**25th February 2024**

**Call to worship**

We imagine God’s plan for us –
our ideas of what a happy future looks like,
for us, for our family, for our community, for the world.
It will bring success, and joy, glory and praise.
But will it? Often things turn upside down, we lose control,
there are unexpected consequences.
God invites us to learn to trust without clear seeing;
only later do we recognise God’s goodness to us.

**A gathering prayer**

Mysterious God,
you love and hold the universe in being.
You treasure each of us as a work of art,
a sign of your presence.
When we haven’t a clue what you are doing,
help us to trust you,
knowing that you see the whole picture.
**Amen.**

**A prayer of approach**

Faithful God, as we continue our journey of Lent,
we come together as your family, your church, your people,
to worship and to learn from you.
None of us are too young or too old to follow you.
All of us can be surprised by new opportunities,
new challenges, new ways to serve you.
We are known by name and cherished as your children,
whatever our age, whatever our circumstances,
for you call and love us all. **Amen.**

**A prayer of adoration**

Eternal God, how wonderful and vast are your horizons.
Thank you, creator God, for making us in your image.
Thank you, Lord Jesus, for calling us to be your disciples.
Thank you, Holy Spirit, for empowering us to fulfil our calling.
Thank you, Holy Trinity, for the expanse of your love
and the depth of your faithfulness. **Amen.**

**A prayer of confession and an Assurance of forgiveness**

**A prayer of confession**

*Response after each phrase:*
**Forgive us and help us to change our perspective.**

God of our days and nights, we are sorry for those moments when we see obstacles and you see stepping stones:
We are sorry when we just see the years behind us, and you see the years ahead:
We are sorry for the times we put limits on what we feel is possible, and lose sight of the fact that you are the God of the impossible:
We are sorry when we shrink the world to our size and lose sight of the vastness of your compassion:
In Jesus’ name we pray. **Amen.**

**Assurance of forgiveness**

Living God, from upside down to the right way up:
**you change our lives and our perspectives.**
From being burdened by guilt to being freed by your grace:
**you change our lives and our perspectives.**
From the fear of death to the embracing of each moment:
**you change our lives and our perspectives. Amen.**

**A prayer of praise and thanksgiving**

Incredible God, we thank you and praise you for trusting in us even when we find it hard to trust in you. **Amen.**
We thank you and praise you for offering us more than we could ever imagine. **Amen.**
We thank you and praise you for making the impossible possible. **Amen.**
We thank you and praise you for all the blessings of youth and of age. **Amen.**
We thank you and praise you for everything – in Jesus’ name.
**Amen.**

**A prayer for all ages together**

In the small things we trust you, God. (*cup hands*)
In the big things we trust you. (*hands wide apart*)
In the confusing things we trust you. (*hands over eyes*)
Together we trust you. (*reach towards each other*)
You hold the whole universe (*big circle*)
in the being of your love. (*hands over heart*) **Amen.**

**Genesis 17.1-7**

**Sermon**

During the Cold War there was a Russian comedian Yakov Smirnoff who made a visit to the United States. He was not prepared for the incredible variety of instant products available in American grocery stores. He says, "On my first shopping trip, I saw powdered milk--you just add water, and you get milk. Then I saw powdered orange juice--you just add water, and you get orange juice. And then I saw baby powder, and I thought to myself, “What a country!"

Instant babies, instant children – if only it was that easy. When your children are small and you are tiring of watching the same episode of teletubbies (or whatever it is nowadays) for the tenth time, changing more nappies, waking up in the middle of the night you long for the day when they will have grown up. People say to you it’s a wonderful age, you just want them to stay this small, but your thinking no – I want them to grow up quickly. Then when they grow up you have nostalgia for when they were small.

Change comes slowly.

The story of God’s salvation plan for humanity is slow. During Lent we are looking at the promises or covenants in the bible that God makes towards humanity

Frederick Beuchner the American Presbyterian minister said the Bible has a central plot:

‘Despite its extraordinary variety, the Bible is held together by having a single plot. It is one that can be simply stated: God creates the world; the world gets lost; God seeks to restore the world to the glory for which God created it’.

I said last week at that the Season of Lent can be a special time for reflection, especially personal reflec­tions on one’s faith journey. This year during the Sunday morning worship in Lent we will be immersing ourselves in God’s promises of presence, love, and guidance through the various covenants in scripture.

