

ORDER OF SERVICE – Worship at Home 07/03/21 – Third Sunday of Lent

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Today we continue our Lent worship series, Worship in the Wilderness, with A Sorrowful Journey. The outline for worship and some of the material has been prepared by Sam and Sara Hargreaves for Engage Worship as indicated.

Opening Affirmation ¹

**Lord God, you rejoice with those who rejoice;
you mourn with those who mourn, and you call us to do the same.
Help us to come to you today with honesty and openness,
May we be able to share our sorrows and know your comfort.**

Psalm 40: 1-5 and 9-13 ²

I waited patiently for the Lord; **he turned to me and heard my cry.**

He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire;

he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand.

He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God.

Many will see and fear the Lord and put their trust in him.

Blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord,

who does not look to the proud, to those who turn aside to false gods.

Many, Lord my God, are the wonders you have done, the things you planned for us.

None can compare with you; were I to speak and tell of your deeds, they would be too many to declare.

I proclaim your saving acts in the great assembly;

I do not seal my lips, Lord, as you know.

I do not hide your righteousness in my heart;

I speak of your faithfulness and your saving help.

I do not conceal your love and your faithfulness from the great assembly.

Do not withhold your mercy from me, Lord; **may your love and faithfulness always protect me.**

For troubles without number surround me; **my sins have overtaken me, and I cannot see.**

They are more than the hairs of my head, **and my heart fails within me.**

Be pleased to save me, Lord; **come quickly, Lord, to help me.**

HYMN SF 829 by Charles Gabriel (1856-1932)

I stand amazed in the presence
Of Jesus the Nazarene,
And wonder how he could love me,
A sinner, condemned, unclean.

How marvellous! How wonderful!

And my song shall ever be:

How marvellous! How wonderful!

Is my Saviour's love for me!

He took my sins and my sorrows,
He made them his very own;
He bore the burden to Calvary,
And suffered and died alone.

How marvellous! How wonderful!

For me it was in the garden
He prayed, 'Not my will, but thine':
He had no tears for his own griefs,
But sweat drops of blood for mine.
How marvellous! How wonderful

When with the ransomed in glory
His face I at last shall see,
'Twill be my joy through the ages
To sing of his love for me.
How marvellous! How wonderful

Prayer of Praise and Thanks

Loving Father we thank you that you make yourself known as the present One, in bush and flame, in healing touch and feeding hand, in cross and empty tomb.

We thank you that you are the One who will wipe away the tears from every eye, the God of all Comfort and the Father of Compassion - the One who in Jesus wept at the grave of your friend and comforted his grieving sisters with words of life and resurrection hope - the One who took our sins and sorrows, who rescued and saved this fallen and broken world; the One who brings hope and life where despair and darkness reign.

How marvellous and how wonderful is your love for us. We cannot express our thanks in words; we stand amazed and silent in the face of such mercy and goodness. Great and mighty are you O God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Reading – Exodus 3: 1-10 ²

¹ Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ² There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. ³ So Moses thought, 'I will go over and see this strange sight – why the bush does not burn up.'

⁴ When the Lord saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, 'Moses! Moses!' And Moses said, 'Here I am.'

⁵ 'Do not come any closer,' God said. 'Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.' ⁶ Then he said, 'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.' At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God.

⁷ The Lord said, 'I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. ⁸ So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey – the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. ⁹ And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them. ¹⁰ So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.'

HYMN – STF 508 ³

Purify my heart,
let me be as gold and precious silver.
Purify my heart,
let me be as gold, pure gold.
*Refiner's fire,
my heart's one desire is to be holy,
set apart for you, Lord. I choose to be holy,
set apart for you, my Master, ready to do Your will.*

Purify my heart,
cleanse me from within and make me holy.
Purify my heart,
cleanse me from my sin, deep within.
Refiner's fire,

Reading – John 11: 20-29 and 32-36 ²

²⁰ When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home. ²¹ ‘Lord,’ Martha said to Jesus, ‘if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.’

²³ Jesus said to her, ‘Your brother will rise again.’ ²⁴ Martha answered, ‘I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.’

