

# worship notes



from the United Reformed Church

Sunday 30th March 2025  
The Fourth Sunday of Lent  
The Revd Ryan Sirmons

## Greeting

The grace and peace of Christ be with you. **And also with you.**  
Let us worship God.

## Call to Worship

No matter how long you have wandered, **come, let us worship God here.**  
No matter what you have done or not done, **come, let us worship God here.**  
No matter how lost you might think you are,  
no matter how much you think you cannot be found,  
the mothering Spirit of God is here.  
**Come, let us worship God here,**  
**and return the embrace that has always been.**

## Prayers of Approach, Confession and Grace

God of all, You wander through the wilderness of life with us.  
You feed us and call us. Your love never leaves us.  
You invite us to be Your people, and You will be our God.  
You call us here to worship, praise, sing, hold silence, repent, and turn again to You,  
the source of love and life.  
Illuminate our hearts, Holy One,  
so that we see no-one only by their usefulness to us.  
Open our ears to hear afresh the sacred stories of Your steadfast love,  
so that we might be a story-full people.  
Let our joyful imaginations aide us in seeing ourselves in these sacred words  
so that Your Word may fill our hearts.  
This we pray in the name of our brother Jesus,  
who gave up his life so that we may know abundant life, Amen.

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.  
If we confess our sins, God, who is faithful and just, will forgive us our sins.

*1 John 1.8-9a*

Let us confess our sins together and seek God's grace.  
**Gracious God, in striving for comfort and ease,  
in the seeking of advantage over neighbour,  
in participating even distantly in the violence of the world,  
or in shielding ourselves in ignorance  
so that we might avoid the hurt that comes  
with loving the world as You love it,  
we confess we have sinned,  
in thought, word, and deed.  
We have not loved our neighbour as ourselves.  
We seek your mercy and forgiveness,  
that we may turn again to You,  
and recover our true identity,  
shaped in Your image,  
filled with Your grace and truth. Amen.**

*Silence*

God is always making all things new! **We are a new creation in Christ Jesus!**  
The Lord says: If you want to become my followers, deny yourself,  
take up your cross, and follow me.  
**Give us the courage to live as Your new creation,  
forgiven, loved, and whole. Amen.**

## Kyrie Eleison

Holy God, holy and mighty, holy and immortal,  
**have mercy upon us.**  
Glory to God in the highest,  
**Glory to God's people on earth. Amen.**

## All Age Introduction

There's a 'magic trick' that can be used where a strip of newspaper is cut in half in front of the congregation, yet after the cut, when revealed, is restored! The message is that God makes restoration happen, and that even when we think we are not whole or there are things that we don't like, God embraces all of us and restores us to wholeness. (This works well with 2 Cor 5 and Luke 15). Pastor John Stephens of Zion Lutheran Church in Oregon, USA, demonstrates this 'trick' here:

<https://dskidsermons.com/2022/03/17/march-27th-2022-4th-sunday-in-lent/>

## Readings

2 Corinthians 5.16-21 | Joshua 5.9-12

## Prayer of Illumination

Your Word, O God, lights our way.

May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all of our hearts, radiate with the light of the way, the truth, and the life. Amen.

## Sermon Notes

This is a Sunday with an embarrassing abundance of good topics from which to preach! There are ways to find a harmony between the Hebrew Bible, the Epistle, and the New Testament stories around forgiveness and reconciliation, and I have lifted up some places to find some resources for that theme below. I also note that it is Mothering Sunday, and suggest that you might be remiss if we did not mention the mothering spirit of God which is evident in all of these themes. I have gone by a different way, focusing on the texts of Joshua and 2 Corinthians, lifting up the theme of what happens when the manna upon which we had subsided disappears. I suggest that the Western Church's manna was Christendom, the presumption that our communities are Christian and the Church is a bedrock institution of those communities. As we rapidly decline in numbers and cultural importance, and encounter people two and even three generations removed from Church, we must face that we are in a 'new land' where the manna has ceased and we are called to produce our own grain. Yet there is a blessing in this, too. Christendom was not Christianity. God still fed us through that time and people's faith grew in abundance, sometimes in spite of Christendom. Yet it also locked us into a narrow understanding of the world, one that justified enslavement, misogyny, classism, and racism. Thanks be to God, our sins performed in the name of the institution of Church can never cloud God's abundant grace. And so, grace, hope, truth, and love continued to flourish. But some of the bad ideas have clung on, and without even realising it, we may continue the very practices that keep us from being free and reconciled to God. Just as it took time for the 'disgrace of Egypt' (Josh 5.19) to be wiped away, so too will it take time before we can shift from manna to growing our own bread (still possible by God's grace).

