

## **6<sup>th</sup> February 2022 – The arc is long**

Led by Rev Kate Whyman

**GATHERING MUSIC** A long way up, Carrie Newcomer

<https://youtu.be/glkBNvUrQ5g>

### **WELCOME AND CHALICE LIGHTING**

Welcome. Welcome to all of you here in the church and all of you here online today. However you are this morning, however you're feeling, whatever joys or sorrows you are carrying, you are welcome here.

I'd like to open with some words by Starhawk.

We are all longing to go home to some place  
we have never been—a place half-remembered and half-envisioned  
we can only catch glimpses of from time to time.

Community.

Somewhere there are people to whom we can speak with passion  
without having the words catch in our throats.

Somewhere a circle of hands  
will open to receive us, eyes will light up as we enter,  
voices will celebrate with us whenever we come into our own power.

Community means

Strength that joins our strength to do the work that needs to be done.

Arms to hold us when we falter.

A circle of healing.

A circle of friends.

Someplace where we can be free.

May that place be here.

This month is LGBTQ+ History Month, which reflects on the history of gay rights and also of related civil rights movements. This year its theme is 'The arc is long', which comes from a quote by the civil rights campaigner Dr Martin Luther King Jr:

*'The ark of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice.'*

"The arc is long" is also our theme for this morning.

But let us light our chalice now, as a symbol of our free religious faith. *And if you're at home, do please light one with me now.*

May this flame this morning be for hope, for courage and for resilience.

Let's sing...

### **1<sup>st</sup> HYMN 194 (purple) We light the flame**

We light the flame that kindles our devotions.

We lift our hearts in blessed community.

The mind has thoughts, the heart its true emotions,  
we celebrate in worship, full and free.

Our faith transcends the boundaries of oceans.

All shall be granted worth and dignity.

So many ways to witness to the wonder,

so many dreams by day for us to dare.

Yet, reaching out, each way is made the grander,  
and love made bold for dreamers everywhere.

Diversity will never cast asunder  
our common weal, our bonds of mutual care.

Infinite Spirit, swell with us, we pray thee,  
that we may share in life abundantly.

Forgive our sins, feed us with good bread daily,  
with strength resist temptation steadfastly.

O God of life, sustain us now, and may we  
with mindful hearts, be thankful constantly.

## **PRAYER**

I invite you to join me now in a time of prayer. I'd like to begin with the prayer of Francis of Assisi. I have amended it very slightly so that it addresses god and spirit that may be feel more sympathetic.

God of All Love

make me an instrument of Your peace.

Where there is hatred let me sow love.

Where there is injury, pardon.

Where there is doubt, faith.

Where there is despair, hope.

Where there is darkness, light.

Where there is sadness joy.

Divine Spirit

grant that I may

not so much seek to be consoled as to console.

To be understood, as to understand.

To be loved, as to love

For it's in giving that we receive

And it's in pardoning that we are pardoned

And it's in dying that we are born

To eternal life.

Amen...

*And let us pause to bring in to mind's eye those known to us, and those unknown, who are suffering or struggling in any way at this time...Close to home we may include those in our own circles and also in this congregation who are unwell. And reaching out further we might include those who experience oppression and discrimination of any kind. And in particular the people of Afghanistan who currently find themselves in such dire circumstances.*

*We pray for all who suffer at this time, and hold them in our hearts. May they find hope, comfort, and resilience wherever they may be.*

**STORY** 'The Touchstone', Anthony de Mello (from Margaret Silf's book 'One Hundred Wisdom Stories from Around the World')

It is said that when the Great Library of Alexandria was burned down, only one book survived. It was a very ordinary book, dull and uninteresting, so it was sold for a few pennies to a poor man who barely knew how to read.

Now that book, dull and uninteresting as it seemed, was probably the most valuable book in the world, for on the inside of the back cover were scrawled, in large round letters, a few sentences that contained the secret of the Touchstone – a tiny pebble that could turn anything it touched into pure gold.

The writing declared that this precious pebble was lying somewhere on the shore of the Black Sea, among thousands of other pebbles that were exactly like it, except in one particular – that whereas all the other pebbles were cold to the touch, this one was warm, as if it were alive. The man rejoiced in his good luck. He sold everything he had, borrowed a large sum of money, which would last him a year, and made for the Black Sea, where he set up his tent and began a painstaking search for the Touchstone.

