

Music: 'Autumn adagio' Op 67 by Glazunov
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dum-2EKDBtY>

Regular Opening Music: 'Its still not going to rain' by Lizzie Hornby

Welcome:

Welcome! whoever you are, and however you are feeling. Whatever you carry in your heart, and bring with you, concerns or celebrations, sadness or joys, you are welcome.

Welcome wherever you are, and however you are joining us: and especially if its your first time, whether in the church, 'live' on-line, or watching a recording later, or for those who still read printed copies of this service, you are all welcome!

And this morning I bring greetings from all our congregations in the Western Union who met here for the Annual meetings for the first time in over two years, and what a wonderful happy day that was.

However we join in, each one is part of our community, contributing by being connected in spirit, all equally valued.

Chalice Lighting: As is our custom, we begin by lighting our chalice flame, as a symbol of our free religious faith. If you are at home and have a candle, you may like to light it now.

'As the leaves of autumn will soon light a blaze of beauty across the countryside,
let us kindle our light of faith and community, bright with the colours of people,
warm with welcome, radiant with hope.'

This month's theme is the web of existence, and I will be alluding to that in this Service, at this time of connection between all life forms on this planet as we approach the Equinox. when the sense of connection between all life forms and activities on this planet seems especially strong, at this time of the approaching Equinox.

Opening Words: 'Autumn Coming on' by Cynthia Edson

The Golden Rod and Cow Parsley come now.

Apples redden on ancient trees.

The Aurora Borealis blooms in midnight sky;

Shooting stars arch downward.

Earth continues her harvest.

We gather in what our lives have sown: for love and laughter we have let our tears flow, cleansing.
For hope and celebration we encounter the coming dark seasons, knowing spring has always come from the ground once again.

For peace we have moved our anger to be heard.

The release of a counterbalance helps us centre down. The current of energy from Earth flows into our feet by ocean, rock and river, on forest floor or plain. It sings in our souls and echoes in our new found voices. Let us be open by sharing it with the world.

I invite you to join in singing our first hymn, which celebrates these connections as in a piece of weaving. It has become a firm favourite for Plymouth Unitarians! Hymn no 199 in Purple Hymn Book: "Weaver God Creator".

1st Hymn: Purple Hymn 199 "Weaver God, Creator"

Weaver God, Creator, sets life on the loom,
draws out threads of colour from primordial gloom.
Wise in the designing, in the weaving deft;
love and justice joined - the fabric's warp and weft.

Called to be co-weavers, yet we break the thread
and may smash the shuttle and the loom instead.
Careless and greedy, we deny by theft
love and justice joined - the fabric's warp and weft.

Weaver God, great spirit, may we see your face
tapestried in trees, in waves and winds of space;
tenderness teach us, lest we be bereft
of love and justice joined - the fabric's warp and weft.

Weavers we are called, yet woven too we're born,
for the web is seamless: if we tear, we're torn.
Gently may we live - that fragile earth be left;
love and justice joined - the fabric's warp and weft.
(French carol tune arranged by David Dawson, words by Kate Compston)

Prayers: Spirit of compassion, we gather here in comfort and security, and for this rare blessing we are truly thankful. But save us from feeling too comfortable, and remind us that so many are not as fortunate as we are.

So, let us pause and hold in our thoughts and prayers all in our own church community, in our city, and in the wider world, experiencing worry, sickness and general misfortune, for we are all connected in some way, even with those we have never met.

We pray for all whose lives have been lost or changed forever, due to the pandemic, in UK and around the world. As the numbers of those developing the illness rises, may everyone behave sensibly to lessen the possibility of spreading it, to help keep us all safe, especially the most vulnerable. We pray that there be a better sharing of the vaccine around the world, for none of us is truly safe until all are safe.

We hold in our thoughts and prayers all suffering through extreme weather conditions in recent months, manifestations of Climate Change : floods, droughts and wildfires; the cost in human lives and many species of wildlife is unbearable.

We hold in our prayers all who are subject to tyranny, persecution, and war, the countless numbers fleeing for their lives from Afghanistan and other unsafe countries. May those who are in the fortunate position to offer them welcome and refuge, be moved to do so.

May we have the gift of true compassion, to enable us to be with them in some way, however small it may seem to us, to act in a neighbourly way, to bring back a little joy and happiness into their lives.

