

Intimations

Welcome to our morning worship. We are following guidance from Church of Scotland and there are only two us in the building. We enter and leave separately, whilst maintaining social distancing at all times. Please remember to maintain appropriate distances between others if you need to go out.

Churches across Scotland are asking us to join in prayer at 7pm on Sunday evenings.

If you have any pastoral care needs, please phone. Contact can also be made via our Facebook page @BoghallParishChurch. Our webpage where you can download a text copy of today's worship www.boghallchurch.org.uk. You can email us info@boghallchurch.org.uk. We have also set up a YouTube channel, search for Boghall Church where a copy of last week's worship is available, and we will upload further services as we go long.

DVD and audio recordings of worship are in process and will be delivered and sent out very soon.

Christian Meditation Sunday nights at 7pm.
(on Zoom)

Mindfulness Wednesday at 2pm. (on Zoom)

In Boghall we usually ring the bell in the hall of fellowship as a call to enter the church and prepare for worship, we would like to do the same today before we begin. The bell is quite far from the microphone but hopefully you may be able to hear it in the distance.

Thanks to Eleanor for sending a prayer by Walter Brueggemann reflecting on the passage from Isaiah 54:7-9:

“Ours is a time like the flood, like the exile, where the certitudes abandon us, the old reliabilities have become unsure, and “things fall apart....

In such a context of enormous fearfulness, our propensity is to enormous destruction...

The alternative is an act of imagination seeded by memory, uttered by a poet that draws the health-giving memory into the present, so that the present is radically reconstituted...

The world comes at us in destructive, pathological ways. From out of the chaos, however, emerges this other voice rooted in memory and comes the text shaping our future not in hostility but in compassion, not in abandonment but in solidarity, not in isolation but in covenant, not in estrangement but in well-being.

In the midst of troubled times, be with us, God of well-being. May faithful remembering lead to compassionate re-imagining.

Let us re-imagine the world as it should be in the words of the prayer Jesus taught us:

Our Father who art in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our debts
as we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, the power,
and the glory for ever.
Amen.”

I find the psalms offer endless expressions of every human emotion. One third of the psalms are laments; raw, heartfelt, honest raging to God. The psalms of lament capture how difficult we find waiting. We find patience hard.

Psalm 130, the psalm for today, captures the emotions of waiting; faithful waiting, faithful exhaustion, faithful exasperation.

But this is not passive waiting. The poet is doing something in his waiting. He cries out, he hears, he watches and he hopes, and finally he receives redemption. We will hear that descriptive line of the night-watchman nearing the end of his shift, eagerly peering for the first signs of morning light, the signs of hope and a new day.

The move from crying out to experiencing hope is founded on a trust in God's steadfast love. The Hebrew word *hesed* is translated as 'steadfast love'. The phrase appears frequently in the psalms. It is the same sort of love that is captured in the story Jesus told of the father waiting for his wayward son to return in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, a love that will wait and watch and never give up.

But waiting can produce other emotions too. Waiting can make us feel isolated, lonely, on our own. Psalm 130 begins with an individual's cry. In the closing lines he is gathered into a prayer for the community, for the nation. We are not alone in this communal prayer.

And we are not alone just now. Communities are gathering the isolated in. The staff and volunteers at the drop-in centre are doing an amazing job providing food to those who need it. We could provide food for the soul. We could send letters of encouragement, children could draw pictures, simple thing to share, connect and encouragement.

Let us listen to psalm 130.

Psalm 130

Waiting for Divine Redemption

¹ Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD.

² Lord, hear my voice!

Let your ears be attentive
to the voice of my supplications!

³ If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities,
Lord, who could stand?

⁴ But there is forgiveness with you,
so that you may be revered.

⁵ I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,
and in his word I hope;

⁶ my soul waits for the Lord
more than those who watch for the morning,
more than those who watch for the morning.

⁷ O Israel, hope in the LORD!
For with the LORD there is steadfast love,
and with him is great power to redeem.

⁸ It is he who will redeem Israel
from all its iniquities.

Someone once described the psalms as the Hebrew Blues, and that is the music that it most resembles, the blues. We are richly provided in scripture with the raw emotions of our human condition. In them we are reminded that it is OK to rage at God. But raging on its own just helps us let off steam and we soon return to our original state of emotions. They knew, in their ancient wisdom, that we need a bit of a structure to help us through our times of trouble.