### *Joshua 5.9-12*

*Watership Down* might be a useful approach to this text, if you wanted to use it as the sole text for this message. Stanley Hauerwas makes a masterful argument for how *Watership Down* is a story that helps us understand that the Church is supposed to be a people who tell stories and make hard journeys together. The 'exodus' of the rabbits from Sandleford, and the journeys they encounter along the way, can illustrate the importance of Church as a place where we play a part in the adventure of life together, maintain our identity by telling and living into our sacred stories, and honour the lives of people regardless of the 'usefulness' of a person (as the rabbits did with Pipkin). This exodus ends with a thanksgiving for the promised land in which the rabbits — and we — end up. Hauerwas outlines this in the first chapter of *A Community of Character: toward a constructive Christian social ethic* (1981), which though over 40 years old feels excruciatingly relevant in the current moment. The movies might be a good refresher, but

beware the recent Netflix version, which is good but changes names and entirely misses out Pipkin!

*Gilgal.* 'Gilgal' is the place where disgrace has been 'rolled away,' from the Hebrew *galal*, 'to roll'. God rolls away ignominy and disgrace of the people's enslavement, like a stone in the way, that gives them entry into their true identity as God's people—not Egypt's or Pharaoh's people. What needs rolling away from peoples' lives?

*The people's response.* The people respond to God's mighty liberative action with a feast of the Passover, bookending the Passover feast that began this journey (cf Exod 12). This signals that their identity as God's people, with sacred rituals, have survived the difficult forty-year cross-generational journey. Passover is a story-rich ritual, meaning that they have retained their sacred stories. Telling those stories will help them retain their character in this new land. The stories are bound up by God's faithfulness to them and remind them of their fidelity to God. How are celebrating our story-rich tradition? How is it shaping us? How are we using these stories to shape our relationships with friends, family, and the wider community?

*God will see us through.* The manna ceases on the day they could eat their own produce of the land. It remained long enough for them to learn how to survive in this new land. God will see us through the transitions to new ways of being and doing. Where is God drying up the manna that we have relied upon, and giving us the recognition that we can create the nourishment we need by the sweat of our own brow in partnership with the grace of God?

### *2 Corinthians 5.16-21*

*We regard no one from a human point of view.* That Christ has been resurrected means that death is no longer the given by which we view human life. If 'death and taxes' were the certainties of life before the resurrection, then human thought was placed upon death as the final word and therefore the basis of our approach to human living (ancient philosophies resist being overly reductive on this point). Now that we have the resurrection, we know that there is a new perspective on life, one that frees us from what Howard Thurman called the 'hounds of hell': fear, hypocrisy, and hatred.<sup>1</sup> Now, we can direct our energies toward love. What are ways we see the world differently via Christ?

*Children's message or Theme instruction idea:*

*So if anyone is in Christ.* Once we recognise that we are in Christ, that is, caught up in this resurrection way of living, we are a new creation, centred on the robust love of God and freed from fear and hate.

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<sup>1</sup> Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*.

*Message of reconciliation.* As Sam Wells has put it, ‘there is no goal beyond restored relationship: reconciliation is the gospel.’<sup>2</sup> Our sins are results of living by fear, hypocrisy, and hate. Even self-indulgence can be driven by the ‘fear of missing out.’ God has given us Jesus, who has bridged the gap of our fear-driven sins that kept us away from God, so that we can be with God. God wants to be with us, and God has shown in Jesus that God will do whatever is necessary to be with us.

*Ambassadors.* God knows, as with a wise mother, that God cannot do ministry *for* us. ‘For,’ as Wells puts it, is not the heart of the Gospel.<sup>3</sup> We must be participants in our own reconciliation. And one of the best ways to do that is to build up a community around us who can be a community of reconcilers, who carry out acts of grace and forgiveness with each other, tell the sacred stories, and use our imaginations to see ourselves in those stories, all of which can point us back to God. This is how we share God’s message of reconciliation from generation to generation and to new people who need to hear this good news.

*St Luke 15.1-3, 11b-32*

This is a rich story of forgiveness which leads to reconciliation with God. I think it is important to set it in its context, in that Jesus is with the ‘sinners and tax collectors’. Jesus does not miss the opportunity to make two points with one parable: one to show the Pharisees the narrowness of their vision of the kingdom of God, and two, the expansive embrace that God offers to those who have lost sight of the love of God in word and deed, but recognise this and turn again to reconcile with God. God (in the person of the father) is overjoyed at this reconciliation!