²⁵ Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; ²⁶ and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?’

²⁷ ‘Yes, Lord,’ she replied, ‘I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.’

²⁸ After she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside. ‘The Teacher is here,’ she said, ‘and is asking for you.’ ²⁹ When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him.

³² When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, ‘Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.’ ³³ When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. ³⁴ ‘Where have you laid him?’ he asked. ‘Come and see, Lord,’ they replied.

³⁵ Jesus wept. ³⁶ Then the Jews said, ‘See how he loved him!’

Talk - A Sorrowful Journey

This week is perhaps the most difficult one on our journey through the wilderness. We began by talking about how the Holy Spirit calls us to the desert so that we might be transformed. We have spoken about how wilderness worship looks different from mountaintop worship - it might involve things like solitude, silence and fasting. But this week we come to the stark truth that wilderness worship might also involve sorrow.

1) The dangerous desert

Most of us have not experienced the desert. We may have a romanticised ideal of what living out in the wilderness might involve. But in Bible times there was no such misapprehension. Not only were deserts lacking in food and water, but they were also the haunt of wild animals, and criminals – lawless places. For all these reasons, the wilderness was feared. For people in Bible times it represented the unknown, danger, failure and mortality. Today we are not good at talking about or reflecting on these kinds of difficult issues. We all experience struggles, fears, doubts, disappointments, anger and hurt - all of us will at some point need to confront our own mortality and that of our loved ones. Perhaps the pandemic has brought that realisation all too close and yet so often we brush these thoughts under the carpet. British people will often do their best to keep a ‘stiff upper lip’, to ‘keep calm and carry on’. Even with God, we can come into church or to times of prayer, and try to pretend that everything is okay. Would God want to hear about our struggles? Can we be honest with him?

2) Learning to Lament

Wilderness experiences in the Bible teach us that God does hear. He does care. In Exodus 3, Moses has escaped to the desert for fear of the discovery of the murder he has committed. It is there he hears God say: ‘I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering.’ (Exodus 3:7) God is not blind to our struggles or deaf to our cries. He does not consider it a lack of faith, an insult, or a sin if we choose to be honest with him. We can tell him about our doubts, how we feel about the state of the world, or share when we feel disappointed with him.

In fact, he wants his people to cry out to him in honesty and desperation. The Psalms are full of honest, raw complaint, sorrow and protest. Bible characters - from Hagar to David, from Jesus to Paul, pray heartfelt prayers of distress. These prayers are called lament. Songwriter Michael Card describes the importance of the wilderness in teaching us to lament: 'You and I were created to wake up in a garden. Instead we open our eyes each morning to a fallen wilderness, a world where our omnipresent God seems disturbingly absent... God transforms us and leads us by his grace into a pathway back to his presence. This path is found in the language of lament. When we lack the language to articulate this forsaken, fallen struggle, when we long for the words to cry out our confusion and bewilderment, the Bible provides such a language for us... Lament is learned only in the wilderness.'

3) Jesus meets us... and sends us

Lament will look different for each one of us. Some people will come and whisper a prayer. Others might shout at God. Some of us will sing a sad song, others might paint a canvas of our pain. Some of us will shake our fists, others will ask questions to try to understand. We can see these different kinds of responses in our passages today. When Martha's brother dies she goes to Jesus with a theological question. Jesus meets her in that, he listens, he responds with a deep truth that she can place her hope in.

Mary is completely different. She has a question, but mostly she weeps. And so Jesus is moved deeply in his spirit and he weeps with her. Even though Jesus must know what he is about to do, he is profoundly sorrowful for Lazarus, and he is not afraid to show it. 'When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. "Where have you laid him?" he asked. "Come and see, Lord," they replied. Jesus wept.' (John 11:33-35)

The story of Moses demonstrates another of God's reactions to sorrowful circumstances. Moses isn't mourning a death - his issue is the mistreatment of his people under the Egyptians. But he is also consumed with self-doubt at the mistake he has already made in trying to sort this situation out. God comes to Moses to tell him that he cares, he heals, and that at he is calling Moses to do something about it.