The psalms of lament give us a structure to rage. When we feel a bit all over the place a structure is good. The psalms start with a **complaint**. A complaint about what is happening and that this is not as things should be. A lament is a protest, a protest to God.

Then they offer a **request**, a brutally honest one. God, do something! Rescue me! Heal me! Restore me! Show mercy! That is a sentiment we can probably relate to just now.

And finally Laments end with an ***expression of trust***. The psalmist remembers what God has done in the past. There is faith and a trust that God will not forget them, that there is always hope.

Writing your own psalm of lament can be a cathartic experience. Have a look at Psalm 13, or psalm 22, or today's psalm and notice that structure. A complaint, an honest, real complaint. A request, what is it that we want and wait for God to do. And finally, that practice of remembering what God has done in the past, that expression of trust and hope.

Take time, we have plenty of it, and construct your own psalm of lament to God. Before you start spend some quiet time, to still yourself, then compose an honest, raw, heartfelt lament.

Our Gospel reading for today is another long one. It is the story of the raising of Lazarus. It is at John's Gospel Chapter 11, verses 1 to 45. What I would like to do is draw out the emotions in this story and see what they might be saying to us today. Emotions do not change over the centuries. We flee from any that we consider negative or painful. And yet we are brought back, especially over Lent and Holy Week, to immerse ourselves in the painful feelings of loss, to feel the hurt before we get to Easter Sunday. We visit the tomb with fear and trembling before we know it to be empty.

The biblical scholars argue over whether this is a resurrection story. Lazarus will die again, so some argue that we should call it a resuscitation story. It is a foreshadow of Jesus' resurrection. However, Jesus says that he is the resurrection and the life.

Later on in John's Gospel we read that Lazarus is at a meal with Jesus and his sisters, he is living life and life in abundance. I think we see resurrection stories every day as people break free from pain or addiction or fear and find their lives once again. We will find life again, the life we feel that we have lost.

I will give a summary of the story. Why not read it later and let it speak to you in the Spirit of today.

Lazarus was one of Jesus' closest friends, someone that Jesus loved. When Lazarus fell ill his sisters, Martha and Mary, sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, the one you love is sick."

When Jesus heard the news, he waited two more days before going to Lazarus' hometown of Bethany. It was strange that Jesus would delay going to see his friend but he said

Lazarus' death would reveal a great miracle for God's glory.

When Jesus told the disciples that he was returning to Bethany they were worried because the religious leaders had threatened to kill Jesus. Thomas, in bravery or bravado, said let's all go so that we might die together.

When Jesus arrived in Bethany, Lazarus had already been dead and in the tomb for four days. When Martha discovered that Jesus was on his way, she went out to meet him. "Lord," she said, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Jesus told Martha, "Your brother will rise again." But Martha thought he was talking about the final resurrection of the dead.

Then Jesus said these crucial words: "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die."

Martha then went and told Mary that Jesus wanted to see her.

When Mary met Jesus, she fell at his feet and like her sister said, "If you had been here my brother would not have died". Those with Mary were weeping and mourning. Jesus was deeply troubled and disturbed, and Jesus wept.

Jesus asked to be taken to the place that they had laid Lazarus. He went to the tomb with Mary, Martha and the rest of the mourners and Jesus was deeply disturbed again. He asked them to remove the stone that covered the tomb. Jesus looked up to heaven and prayed to his Father, closing with these words: "Lazarus, come out!" When Lazarus came out of the tomb, Jesus told the people to remove his grave clothes.

In this story we have all the emotions associated with grief and loss. We will come back to that but first let's look at fear.

When Jesus says that they will go back to Bethany the disciples object. They have threatened to kill us, they say, not a good idea to go back. Thomas, who we will forever think of as Doubting Thomas breaks rank and says, 'let's go back so that we can all die together'. While courage is a virtue in the face of fear and cowardice is the vice, another vice would be recklessness. How would you consider Thomas' response to fear? Courageous or reckless?

We are seeing both a courageous response to Coronavirus but also a reckless one. Jesus says to the disciples we walk in the day light, if we go out at night we will stumble. It is a simple way of saying we take precautions to keep our selves safe. With those precautions Jesus still heads back to Bethany and the threat of death.