*Who are tax collectors and sinners?* Amy-Jill Levine and Ben Witherington have shown that the sinners and tax collectors are not the same as ‘outcasts’. Instead:

‘they have violated the welfare of family and community and thus walked out of home and community. We typically today do not use the term “outcast” to speak of arms dealers, loansharks, inside traders, or collaborationists with occupation governments, but they would be the modern equivalents of Jesus’ audience.’<sup>4</sup>

Not equating the youngest son with Gentiles is important. Past Reformed thinkers have settled on the idea of the eldest son representing Jews, and the youngest son representing Gentiles, which has led to anti-Semitic sermons if not acts of violence and hate. The text itself shows that Jesus is demonstrating that these ‘sinners and tax collectors’ are Jewish, have violated the values of community and home, but that they are enthusiastically embraced by God when they seek reconciliation. Those who have ‘kept the faith’ are challenged to put their judgement away and participate in the glorious feast which God sets. So who are the sinners and tax collectors today? Who needs to participate in acts of

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<sup>2</sup> In Carter, *The City Is My Monastery*. Drawn from Wells’ *The Nazareth Manifesto*, upon which Carter’s monastic life is modeled.

<sup>3</sup> Wells, *A Nazareth Manifesto*.

<sup>4</sup> Levine and Witherington, *The Gospel of Luke*, 410.

radical reconciliation with one another and God? How might we reach them? How much do we participate in those activities ourselves, through our consumption, work, and investment practices?

*Fear of not having enough.* Another theme to explore is the difference between those who have 'kept the faith,' which some of our church folk might think represents them in the person of the eldest son, and God's seeming preference for the returning/prodigal son. If we start with a fear of scarcity—that there is a limited amount of resource—then we will be scandalised by the father's profligate liquidation of half of his assets for a premature inheritance to his ne'er-do-well child to spend. And then, upon his return, the child is celebrated with an extravagant feast featuring the 'fatted calf' saved for only the best guests.

If we dare to read this through the 'resurrection lens' through which Paul invites us to see the world and its people in 2 Cor 5, then we see that the father has no fear of scarcity. The father knows that God will provide enough, always and forever enough. So by giving away half his fortune, the father is underscoring how insignificant material wealth is for him. By welcoming the prodigal back just as extravagantly, he is demonstrating that this initial loss of wealth had no impact on his ability to offer a radical and loving welcome. Perhaps he hopes that his son, in seeing how quickly and easily a half a lifetime of wealth can be squandered, will learn a lesson he could not learn in the household: that material wealth is not what matters in this life. It can go away in an instant. What matters is the human embrace of love, which can be found in and through Christ. In a time when many of our churches fear we are not enough to do the ministry we think we need to offer, or hoard our wealth for that day when God will call for its use, perhaps we can recall this story: what matters is the love we experience now, with the assured hope that that love will continue in the future. Are we spending our wealth now, whether in human or financial form, to embrace, with faith that God will provide in the future?

*Forgiveness and reconciliation.* St Augustine's famous line from the *Confessions* applies here, 'Our heart is restless until it rests in you, God'. It cannot do that until we are reconciled with God. The good news is that God has already reconciled with us through Jesus. The bad news is that we do not seem to know it. Until we are reconciled with God *and* recognise our forgiveness, we are not whole. The way to recognise what God has already done, however, is to participate in radical acts of forgiveness—this is to 'imitate the way God is,' as Sam Wells puts it in his Nazareth Manifesto. Unless we are able to forgive, we are not whole. The blogger Maria Popova recently [wrote a poem](#) about forgiveness, and shared the powerful feelings that drove her to write the poem in the present moment:

I had been thinking about forgiveness — about its quiet power to dislodge the lump of blame from the thorax of time and fill the lung of life with the oxygen of the possible, about how you bless your own life when you forgive your mother, forgive your father, forgive the person for whom your love was not

enough, forgive the person for whom your love was too much, forgive yourself, over and over and over.<sup>5</sup>

She lifts up Hannah Arendt, that Jewish survivor of concentration camps and deft student of postmodern human life amidst the ashes of World Wars, who describes how without forgiveness, we can never be released from the consequences of what we have done, and thus never be whole. Even inadvertently, we do a great deal of harm, we feel our guilt, and it weighs on us as something that will crush us *unless we can forgive ourselves and others*. Further, we need promises that we can fulfil. To forgive and keep promises requires that we relate with other people. Arendt, who points to Jesus as the ‘discoverer of role of forgiveness in the realm of human affairs,’ argues that forgiveness (and reconciliation) are the very foundation of any human society:

Without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would ... be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover; we would remain the victims of its consequences forever, not unlike the sorcerer’s apprentice who lacked the magic formula to break the spell. Without being bound to the fulfilment of promises, we would never be able to keep our identities; we would be condemned to wander helplessly and without direction in the darkness of each man’s lonely heart, caught in its contradictions and equivocalities — a darkness which only the light shed over the public realm through the presence of others, who confirm the identity between the one who promises and the one who fulfils, can dispel. Both faculties, therefore, depend on plurality, on the presence and acting of others, for no one can forgive himself and no one can feel bound by a promise made only to himself; forgiving and promising enacted in solitude or isolation remain without reality and can signify no more than a role played before one’s self.<sup>6</sup>

So what Jesus is doing here is telling the Pharisees, sinners and tax collectors, and us, is that forgiveness—reconciliation with God—is the underpinning of true human society. It is how we find our hearts’ true place of belonging. It is a radical act of love-filled faith: to forgive, and be forgiven. We need one another in order to do this. We cannot do this alone! The father will never be whole without forgiving the prodigal son. His joyful act of forgiveness stands in contrast to the eldest son’s poisonous brooding which will leave him always missing some core part of himself. The relational element here is vital: you can forgive someone, but unless you are able to receive the acceptance of that forgiveness in a mutual way, there is no reconciliation. What applies to our human relationships remains valid for God, too. God forgives us, and when we receive that forgiveness, we can be reconciled, made whole, and find that our hearts are no longer restless.

*Forgiveness*. A rich trove of stories about forgiveness has been collected by Johann Cristoph Arnold, of the Bruderhof Community. With registration it can be downloaded for free from <https://www.plough.com/en/topics/life/forgiveness/why-forgive>

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<sup>5</sup> Popova, ‘Forgiveness’.

<sup>6</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, in Popova, ‘The Antidote to the Irreversibility of Life’.



- Carter, Richard. *The City Is My Monastery: A Contemporary Rule of Life*. La Vergne: Hymns Ancient & Modern, 2019.
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## Affirmation of Faith

With the whole church:

**we affirm that we are made in God's image,  
befriended by Christ, empowered by the Spirit.**

With people everywhere:

**we affirm God's goodness at the heart of humanity,  
planted more deeply than all that is wrong.**

With all creation:

**we celebrate the miracle and wonder of life, the unfolding purposes of God,  
forever at work in ourselves and the world.**

*from the Iona Community*

## Prayer of Intercession

Grant us your loving grace in the morning,  
and we will live this day in joy and praise.

Ps 90.14

Eternal God,  
we rejoice this morning in the gift of life,  
which we have received by your grace,  
and the new life you give in Jesus Christ.  
Especially we thank you for:

*(if there are pertinent instances of the below in your ministry, add them at the end of each line—but you may also offer a brief pause for worshippers to lift these prayers up themselves)*

- ministries of compassion, witness, and service...
- those who make and grow the things we need...
- the communities in which we live...



- strength and the abilities to serve your purpose today...
- indications of your love at work in the world...

*Individual prayers of thanksgiving may be invited, asking: 'People of God, for what else do we give thanks?'. Or a moment of quiet may be offered for people to lift up their thanksgiving in the silence of their hearts.*

God of grace,  
we offer our prayers for the needs of others  
and commit ourselves to serve them  
even as you have served us in Jesus Christ.

Especially we pray for

- the Church in all the world...
- the conservation of the soil, water, and air...
- those closest to us in this community...
- friends and relatives who are far away...
- all who care for others in body, mind, and spirit...

*Individual prayers of thanksgiving may be invited, asking: 'People of God, for what else do we pray?'. Or a moment of quiet may be offered for people to lift up their intercessions in the silence of their hearts.*

*From 'Daily Prayer' from the Presbyterian Church (USA),  
2023. App version 4.0.1+23.*

## Blessing

May the road rise up to meet you.  
May the wind be always at your back.  
May the sun shine warm upon your face;  
the rains fall soft upon your fields,  
and until we meet again,  
may you be held in the palm of God's hand.

*An Irish blessing*

## Hymn Suggestions

	RS	CH4	StF	MP
Amazing Grace	92	533	440	31
Brother, sister let me serve you	474	694	611	
God weeps		168	700	
Great is thy faithfulness	96	153	51	200
Heaven shall not wait		362	701	
I am the church		204		
Just as I am	364	553	556	396
Loving spirit, loving spirit	326	597		
For the healing of the nations	620	706	696	
God of freedom, God of justice	625	263		

RS – Rejoice & Sing | CH4 – Church Hymnary 4 | StF – Singing the Faith | MP – Mission Praise

Wonders of your love ([link](#))

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