This was the way he went about it. He would lift a pebble. And if it was cold to the touch he would throw it in the sea, so as not to pick it up again. So each day, for hours on end, he persevered in his patient endeavour: lift a pebble; if it felt cold, throw it into the sea; lift another, and so on. This went on for hour after hour, for a week, a month, for a whole year. Still no touchstone.

Then one evening he picked up a pebble, and it was warm to the touch. But through sheer force of habit, he threw it into the Black Sea.

**READING** Howard Thurman (Black American theologian and civil rights leader, among other things)

For many, waiting is... the experience of recovering balance when catapulted from one's place. It is the quiet forming of a pattern of recollection in which there is called into focus the fragmentary values from many encounters of many kinds in a lifetime of living. It is to watch a gathering darkness until all light is swallowed up completely without the power to interfere

or bring a halt. Then in that darkness, to continue one's journey with one's footsteps guided by the illumination of remembered radiance. This is to know courage of a peculiar kind, the courage to demand the light to continue to be light even in the surrounding darkness. To walk in the light while darkness invades, envelopes, and surrounds. This is to wait on the Lord. This is to know the renewal of strength. This is to walk and faint not.

## **2nd hymn 148 Spirit of Life**

Spirit of Life, come unto me.  
Sing in my heart all the stirrings of compassion.  
Blow in the wind, rise in the sea;  
move in the hand, giving life the shape of justice.  
Roots hold me close; wings set me free;  
Spirit of Life, come to me, come to me.

*Words and music © 1981 Carolyn McDade, arranged by David Dawson*

## **CANDLES OF JOY AND CONCERN** (for your own darkness and for light and hope)

*Blended*

**INTERLUDE** Violin Partita No. 1 in B Minor, BWV 1002: II. Double, Johann Sebastian Bach, Itzhak Perlman

## **ADDRESS The arc is long**

Science tells us that the Big Bang was nearly 14 billion years ago. Actually 13.8 billion – so still a couple of million years short of 14 billion in fact, but still, that's some arc. Some project. Some vision. Or, if that makes the universe sound too 'designed', then let's say it's quite some chain of events that has unfolded to get us to here and now.

Out of that nearly 14 billion years, humans have been for only around 2 million (so about the same snippet of time we've just described as 'nearly'). Two million years is a tiny fraction of the life of the universe, but it's a much longer time than perhaps we tend to think since the first humans emerged in Africa, given that we, who use the Christian calendar, call this year just 2022. Which can give us a very skewed sense of time, and some would say a massively inflated view of our own importance.

For example, you may have read or heard about the amazing recent findings at Sherford, the new housing development just outside Plymouth, where remains of a woolly mammoth and other animals who roamed the earth between 30,000 and 60,000 years ago have been found. That's still incredibly recent in cosmic terms. 2022 barely scratches the surface.

Of course you could say that we – and the woolly mammoth – have all been around for 13.8 billion years, in some form or another. After all, the events leading to our births, and all the energy and matter required to form 'us', began right back then with everything else. Nearly 14 billion years ago. We are merely the latest spin of the kaleidoscope pattern to emerge from what has been a continuously changing pattern of forms since the year dot. Which, it suddenly struck me as I was writing this, is a very apt turn of phrase.

It helps to remember this, from time to time, I think. These immense time scales. The unimaginably long arc of time that has brought us here, and the unknowably – possibly longer – arc of the universe that stretches out ahead and way beyond us into who knows where. Like Martin Luther King Junior, I do, however, like to think that the moral universe (which may or may not imply humanity) is bending towards justice in the end, I have faith that, despite the many all-too-obvious setbacks along the way, in the end 'all shall be well', as Julian of Norwich famously put it. That 'good' will – ultimately – overcome 'evil'. And that in the meantime our little lives – our brief existences – can be aligned with that overarching direction, if we choose. We can make a difference. We can choose to bring understanding, compassion and honesty in to our daily lives and so help rather than hinder the process. We can align ourselves with the Divine will, which I think most of us believe to be Love, or Light, or Goodness.

Part of keeping on track with long sweep of the arc, which helps us keep our spirits up on a daily basis, is to constantly notice – to actively practise noticing – each gift, each blessing, each step forwards, while not getting too despairing about things not being good enough, or

right enough, or (heaven forbid) perfect. Of course we feel pain and sadness for ourselves, and for a suffering world that too often seems to be going backwards rather than forwards, but we need to balance that care, concern and empathy with hope and appreciation for what is already here, for all that has already been achieved along the way (which is so much), with all that is good and beautiful, right here and now.