We experience a collective sense of fear just now unlike anything we have ever experienced. And it is a fear which we have to face. All the good spiritual practices help lead us into our fears, but not in a reckless way.

One problem with fear is that it feeds anxiety. But anxiety and fear are different. Fear is a real threat, anxiety feeds on our worries. I have friends and family working in the NHS just now and they have every reason to be fearful as they courageously show up for their shift. Anxiety is all the 'what ifs' and 'what might be', a free-floating anxiety that can't settle on the real threat. It is a fear of the unknown and all that cannot be controlled.

The Psalms of Lament help us name our anxieties and our fears. Naming them helps us move towards them, rather than flee from them. To sit with them for a while. That will not remove the reality of our real fears but may help us see our anxieties in a different light.

This story says a lot about loss and grief. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross' study on grief changed the way we approached bereavement. She suggested a structure to explore grief which has been compared to the structure of the psalms of lament. Her 5 stages of grief can be used to explore the story of Lazarus.

Her first stage is denial. Why did Jesus wait when he heard about the illness of his friend and not go straight away? Perhaps we are seeing Jesus at his most human here, experiencing all the emotions that we feel. We delay, put off, avoid the truth of things we do not want to face. We go into denial. It can't be, it must be a mistake, it will pass. Facing our fears is scary but must be done at some time.

Kubler-Ross' next stage is anger. We hear that Jesus was 'deeply troubled' on two occasions. A better translation to deeply troubled might be gut wrenching anger.

The scholars dispute what Jesus was angry about: the death of Lazarus, their lack of faith, the mourners, but maybe he was just angry at the pain of his friends. Maybe Jesus, in that moment, felt the powerlessness we feel, when we want to make things better, to take away the pain, but we can't. Anger is the emotion that often surprises those who grieve. We can feel ambushed by anger, as if it comes from outside us and takes us over. That anger that we can feel at God is so well captured in our psalms of lament.

Then there is bargaining. Mary and Martha's first response to Jesus was "if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Maybe a bit of anger and a bit of bargaining. Martha adds "even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." We've all done it. The prayer as we wait for hospital results. The prayer when we are called to come to the hospital immediately. The prayer before the start of another shift. Fear and bargaining go hand in hand.

Then there is depression. Depression and anxiety are dangerous friends. Jesus wept. Deeply troubled and disturbed he wept. What does it mean to follow a Messiah who cries? It isn't the strong sort of leader we seek. Archbishop Desmond Tutu describes himself as a cry-baby. He cried through the South African Truth and reconciliation commission. It didn't make his leadership weaker but stronger. He wept at the truth of the pain, and the pain of the truth.

When people say that coronavirus is some sort of judgement from God, I say God is weeping, God is deeply disturbed, this is not what God wants for the world, a world that God said was good. This is not what God wants for the world which God so loved that he sent his only son. God weeps.

The final stage in Kubler-Ross' study is acceptance. An acceptance that we are powerless to some things. Some things are out with our control.

Anger eats us up and if we can't project it outwards, we project it inwards. Depression and anxiety keep us prisoners in our real and imagined fears. Bargaining eventually runs out of people to bargain with and the reality of the situation finally closes the door of denial. Acceptance leads us to the only door left to go through.

The hardest part of the psalms of lament is the final stage: trust. When we trust something else, we must give up our claim to the power to fix everything. Acceptance is facing reality and facing that we are not in control of ever part of our lives. We do not want to go there, and it is a harsh lesson which suffering, grief, and pain teaches. The words that are used for this stage we find unattractive. Buddhists call it emptiness, Christians call it poverty of spirit, Alcoholics Anonymous call it powerlessness. But that acceptance, that trust, can lead to a real sense of inner freedom and peace.

Alcoholics Anonymous adopted the prayer written by *Reinhold Niebuhr* that has become known as *The Serenity Prayer*.

Let us close with the Serenity Prayer, a prayer for our times.

Serenity Prayer

*God grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change;
courage to change the things I can;
and wisdom to know the difference.*

*Living one day at a time;
enjoying one moment at a time;
accepting hardships as the pathway to peace;
taking, as He did, this sinful world
as it is, not as I would have it;
trusting that He will make all things right
if I surrender to His Will;
that I may be reasonably happy in this life
and supremely happy with Him
forever in the next.
Amen.*

Blessing