Last week we looked at the story of Noah’s Ark and the promise of the rainbow and we explored understandings of that ancient story. Today we have God’s promises to Abraham – to make him the father of all nations. God will start his salvation plan by using a family to start a people, a nation that God will particularly deal with, and reveal his ways to in order for them to be a light to the whole world and through whom he would bring Jesus to be the true light for the entire world. All that will take thousands of years.

But it starts with a family.

The family is the natural place to give birth to faith.

Justin Barrett an Oxford academic and psychologist, believes that children are born believers. They have an innate tendency to believe in God and look for purpose and meaning in the world. They ask searching questions, wonder about the meaning of life and express their own sense about what truly matters.

A little boy's prayer: "Dear God, please take care of my daddy and my mommy and my sister and my brother and my doggy and me. Oh, please take care of yourself, God. If anything happens to you, we're going to be in a big mess."

The research of psychologists actually suggest that being involved in a community of faith brings with it so many benefits.

prosocial involvement, academic achievement, coping with problems, being more likely to take care of health (better exercise, nutrition, dental hygiene)

Less likely to engage in risk-taking behaviours, use weapons, fighting.

Being involved in religion provides a context for: identity development, meaning, connectedness, community, being in nature, finding perspective, asking questions on difficult subjects, finding support, understanding boundaries, increased openness, better relationships, greater emotional responsivity to others, heightened sense of personal satisfaction, happiness, and positive identity formation.

Of course you can get toxic religion. But there is also good religion that is good for you.

Good religion should help you walk with God. That is one definition of spirituality – our walk with God – the search for God in response to God’s search for us.

God chose Abraham, met him, revealed himself to Abraham and said I am God Almighty, walk before me faithfully and be blameless.

How do we walk with God? Micah the prophet summed it up pithily later in the Bible when he said what the Lord requires is this: “Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God". Justice, mercy, humility.

The word for walk implies walking, rather than simply making a single walk from A to B. Abraham is to walk or live his life ‘before God’. God is watching and watching over – which is both an encouragement and a challenge. Both are significant.

God will be watching over and protecting so ultimately no harm comes. Life maybe harsh and cruel but ultimately our lives rest in the gentle hands of God.

God will be watching over Abraham’s life to see what kind of person he is. Abraham is no saint and gets up to some really bad stuff. The covenant God makes with Abraham doesn’t depend on Abraham being morally upright. Grace means there is nothing we can do to make God love us less. Grace means there is nothing we can do to make God love us more.

But it does depend on Abraham trusting God. The word translated as blameless makes it sounds very demanding this covenant. But the word used here suggests not the absence of faults but the presence of a positive quality. God wants Abraham to be wholly committed to God’s ways. God doesn’t expect him to be sinless and whiter than white. God can cope with people’s moral mistakes.

Rather God is looking for a certain direction in people’s live, a certain cast to their lives – a focus, a goal, a fundamental moral wholeness.

God’s covenant with Abraham, God’s relationship with us, depends on our integrity and desire to keep on trusting even when the going gets tough, or we stumble and fall. Like any relationship it always takes two to tango – otherwise it won’t work.

People can feel not good enough to be in the community of faith. Many years ago, I was a community worker for a church in a couple of inner city council estates. There was a local resident, we’ll call her Ceri, who was a great community activist. She worked with me in setting up a housing tenants association, a lunch club for the elderly, a parent and toddler’s group and a youth club. I said why you don’t come to church on Sunday morning worship; you practically live in this building most of the week. She said ‘I’m not good enough. All these people who come to church are nice people, I’m not nice.’

 Despite my best efforts I couldn’t get through to her. Sadly Ceri developed terminal cancer. Her husband closed the door on the community and wouldn’t let anyone see her in her last stages of the cancer. I put a card through her door with some words from Psalm 91:

*Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High, will rest in the shadow of the almighty. I will say of the Lord ‘he is my refuge and fortress, my God in whom I trust.*

She rang me up and asked me to come and visit her.

She said she had tried all sorts of things to get well, she had even had faith healers in, reiki practitioners, acupuncture, you name it. What could I offer she said? I said I believe God loves you, loves you with a love that not even death can end. Jesus came to show us that love. He said he was our Good Shepherd who will take care of his sheep.

We talked about the life of faith and trusting ourselves to God, asking Jesus to come close, by his spirit. She wanted me to pray for Jesus help. So I prayed for her, saying sorry for I asked the Holy Spirit to fill her life. She went all hot and said it felt like electricity and then felt a real peace.

