness of our humanity –
people of love, justice and mercy, Amen.

Prayer for Illumination

Spirit of God,
among us, and within us,
may the true living Word be made manifest
in the sharing of words
ancient, yet alive to us now
through your power and presence, Amen.

Reading

Song of Songs 2:8-13
Sermon Notes

This is an unusual reading, one whose value to the preacher may not be immediately obvious. Being the only reading from Song of Songs featured in the lectionary cycle, it represents a good opportunity to try something different. The rich imagery drawn from the natural world has led some to call this passage 'the Spring song'. If we enter into this passage with our imaginations and emotions, we can enter into the beauty and fecundity of nature.

Song of Songs is one of only two books of the Bible not to mention God by name (the other being the book of Esther). It’s quite a unique book in that a majority of the language is written from the perspective of a female lover and in the first person. This gives an interesting perspective on the role of such a book in the cannon of scripture. You may wish to explore the possible reasons why such a distinctive book has survived as part of the canon of scripture.

It might be a brave preacher who engages in some depth with the sensuality and sexuality of the reading. I would recommend a good commentary if you choose to go down this route. Such a sermon could explore the idea that God blesses our sexualities and sexual expression. This is something that is not often spoken about in church and could be healing for some to hear. It could be a good opportunity to readdress some of the negative and harmful messages some in the church have offered about sex, but pastoral sensitivity is a must.

There is a repeated line in the reading – 'Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away with me' (v 10 and v13). This could be used to reflect on the fact the poem is about the lovers seeking to see each other, and to physically express their love for each other. Such a sermon could reflect on God's desire for us, and the Christian spiritual traditions that teach us to develop and maintain our desire for God. It might helpful to be reminded that just as connection in human relationships requires work, so does our relationship with God. Sometimes people can forget that prayer can be creative, involving not just our words, but our bodies and emotions, as well as poetry, dance, art and nature itself.

Affirmation of Faith

We believe in God
whose love is the source of all life and the desire of our lives,
whose love was given a human face in Jesus of Nazareth,
whose love was crucified by the evil that awaits to enslave us all
and whose love, defeating even death, is our glorious promise of freedom.
Therefore, though we are sometimes fearful and full of doubt, in God we trust;
and in the name of Jesus Christ, we commit ourselves, in the service of others,
to seek justice and to live in peace, to care for the earth
and to share the commonwealth of God's goodness,
to live in the freedom of forgiveness and the power of the Spirit of Love,
and in the company of the faithful, so to be the Church
for the glory of God. Amen.

Iona Abbey Worship Book, p.75

Offering

God has given us all we need for abundant life.
We need only share what we have been given
so that all may enjoy God’s generous gifts.

Generous God,
we thank you for the abundance we know
in this part of the world,
which we confess, we struggle to share.
May these gifts of money
and the offering of our lives,
be used generously
for the good of all. Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

God of all,
each week we celebrate resurrection,
when your love is proven stronger than death,
may we, by our words and deeds
join with your Holy Spirit in the healing
and making whole of all creation.

Pause

We pray for our earth, confessing the many ways
our actions bring about death and destruction.
Wake us up to our toxic ways,
that we might become agents for change –
a community transformed and transforming,
driven by care for all that you created and called good.

Short silence

God who in Jesus, died and rose again,
you who knew suffering,
you who came to set the oppressed free,
may we be moved to action and empathy
by your shed blood and tears,  
to pursue justice and peace for all peoples.

_Pause_

We pray for all who long for peace,  
but instead live with tyranny and torture –  
for all in Afghanistan, Ukraine, Sudan and so many other places.  
We pray for freedom and peace –  
for an end to domination and oppression  
for there to be no more shed blood and tears.

_Short silence_

God whose image rests within each person,  
a divine spark of beauty and potential  
in each human soul – may we be quick  
to recognise one another’s inherent dignity and worth  
and to answer Christ’s call to oneness  
welcoming without qualification or condition.

_Pause_

We pray for ourselves,  
acknowledging that when we find others hard to love  
it’s rarely about them, but about us –  
our dislikes, our prejudices, our preconceptions.  
May we be freed of all that stands in the way of loving as you love.

May we be transformed ever more into Christ’s likeness  
in whose name we pray, Amen.

**Blessing**

As we go from this place, let us be alive to God’s presence with us.  
May we be God’s agents God’s very hands and feet  
offering love and joining in with God’s beautiful story.

May we be blessed by and offer in turn  
the blessing of the triune God,  
this day and always. Amen.
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