And let us give thanks for happy events in our own lives, which lighten our hearts. May we contribute to and benefit from the resources of love and strength our church community offers, to us and to the wider community outside our doors....AMEN

..... Let us take a short pause for our own silent prayers ... AMEN

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The following, is a creation story, a myth, a tale about night and day, their changing lengths due to the seasons, and it is about balance, at the time of Autumn equinox; that time of night/day balance, and as we ponder on balance in the wider world and our individual lives.

### **A story from the Navajo tribe**

A long time ago, when the world was only just being created, the animals separated into 'Day animals: those that forage and are more active during the day eg dogs, lions, monkeys, and Night animals, those that forage and are more active at night eg owls, racoons, bats.

It was a time when animals could talk, and they would often play games together taught to them by the Giant who had then gone away on a journey. The animals would play the moccasin game. This involved one team hiding several moccasins in the soil, and the opposing team trying to guess which one contained a small ball hidden inside. It was a favourite game. Each team, the Day animals and Night animals would play, alternating games of guessing. And so it went on.

Each side would up the stakes. One side would say, "If we win, then we control the river." The other side would then say, "If we win, we control the weather." Until eventually, the Night animals suggested that if they won, then the world would forever experience night-time and never day-time, and so the Day animals said that if they won it would be forever day-time.

And, so that game started – perhaps it's still being played today: as days grow shorter in the winter, and then night grows shorter in the summer, as each side scores more winning points. A balance of sorts?

However, the owl started to cheat. When the owl buried the moccasins, he kept the ball hidden under his wing, and so the Day animals could never guess where it was, because it wasn't hidden in a moccasin. The Day animals were doomed to lose.

Imbalance entered the world.

And so, the Day animals, realising what the Night animals were doing, cried out in lament to the Giant to return and restore order. Their cry was 'Give it back, give it back'. A plea for the Night animals to return the hidden ball, to play fair, and not cheat, and for order to be restored.

Even today, that cry, is sung by the Navajo, and has been turned into a modern song.

Night and day vie for supremacy, still, throughout the changing seasons, and yet there is still some order and balance in night and day, and the changing seasons.

For us, it is a timely story for the impending Autumn equinox. A time of balance.

**Our Reading is a seasonal Poem : 'September on the Mosses' by Norman Nicholson**

Wait, tide, wait;  
Let the mosses slide  
In runnels and counter-flow of rock- pool green,  
Where web-foot mud-weeds preen  
Leaves spread in the sunshine; where  
on slow air-ripples the marsh aster lays  
Innocuous snare of sea-anemone rays.

Wait, tide, wait;  
Behind your wide - as -winter ebb the poplars of the waves  
Turn up their underleaves of grey.  
Thunder-blue shadows boom across the bay.  
But here the silt is green, the salt is bright,  
And every grass-tongue licks its summerful of light.

Autumnal tide,  
Mauve as Michelamas daisies, bide  
Our while and summer's. Let the viscous sun  
Percolate the turf. Let small becks run yellow for ever with shine,  
and the floor of this moment hold back time and shut the gate.  
Wait, tide, wait.

Deciduous tide,  
On the willow whips of inshore billows the inside  
Edge is brown. Crying 'Never!  
Canutes no due tomorrow, and now is ever  
By being not lasting. So  
With pride let this long-as-life hour go  
And flow, tide, flow.

And the tides at this time of year are often the highest and the lowest.

**A Seasonal Reflection on Balance**

Balancing at the Autumnal Equinox, could mean not only taking stock of the present situation, but also honouring the procession of the seasons that gives so much meaning and context to our lives  
..... *P A U S E*

Balancing at the Autumnal equinox might mean reflecting, looking back with atonement and looking forward with hope and love ..... *P A U S E*

Balancing at the Autumnal Equinox might mean simply looking at the moon, the sky, the stars and feeling the bracing change in temperature to autumn's coolness from summer's warmth . ..... *P A U S E*

What ever it means, may each of us in this equinox season, balanced between Summer and Autumn, take time to inhabit the changes. .... *P A U S E* May it be so.

*Pause of about 1 ½ minutes of silence, followed by piano music, 'Sit with me' by Lizzie Hornby*

**ADDRESS FOR THE AUTUMN EQUINOX**

"September - a subtle shift – autumn creeps softly upon us.  
The earth tilts us towards darkness, while her beauty still surrounds us."