I went back the following day and we shared some passages in scripture. However the next day she was admitted into hospital and within a week she died. But I know that Ceri had found faith, that she knew she was loved and accepted by her heavenly Father and that she had new courage and strength in facing her final challenge. I have faith that death was not the last word for Ceri and I trust in God’s promises – as Psalm 91 continues:

*He will rescue you from the fowler’s snare and from deadly pestilence. He will cover you with his wings, you will find refuge.*

For the promise to Abraham, the rest of this 17th chapter tells us that the gift of "the land" is an important part of the promise, and then spends a good amount of time on the sign of this covenant, circumcision. The promise of the land continues to be the source of great controversy today with Israelis’ and Palestinians at loggerheads. Abraham was the father of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and those three faiths have not always got on either. Families!

Circumcision is the subject of modern debate within the Jewish faith with some believing that it is a mutilation. The early church struggled about its necessity. They decided that the sign of baptism would become the new sign of belonging to the community of faith, God’s family. The sign of baptism was more inclusive, as it was open to both male and female.

In ancient times, covenant partners would engage in a ceremony where each step symbolized the new relationship they were entering. First, animals would be slaughtered, split along the spine, and laid out on the ground each piece across from its other half.

Then, the partners would exchange outer robes symbolizing the taking on of a new identity now being a representative of the other. At this time, one or both might also be given a new name to further express this new identity.

Next, the covenanting parties would exchange weapons promising to rise to the other's defense and act for their protection.

Afterwards, they would exchange belts symbolizing the offer of strength thereby giving the other access to one's wealth and resources.

Then, they would comingle their blood by making a cut in their arm or hand and either dripping the blood into a cup from which they would each drink or by clasping hands allowing the other's blood to flow directly into each other's bodies.

Subsequently, they might rub dirt or ash into the wound in order to create a permanent scar as a visible reminder of this covenant.

Alternatively, they may exchange rings, set up a pillar, plant a tree, dig a well, or in some other way create a permanent sign of the covenant.

Then, the parties would pass between the slaughtered animal halves calling the gods to bless the other person if they upheld this agreement and calling down curses on the other person and themselves if either should fail to live by this covenant. Finally, the animals would be sacrificially offered to the gods and a feast prepared and eaten together in this new relationship of unity.

This covenant is made through the ceremonial process of cutting. The two parties essentially became one tribe or clan now holding the rights and responsibilities to each other of blood kinship.

In this manner, entering a covenant relationship is similar to the process of adoption in today's society. Adoption is a legal agreement whereby adults who are not biologically related to a child agree to take on the responsibilities of parenthood and that child is then considered to have the status and rights of any biologically born, blood-related son or daughter for the rest of his or her life.

In the same way, a covenant was to be a permanent relationship of unity together.[[1]](#endnote-1)

In the [Abrahamic covenant](https://www.compellingtruth.org/Abrahamic-covenant.html) parts of this covenant are established at different times—God calls Abraham out of his land and promises to make him a great nation from which the whole world will be blessed in [Genesis 12](https://www.bibleref.com/Genesis/12/Genesis-chapter-12.html). In [Genesis 17](https://www.bibleref.com/Genesis/17/Genesis-chapter-17.html) the covenant is sealed with the sign of circumcision. But the main event is a dramatic scene in [Genesis 15](https://www.bibleref.com/Genesis/15/Genesis-chapter-15.html). Abraham asks for reassurance of God's promise to give him a son, and God responds by telling Abraham to gather various animals and sacrifice them, laying their halves on either side of a path for them to walk through. God then puts Abraham in a deep sleep and passes through the animal halves to seal the covenant between them. The symbolism of the cut-up animals is saying, "Let my body be cut up if I were to break this covenant."

The cutting, the circumcising, the shedding of blood - may seem strange and even barbaric to us today – but was a solemn oath of commitment to the ancients. The shedding of blood by Jesus on the cross, likewise was seen as God’s solemn promise of life and forgiveness and restoring of relationship to us.

The last thing I want to mention is about names.

Names play an important role in this story, and not just for Sarah and Abraham. The different writers used different names for God throughout the Book of Genesis. In this text, God is *El Shaddai,* translated here as "God Almighty". In the chapter before this one, Hagar the slave who Abram’s wife Sarai gave to him to have children with and then banished out of jealousy is now lost and out there in the wilderness and feeling forgotten. She dares to name God as "the One who sees me" (16:13). God reassures her that God does see her and her son Ishmael.

What is a name for God that "may be more congruent with our own the life experience?

