

27th February 2022 - Into the Wilderness, led by Jennifer Sanders

Prelude

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pAJVLpnyWkw&list=PLtXpflAzt87ch1LgK9EE13WaJpPDnyGVZ>

Opening words

The wilderness is some where we have been before. Time in the wilderness is always a time of struggle. It is also a time of transformation and renewal. In traditional terms, it is a time of purification. The journey into wilderness reminds us that we are alone and not alone.' — Sarah York

Good morning everyone and welcome to our Live and online Sunday service here at Plymouth Unitarian Church.

For those of you that dont no me I am Jennifer and the lay pastor at Hastings and a trainee minister . Thank you for having me this morning as part of my placement. Its good see you all again

Our opening words from Sarah York remind us of the journeys we have all taken and are about to take - some joyful and some challenging . Ion our Unitarian tradition and as a reminder of the light that is present in our lives to show us the way we light our chalice

Chalice lighting

This a chalice of audacious hope.

This chalice shines a light on our shared past, signalling our intention to listen deeply, reflect wisely, and move boldly toward our highest ideals.

Rev Rebecca Savage

With this flame, we cut through the dankness of isolation and are warmed by the fires of our interconnection.

For this moment, this radical moment, we find a certainty within the knowable bonds of love and community.

By [Amy Williams Clark](#)

Let us take a few moments of stillness bathed in the light of this flame of hope and direction. A light that can show us the way to our spiritual connection which is ever present. Supporting and guiding us through the wilderness

Silence

Prayers

Spirit of Life and Love,
Our hearts are aching today
As we watch fear and terror
Being inflicted on Ukraine.

We pray from afar,
Seeing people flee in fear,
Praying in the streets,
Gripped by an uncertainty
That echoes in our hearts.
We have known uncertainty
And fear these last two years,
And while we are aware
It is nothing like war,
We are reminded of our tie
To the humanity of those
We have never known.
We pray for the parents
Trying to protect their children.
We ache for children
As forces outside their control
Shatter their world.
We ache
For those doing what they can
To flee the movements of nations.
And we pray
For those who cannot flee.
May the world not turn its face
Away from this pain.
Even in those moments
When we, as individuals,
Must rest our spirits,
May our thoughts and prayers
Become actions
That end war
And the threat of war
Forever.

Hymn 62 Here we are gathered (purple)

Into the Wilderness is our theme for today's service and the following comes from Rev Ant Howe, Unitarian minister and lead tutor of the Unitarian College

The season of Lent reminds us that there are journeys we all have to make in life. Physical journeys... Spiritual journeys.....
Some journeys we can share with others..... but other journeys lead us into the wilderness alone.
Some people give something up during Lent, others take something on.
Whatever we think about this season of Lent, may we know that ours is a journey of hope. Our free and liberal faith calls us to journey from oppression to inclusion, from grief to gladness, from despair to hope.

Hymn 33 Do you hear (Green)

I was brought up in what one may term a form of Christianity I was baptised In the church of England and shipped off to Sunday school in my early years. We never practiced faith

at home but went to church on a Sunday and celebrated all that the traditional festivals had to offer.

Lent was about pancakes and then the long wait for Easter celebrations .

The space in the middle had no religious significance for me for many years. I went through a period of “ giving up something up for lent - mostly I failed miserably and ended up with a jar full of money having failed to stop swearing !

The origin of Lent, of course, goes back to the Gospels, and the story about how, after he was baptised by John the Baptist, Jesus went off for forty days into the wilderness, and did some serious soul-searching,

Our First reading comes from Sarah York a Unitarian Universalist

When Jesus was baptized the spirit descended upon him like a dove and God said, “This is my son, in whom I am well pleased.” It must have been a great feeling, but it didn’t last long. The next thing Jesus knew, the nice spirit that had descended like a dove became aggressive and drove him into the wilderness. There he spent forty days of deprivation, self-examination, and confrontation with the devil. He suffered; he struggled; he was tested.

Jesus’ solitary struggles to remain true to his covenant and calling echo those of his ancestors, who spent forty years in the wilderness establishing a religious community.