So writes one of my favourite Unitarian authors, Cliff Reed, expressing so succinctly and so beautifully my own feelings about this time of year. Its so true! Preparing today's Service during a week of beautiful serene weather, with the windows wide open, merely days from the Equinox and the *real* start of Autumn, I thought that, so often, Summer saves some of its best until last – balmy days bathed in the light of a golden sun - but a sun which sets a little earlier each evening. The bees buzz busily in the flowers in the pots in my backyard, seeking nectar to stock up their stores, and the leaves on the trees in the local park are starting to turn colour; the rosehips and berries in our church garden blaze gorgeously orange and gold. Walking in the local park one early morning, I noticed a layer of mist enfolding the river Tamar, shrouding the Cornish hills from my sight, and Keats' well-known words came into my mind,

"Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness!  
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;  
Conspiring with him how to load and bless  
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eaves run;  
To bend with apples the moss'd cottage trees,  
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core."

These are lovely words, and we all know Delphine's tree on her allotment is 'bent with apples!' but what causes this ever changing kaleidoscope of the turning seasons?

Its all because of the relative movements of planet Earth and the Sun. This Wednesday September 22<sup>nd</sup>, at 7.21 pm UK time, the centre of the sun will cross directly over the Earth's Equator, and appear to head south as part of an annual cycle.

On that day, the sun will rise exactly due east, and set exactly due west. During the few days hours immediately before and after the moment of the equinox on September 22<sup>nd</sup>, across the whole world, the length of darkness and light, of day and night, will be the same - EVERYWHERE. This has fascinated me ever since I first heard about it as a child, – just think ... someone living on the equator will enjoy a similar amount of daylight as someone living in Norway, or Australia, as us in Plymouth, and the scientists living at the research bases in Antarctica. Truly, this is something which unites the whole human race, and it happens just twice each year, once at the March Equinox, and now at the September Equinox!!

After the Equinox, the sun's apparent path over the earth will continue to move south, because of earth's tilt of 23 ½ ° with respect to the plane of its orbit around the sun. In 3 months time, just shortly before Christmas Day, the Sun will shine directly over the tropic of Capricorn, far into the southern hemisphere, and unbroken darkness will embrace the North Pole and all lands and waters south to the Arctic Circle. There is constant change. As in the Navajo story which Ann read earlier, there seems a constant contest between times of darkness and light, and we become more aware of it at this time of transition.

Commented [MU1]:

With the changing of the seasons, we recognise the flux of life - the profound teaching that nature gives us, that everything is constantly changing. Edwin Way Teale writes of the seasons, seeing Autumn thus:

"Change is a measure of time and, in autumn, time seems speeded up.  
What was is not and never again will be; what is, is change."

This autumn, Time really does seem to have speeded up, it seems only a few weeks, since we were looking forward to the Spring equinox, and the Census, – but it was a *whole 6 months* ago! Is it only me, who thinks Time itself has behaved a little disconcertingly; seeming to be both compressed and elongated these past six months?

Maybe its not so surprising, for so much has happened in those six months, locally and globally. For us in UK, we have gone from *almost* total lockdown, to *almost* total freedom, in faltering steps, thanks in no small measure to the Vaccines, thanks to the scientists who developed them.

As wise woman Sophie Lutz observes,

" Here we are then, back to school, back to work, back to life pre-Covid. Except that there is no way of pretending the truth of that. Wildfire smoke billows from California to Greece, floods in Germany and Raynes Park, the return of the Taliban crushes air out of the lungs of women everywhere as we watch the fate of our sisters in Afghanistan. And all of us have personal challenges we are facing, none of us unscathed by the last two years. We reap what we, and those who rule us, sow"

For people like the ancient Celts and Old Testament Jews, the Autumn Equinox marked the beginning of the new year. Indeed modern Jews still celebrate their New Year in September, followed a few days later by the Day of Atonement, (this year, it was on 16<sup>th</sup>) when all wrong-doings of the past year may be forgiven if the perpetrators (and everyone is a perpetrator, in some way) are truly repentant. So the old dirty slate may be wiped clean – for a fresh start, a spot of Autumn cleaning

We all, by which I mean *all humanity*, world wide, needs to wipe clean several dirty old slates to make a fresh start. The news that we are in a Red Alert situation regarding Climate Change was a nasty shock to hear, even to scientists and concerned lay people, who have been warning of this for many years. We must be thankful that the most senior people at the UN, and increasingly church leaders, and some others in 'authority' are aware and calling for concerted action. We should be thankful for this wake up call! There is still time – *just* - if everyone takes action. We can all take individual actions, for we are all part of the interconnected web of life. We can reduce our carbon emissions, in various ways. We can buy more locally grown food, or even grow some of our own. We can buy less and repair, reuse and recycle to reduce waste. And we can all send messages, by the written word or in more active ways, to political leaders at all levels of government, from local councillors to Prime Ministers and Presidents around the world, until they heed this God-given warning, and convert words into the actions needed to minimise the damage – not only for us, but for all the life forms with which we share this world.