As an African American, Howard Thurman knew plenty about discrimination and injustice. But he always spoke of the importance, even in the darkness, of continuing the journey 'with one's footsteps guided by the illumination of remembered radiance'. Even when life feels difficult or even overwhelming, we too need to keep ourselves attuned with the light that is always there, and follow its trajectory as best we can. Both Thurman and Martin Luther King Jr would no doubt see great improvements in some ways if they were here today, and would be greatly disappointed to see the lack of progress in others. But would keep following the light, knowing that 'the arc is long'.

LGBTQ+ history month was founded in 1994 in the US, where it's celebrated in October. Here in the UK it's observed this month, in February, and coincides with a celebration of the 2003 abolition of Section 28 (or Clause 28), which prohibited the promotion of homosexuality as being acceptable. Great strides forward have been taken since then, including the legalization of same-sex marriage. And yet only this week three people were found guilty of murdering Cardiff doctor in homophobic attack. Reminding us again that the arc is long.

What about the man in our story, who was searching the beach for the one pebble that could turn everything to gold? You could say that he was searching for the answer, or for the light. But was so caught up in the search, and the struggle, that he'd stopped expecting to find what he was looking for, so much so that he completely missed the moment when he was actually holding it, right there in his hand, until it was too late, and he'd thrown it into the sea. So much of what we seek actually *is* given to us, but what use it is if we don't see it, or don't appreciate it? If we're so identified with the darkness that we miss the light?

For all our life journeys, our guiding stars are vital. The personal arcs of our own lives, the longer arcs of our congregations, and societal and global arcs of LGBTQ+, anti-racism, and the environment and more – in fact all the things we live and support and work towards - these give us our context and direction – they trace arcs across the skies for us. At times they seem clouded and lost. But at such times, rather than despair there are at least two

things we can do. One is to remind ourselves that the universe is 13.8 billion years old and we're just a blink of an eye in the passing of time. *And* the second is to look squarely in to the present, which is everything – in effect all those 13.8 billion years have rolled out to form this one moment. It's all here now. So we can pause and look, and see the miracle of that, the potential within it, and our place in it, and above all take that moment to bring love and light, right here, right now.

'The ark of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice,' said Martin Luther King Jr.

Let's hang on to that thought. May we too have faith in that overarching belief. And then bring the best of ourselves to bear in whatever way we can. It's not our job to fix the world, or to bend the universe to our own will, but we are called to offer love and understanding in each moment as best we can. To match our will to the Divine Will as it bends, ultimately but surely, towards justice. All shall be well.

Let's sing...

For me, I understand these words as being about creating a better world. But I can also see how they could be interpreted more figuratively, about building community right here. Try imagining the word 'land' as 'church' or 'place' to see how that shifts perspective. After all we're all broken, to an extent, and we're all captives in one way or another. So both readings seem to me to be equally valid and important.

**3<sup>rd</sup> HYMN: 198 (P)** We'll build a land

We'll build a land where we bind up the broken,  
We'll build a land where the captives go free,  
Where the oil of gladness dissolves all mourning.  
O we'll build a promised land that can be.

*Come build a land where sisters and brothers  
Anointed by God may then create peace:  
Where justice shall roll down like waters,*



*And peace like an ever flowing stream.*

We'll build a land where we bring the good tidings  
To all the afflicted and all those who mourn.  
And we'll give them garlands instead of ashes.  
O we'll build a land where peace is born.

*Come build a land where sisters and brothers  
Anointed by God may then create peace:  
Where justice shall roll down like waters,  
And peace like an ever flowing stream.*

We'll build a land building up ancient cities,  
Raising up devastations of old;  
Restoring ruins of generations.  
O we'll build a land of people so bold.

*Come build a land where sisters and brothers  
Anointed by God may then create peace:  
Where justice shall roll down like waters,  
And peace like an ever flowing stream.*

Come, build a land where the mantles of praises  
Resound from spirits once faint and once weak;  
Where like oaks of righteousness stand her people.  
O come build a land, my people we seek.

*Come build a land where sisters and brothers  
Anointed by God may then create peace:  
Where justice shall roll down like waters,  
And peace like an ever flowing stream.*

Words: Barbara Zanotti, Music: Carolyn McDade  
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**CLOSING WORDS** Let Our Lives Be a Prayer, by Rev. Joel Miller

Let our lives be a prayer

That waters dry souls

Mends broken hearts

Refuses to be terrorized

Seeks this world's beauty

And carries us through its storms.

**Amen**

**CLOSING MUSIC** Weather the Storm, Benjamin Scheuer

<https://youtu.be/jrWtVWsqXYw>