Wilderness is a part of every person’s soul-journey, and part of our journey together as human beings who seek to live in community. Time in the wilderness is always a time of struggle. It is also a time of transformation and renewal. In traditional terms, it is a time of purification. The journey into wilderness reminds us that we are alone and not alone. We are neither where we have been nor where we are going. There is danger and possibility, risk and promise. In the wilderness, the spirit may descend like a dove and lift us on its wings of hope, then drive us into the depths of despair; it may affirm us with a gift of grace, then challenge us to change. In the stories and rituals of Eastern as well as Western religions, a journey into the wilderness represents a time when we both pursue and resist the Holy.

We may choose to enter the wilderness like the people of Yahweh, to escape bondage, or, like Henry David Thoreau, to “live deliberately.” Or we may, like Jesus, be driven there without much choice. Once there, even our markers of time and space collapse, for this wilderness is not in space or time, but is the boundless territory of the soul.

We may have in the past had a clear direction of where we are going , education , partnership , children careers homes holidays . Occasionally we may have had reason to question our direction . Some of us may have changed our career after an epiphany moment or of years of longing to have more meaning in our lives.

Retirement can also bring about a sense of soul searching .. what now?

But no more than what we have lived through these past two years which have been a forced opportunity to look again . We have been forced into the wilderness of truly not knowing . So many of our festivities, rites of passage anniversaries have been stripped away leaving us with the bare essentials to navigate a new way of being

The usual sat nav of life is no long working

Recent changes in the law present us with a return to so called freedoms. An opportunity to make choices that in the last 2 ears have been forbidden or out of reach. For some it may signal an end to the wilderness of not knowing of fear and restriction for others it may present a whole new land-

scape of uncharted territory - walking the path on a road that has not been traveled in quite this way .

Journeys are not easy without a specific map ready to follow. We are invited to question the maps that may have been given us in our younger years in relation to our spiritual practice And as we enter the first week of lent we may be challenged more by its history and legacy

As Unitarians we have choices about Lent, whether we engage or not, whether we believe the story of Jesus entering the wilderness, but what we do know is that time with ourselves in reflection and prayer - dedicated time to sit and listen to the still small voice within is an integral part of connecting to what we call sacred

Into the wilderness is a collection of poetry and prayer written by Sarah Awe She writes a poem for Ash Wednesday and for each of the 5 weeks leading up to Holy week

In the first full week following Ash Wednesday,, she names her poem **The wilderness is a place of beginnings**

“Begin again,” life whispered in my ear; For some days are beginning days.

Some days are designed to be the day we try again, And on those days—the sun rises for you.

On those days, the birds sing for you.

On those days, God is cheering for you.

That’s just the way God and beginnings work.

For when your heart is broken and your life is in pieces,
Or when the addiction or the depression have found their way back into your bones, Or
when you lose sight of the person that you were called to be,
The wilderness will sing to you, “Begin again.”

“Begin again” with the person you want to be. “Begin again” with the person you want to love. “Begin again” with the knowledge of your faith. “Begin again.”

The sun is rising for you.

Our reading this morning remind us of the invitation to walk into the wilderness and begin again

And as we enter a period of stillness Let us ask ourselves these questions

What is it in our own lives that needs a fresh perspective

What is it in our own thoughts about the divine that needs questioning

What practices that we know can provide us with the nourishment for the days ahead that have fallen barren by the roadside

We take this time to ask and receive

Silence

Light of love god of all mystery of mysteries we ask for new direction in our lives. To be shown the new road with greater clarity and wisdom . We ask that we have the courage to sit in the space of quietness to enter the wilderness safe in the knowledge of your ever prescience

Music <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G4uEofU8PSE>

Address

In the traditional Christian sense the belief that Lent is a time that needs Christ's intervention to bring about a new aligned relationship with god will probably not sit comfortably with us: the sense that we have all sinned and need to turn to god for forgiveness and be in the correct relationship with god will no doubt ruffle a few feathers. But the time of lent does lend itself to an opportunity to reflect to place ourselves in what we call the Wilderness to examine and meditate on what needs changing

We may feel that we have had enough time of introspection this last year - enough already the sun is coming out Spring is really here and we just want to get on.