Humanity must clean the dirty old slates of global inequalities of water and food supply, and of vaccine supply. For none of us is safe until all are safe. We must wipe clean the dirty old slates of poverty and injustice, inequalities of gender- based disadvantages, and

cruelty and – perhaps the hardest, plain stupidity! I can see some of your eyes starting to glaze over – ‘That’s a lot of slates to wipe clean – can we do it?’ you are probably thinking? We *must* give it the best we can, for we are a part of the wonderful web of life - All inter-connected in unexpected ways. I’ll give you just one example.

A former colleague from the Marine Labs in Plymouth now lives and works in Australia. In a recent facebook message he was told of a scientific paper, which draws links between the smoke from recent forest fires to a plankton bloom in an ocean half a world away. Carbon in the smoke particles rose high into the atmosphere, and transported by atmospheric currents for thousands of miles before falling into the sea. The carbon fed the plankton, the microscopic sea life, which feeds many larger marine animals, some of which may be fish some of which humans may catch and eat. So, we are all part of this web of life!

Before closing, let us take heart, and think has been achieved in the past six months. I’ve mentioned the Vaccine, and that’s been a lifesaver – literally. The good we have done: in lockdown: sowing seeds or planting up a garden; making something beautiful, donating to a good cause, a kind act for a neighbour; sending a card, or phoning a friend to lighten their day, or simply just getting through a difficult day. There have been joys: watching those seeds grow into a flowering plant or delicious vegetables, seeing a beautiful sunset, hearing children’s laughter, receiving a piece of good news - and then, as lockdown eased, meeting up with friends in person, to share fellowship and love with others again. I’m sure we each have our own thanksgivings.

Finally, one thing we all have in common. We cannot turn the clock back. The past is past and gone. Gone are all the good times but also the bad, the pleasures but also the pains. Now we look to the future – made wiser by all that has gone before. Learning from the past, but not living there. We do well to listen to St. Paul, who advises us to forget the past and: ‘...to reach forth unto those things which go before.’

Well, too, to heed the humorous words of Mark Twain, who in his wise and witty way says,

‘We had better be concerned about the future, because that is where we are going to be spending the rest of our lives.’

To live in and for the future - that is the challenge for each of us. For it is in the future that we shall find our hopes and opportunities, our chance to do a little better – to climb a little higher, to enjoy afresh each day, the wonder in our lives.

So may it be for us all this Autumn *AMEN ...*

**2nd Hymn:** no. 247 in the Green Book, ‘A World of Wonder’

*(Tune ‘Laudate Dominum’ by Charles Parry, 1848-1918) Words by Sydney Henry Knight, 1923- used by permission)*

1. The sun at high noon,  
The stars in deep space,  
The light of the moon on our upturned face,  
The high clouds, the rain clouds,  
The lark-song on high,  
We gaze up in wonder,  
Above to the sky.

2. The green grassy blade,  
The grass-hopper's sound,  
The creatures of shade  
That live in the ground,  
The dark soil, the moist soil,  
Where plants spring to birth,  
We look down at wonder  
Below to the earth.

3. The glad joys that heal  
The tears in our eyes,  
The longing we feel,  
The light of surprise,  
Our night dreams, our day dreams,  
Our thoughts ranging wide –  
We live with a whole world  
Of wonder inside.

**Closing Words:** *by Rev Vernon Marshall*

"Giver of life, you have blessed us with the changing seasons. As summer green turns to autumn brown, help us welcome the change as a renewal of all that lives. Nature freely accepts the transformation. So may our lives be freely transformed."

**Music: Closing piano music**

**Extinguish Chalice**

**Final Closing Music Video** Allegro from Autumn, from Vivaldi's Four Seasons  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1uaVhKocqPw>