God changes Abram's name and gives him a new life and "a wondrous, limitless future of power and well-being." This future embraces us today, as we participate in the transformation God promises: "Those barren at the beginning are fruitful at the end. Those abandoned have become cared for. Those displaced have become royal. Those alone have come to covenant"

This is a family story, and it is poignant that the families descended from Abraham have struggled for centuries with each other, like so many family stories today. Still, the story of Abraham and Sarah can inspire hope in every family, every congregation, no matter what appearances may insist to the contrary. What unseen possibilities, beneath those appearances, can God use to produce marvellous and amazing results, a multitude of blessings for the entire human family? In what ways is God acting and initiating wonderful things, including surprising and seemingly impossible ones, in your lives and the life of our church today?

The passage finishes with Abraham and Sarah doubting and laughing at the suggestion by God that they will have children in their old age. Great ancestors in the faith doubting and questioning and laughing about the promises of God? All too human.

At the start of this passage Abraham falls facedown when he is encountered by God. At the end of the passage Abraham falls face down in laughter at what he has heard.

How is your walk with God going?

Do you sense a direction, a promise? Or are you full of questions, doubts, laughter? Are you falling down in awe

Or are you falling down in disbelief – ahh you must be kidding?

How is your walk with God going?

**Prayers of intercession**

**Trusting God when we don’t understand**

Leader: Lord, even when we don’t understand,
**All: help us to keep on trusting you.**

Lord, there is so much going on in our world that we don’t understand. There are wars and rumours of wars, famine, natural disasters, corrupt leaders, injustice, global warming. The more we pray, the more we could keep adding to this list…

Lord, help us to hold on to the fact that you are in control. That, ultimately, you are God. We bring specific areas of concern to you now: Gaza and Israel, Ukraine and Russia….. We pray for your loving hand to be on the people who are suffering. We ask you to bring them comfort and security. Lord, we pray for peace.

Leader: Lord, even when we don’t understand,
**All: help us to keep on trusting you.**

Lord, there is often so much going on in our neighbourhood that we don’t understand. There are strikes and unrest; waiting lists in our hospitals that seem endless; ambulances stuck outside hospitals; schools with crumbling walls and ceilings. Lord, it seems as if there is never any contentment, and very little joy. And, when we turn to you, we hear you speaking of suffering and rejection. As followers of Jesus, you explain that our true joy comes only from denying ourselves. Sometimes it all seems so confusing and topsy-turvy.  Sometimes following you is hard. We admit that there are times when we just do not understand. Yet you love us through all our turmoil. You care for us deeply and long for us to see things from your perspective. Give us insight and wisdom, we pray, especially when (*add local concerns here*)…

Leader: Lord, even when we don’t understand,
**All: help us to keep on trusting you.**

Lord, there is so much going on within us that we don’t always understand. We fall sick, some people are cured and some are not, and there often doesn’t seem to be any explanation as to why. We pray now for those, amongst us who are suffering in any way…

We remember those who are sad and sorrowful, those who are lonely, anxious or depressed. We pray for those waiting for treatment or a diagnosis. Lord, we don’t understand illness and disease. We pray for those whose faith is tested by their troubles. Give them courage to face their situations. Show us how to be empathisers, how to be good listeners, how to be there when we are needed. But, most of all, we pray for your comfort and love to be felt by all who need your touch today.

Leader: Lord, even when we don’t understand,
**All: help us to keep on trusting you.**

Lord, we know that to serve you well, we are called to deny ourselves take up our crosses and follow you. But it’s hard. It would be so much simpler to be your followers if you promised us an easy life. Yet, you have promised to be with us. You have promised to uphold us. You have promised your Spirit to help and guide us. So, we offer ourselves to you afresh today. Even when it’s hard. Even when we don’t know where we’re going. Even when we just don’t feel like it. Help us to turn our eyes to you. To look beyond ourselves to those who need our help. To look beyond ourselves and see those who we can serve. To look beyond ourselves and see where we can make a difference in our homes, our communities, our workplaces and schools, yes, even in our world. Go before us, Lord, give us courage. Shine into our dark moments and lead us onward so that we can help spread your kingdom wherever you call us to go.

Leader: Lord, even when we don’t understand,
**All: help us to keep on trusting you
and to keep on following you wherever you lead us.**

**Amen**

**A sending out prayer**

Loving God,
Thank you for the wonderful times,
when our hearts are singing.
Thank you also,
that you are with us in the difficult times,
when we are confused and don’t understand.
Help us to feel your presence – at all times.
Help us to hear your guidance and learn to trust you,
knowing that good times will come again.
**Amen.**

1. <https://www.compellingtruth.org/difference-covenant-contract.html> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)