I spoke to someone recently about Lent

'Seriously?' they said 'there is nothing left to give up apart from Netflix' (others are available)

When I started to suggest that this may be a possibility I was met with a face the sign of thunder which translated as 'Dont even think about it !'

And yet the invitation is to take some more of that precious time to do an inventory of our lives ,perhaps since the lockdown a year ago, an opportunity to examine how we have been in body, mind and action but with a compassionate guide by our side whether that be God, our community or the wilderness itself within nature ?

The wilderness in the sense of nature can be a place of getting away from it all, away from those distractions that pull us away from the connection to the divine

A desert landscape, one like Jesus faced during his time in the wilderness, was largely uninhabitable and was full of dangers for anyone who dared to venture in it for long. Danger from scorching heat by day and extreme cold by night, danger from wild animals and scorpions, plus the scarcity of food and water.

Wilderness is not a luxury but a necessity of the human spirit." Edward Abbey

Wilderness has been characterised as barren and unproductive; little can be grown in its sand and rock. But the crops of wilderness have always been its spiritual values silence and solitude, a sense of awe and gratitude able to be harvested by any traveler who visits." David Douglas

Are these places still in existence today the places that are so wild and untouched? I often wonder when I walk the dogs each morning . There are various routes I take - I am blessed by the abundance of fields at the back of my house - and I ponder , has every blade of grass been walked on, has every inch of the woods and trees been touched - is it still a wilderness?

OUR opening piece of music was from the film Into the wild After graduating from Emory University, top student and athlete Christopher McCandless abandons his possessions, gives his entire \$24,000 savings account to charity and hitchhikes to Alaska to live in the wilderness.inspired by tales of Jack London and Henry David Thoreau,

The allurements of nature and wilderness is the major theme of this story. Chris McCandless believes wilderness may provide him shelter from the painful modern realities of materialism. He lasted 133 days before he starved to death, His body was found and the abandoned bus became a pilgrimage place for man seeking reprieve from the demands of the world in nature. What we would call now an alternative lifestyle

.If he had a companion and proper supplies he would have survived. However the way he went on his journey, alone and unprepared was the way he had intended it to go.

We dont have to be as radical as Chris Macanadless - Whether it is by choice or driven by a need to do something different in our lives the Wilderness can be the place outside of ourselves where we seek that reconnection, we take the space.

People like Chris choose to loose the trapping of modern day living and try what we would call an alternative lifestyle. Living in nature, off grid away from the distraction of a materialistic society and there are those in Ukraine ad we sit here today that against their will are walking into a wilderness of unknown land and unknown future not by their won choice .

Is there hope for them ? We may feel powerless to help them and yet thought his choice of introspection and prayer we come face to face with the wilderness not only what we see on our screens but also the wilderness we hold within

Sarah Awe - whose poertry we heard earlier talks about the need to really name the wilderness that we feel in order to heal from it and be with it

First, we have to name it— The heartbreak,
The addiction,
The shame, The grief.

Whatever your wilderness is, First we have to name it.

And once we've said those words out loud, We let that truth hang in the air.
And we let ourselves feel what we feel,
For in this moment,

we are close to the surface.

And after a few deep breaths,
We begin the removing.
Piece by piece, we take our armour off,

...And once we are armour-free, Hearts on our sleeves
And tears in our throats,
We stand toe-to-toe

With the very hurt that wrecked us.
And we don't try to swallow that pain away.

When we touch the wilderness within we touch the beauty the desolation the unknown ,
the space which can bring new possibilities.
Can we have the courage to step into the wilderness of the unknown with the god of our
understanding by our side
Can we take the risk to sit with the uncomfortable able truth of the unknown
Can we make a commitment to begin again moment by moment
We are invited in the season of lent to do just that and though the desert we may find the
beauty that has always been there
Amen

Silence

Closing works

Carl Jung wrote, ' . When we are willing to risk venturing into the wilderness, and becoming
our own wilderness, we feel the deepest connection to our true self and to what matters
most. "

May you go in peace in love and in connection with the wilderness both within and around
Amen

Closing

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XjjeSN4kQjw>