So if you are like Martha, wilderness worship is a place for you to be honest with God, to tell him how you feel, to ask him questions, to call out 'how long, O Lord?' All of these things are okay with him, and he will meet you in your honesty. Wilderness worship is also a place to weep, to just let it all out like Mary did. That is okay with God too. Jesus stands and weeps with you. And, thirdly, wilderness worship might be a place where God shows you his heart for a situation, as he did with Moses. God may move you through an injustice you hear or read about or through a need or a situation you discover or through a person you meet. Lament may be healing just for you and there is nothing wrong with that but it may also be about the response, the motivation and action that results. It may be that he impresses his sorrow for something on your heart, and then he sends you to go and do something about it, in his power. So let's learn to lament and see what God brings about through it. There is plenty to cause us to lament.

You may want to find some quiet time now in the new few days to write down what causes you to lament. These things may be about your own life in the past or present, or relate to things you regret about the way the world is, its injustices and pain. Offer these things honestly to God and seek his grace and healing. You may need to speak to someone you trust in consequence.

HYMN ⁴

You say the things in the past are gone,
there's no need for shame.
I feel it's easier said than done,
so help me today.

You say there's nothing I need to fear,
you're making a way,
around me sorrow is drawing near,
Lord help me to pray:
*You are my way in the wilderness
my streams in the wasteland.
And when the waves seem to cover me,
Lord you take my hand.
And as I walk through the blazing fire,
your love refines me,
You are my way in the wilderness,
my faithful God.*

You say I'm precious before your eyes,
you say that I'm loved.
I soon forget that you're by my side
so help me to trust.

You say a new thing is rising up,
you're bringing new life.
Right here, this moment it's feeling tough,
I'm longing for light:
You are my way in the wilderness

Prayers for others based on words from Psalm 13 ²

How long, Lord? Will you forget me for ever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

We pray for those who feel forgotten and unseen,
may they know that they are remembered and seen by you God.
Help us to partner with you to remember the forgotten.
Search our hearts to reveal those we hide our faces from,
the outcast, the stranger or the homeless.
Change our hearts, that we may turn our faces
towards these people and see them as your beloved children.

How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart?

How long will my enemy triumph over me?

We pray for those we know who struggle with mental illnesses, anxiety and depression.
We pray that there will be resources released to help,
Enough staff employed and finances given towards mental health services nationally.
Help us to be a friend and a listening ear to those who suffer.
Fill us with compassion and wisdom.
Ultimately, we pray for those who wrestle with sorrow,
that they may know your victory over those dark thoughts which currently seem to triumph.

**Look on me and answer, Lord my God. Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death,
and my enemy will say, "I have overcome him," and my foes will rejoice when I fall.**

We pray for those who might have fallen in some way, may they know your restoration and grace.
Help us not to judge or exclude your beloved children,
but instead lift them up in prayer, and embrace them with the grace we know in Christ.
Thank you, loving Father God, for hearing our prayer.

But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation.

I will sing the Lord's praise, for he has been good to me. Amen.

Lord's Prayer

HYMN – STF 481 ⁵

The Lord's my shepherd, I'll not want.
He makes me lie in pastures green,
He leads me by the still, still waters,
His goodness restores my soul.

And I will trust in You alone,

And I will trust in You alone,

For your endless mercy follows me,

Your goodness will lead me home.

He guides my ways in righteousness,
And he anoints my head with oil;
And my cup - it overflows with joy,
I feast on his pure delights.

And I will trust in You alone,

And though I walk the darkest path -

I will not fear the evil one,

For you are with me, and your rod and staff

Are the comfort I need to know.

And I will trust in You alone,

Final Blessing ¹

Thank you, gracious Father, for the space to be honest with you today.

To you all hearts are open, from you no secrets are hidden,

so may we continue to talk openly with you as our time of worship ends.

Make us a people who listen to others, sharing their sorrows,
and spreading your comfort.

And may God's blessing and peace be with us and all those we love now and always. Amen

Acknowledgements

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