

**4th December 2022 – PLYMOUTH**

**The wonder of trees – led by Rev Kate Whyman**

**1. INTRO MUSIC (2'42")**

Le Sapin (Spruce) Sibelius

<https://youtu.be/mnRXyuFTGqw>

*'Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.'* Genesis 2:9

**2. WELCOME/CHALICE LIGHT**

Welcome to this morning's service. You are welcome whether you're here in person or joining us online. Whether you are a member of this congregation, a friend or a visitor. Whether you come in sadness or in joy, in anxiety or with peace of mind, you are welcome.

This week has been National Tree Week, and this weekend is National Tree Dressing Day, both of which aim to draw attention to and celebrate trees. We know that trees are vital to life on earth. Forests perform vital functions that make our planet habitable, including converting sunlight energy into organic matter to provide food. Trees are the biggest and longest-lived creatures on earth. Their grace and beauty are sources of inspiration; they keep us in touch with the seasons, and remind us of our own mortality. Trees dominated the earth in the Devonian period around 400 to 350 million years ago. By contrast humans have only been here for around 2 million years. Like mountains, they are powerful reminders of the earth's history.

So perhaps it isn't surprising that trees have become sacred in many cultures and religions, and they will be the theme of this service.

Today is also the 2nd Sunday in advent.

So, let us begin this time of celebration, contemplation and community by lighting the our chalice and advent candles. May our flames be symbols of the meeting of earth and fire, the material and the ephemeral, the body and the spirit. May they remind us of the human condition, of being rooted to the ground even as we also reach up towards the stars.

3. **1st Hymn:** 147 (P) Spirit of earth, root, stone and tree

Spirit of earth, root, stone and tree,  
water of life, flowing in me,  
keeping me stable,  
nourishing me,  
O fill me with living energy!  
*Spirit of nature, healing and free,  
spirit of love, expanding in me,  
spirit of life, breathe deeply in me,  
inspire me with living energy!*

Spirit of love, softly draw near,  
open my heart, lessen my fear,  
sing of compassion, help me to hear,  
O fill me with loving energy!  
*Spirit of nature, healing and free,  
spirit of love, expanding in me,  
spirit of life, breathe deeply in me,  
inspire me with living energy!*

Spirit of life, you are my song,  
sing in my soul, all my life long,  
gladden and guide me, keep me from wrong,  
O fill me with sacred energy!  
*Spirit of nature, healing and free,*

*spirit of love, expanding in me,  
spirit of life, breathe deeply in me,  
inspire me with living energy*

*Arr David Dawson, words © Lyanne Mitchell*

#### 4. PRAYER

God of all life

We give thanks for the splendour and the mystery of creation.

We remember that we are part of all that is,

Connected to the stars and the oceans,

To the plants and the planets,

To each other and to you.

Be with us always, now and evermore.

*Let it be so.*

**The prayer of the woods** – found in the forests and parks of North America

I am the heat of your hearth on the cold winter nights,  
the friendly shade screening you from the summer sun,  
and my fruits are refreshing draughts quenching your thirst as you journey on.

I am the beam that holds your house, the board of your table,  
the bed on which you lie, and the timber that builds your boat.

I am the handle of your hoe, the door of your homestead,  
the wood of your cradle, and the shell of your coffin.

I am the bread of kindness and the flower of beauty.

Ye who pass by, listen to my prayer: Harm me not.

5. **1st READING** 'Pine Forest Fugue', from *Evening Tide*, meditations by Elizabeth Tarbox

The wind sings four-part harmony: aspen, piñon, ponderosa and spruce.

What a language this is: beyond the reach of words, whispered secrets understood only at the place where the lover sighs and cries, and brings a truer life to life.

I listened at midday to the song humming over these tall, green organ pipes and I listened at dusk when the hills were rust and the sky pink with sunset. And I heard it again, the theme of a thousand pines. But I did not understand, and the chill I felt was of one who waits outside.

The raven understood, with outstretched fingers and the air between its toes, but I only closed my eyes and tried too hard to hear. I woke next morning from my bed on the forest floor, as if the hum had stroked my bones and calmed the fractious poet. And I learned to trust that my soul knows things I'll never find the words to tell, and my heart will sing to meet the forest's call.

6. **2nd HYMN - 148 (P) Spirit of life x2**

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 © Carolyn McDade, arr David Dawson*

**7. 2nd READING** poem by Wendell Berry

Slowly, slowly, they return  
To the small woodland let alone:  
Great trees, outspreading and upright,  
Apostles of the living light.

Patient as stars, they build in air  
Tier after tier a timbered choir,  
Stout beams upholding weightless grace  
Of song, a blessing on this place.

They stand in waiting all around,  
Uprisings of their native ground,  
Downcomings of the distant light;  
They are the advent they await.

Receiving sun and giving shade,  
Their life's a benefaction made,  
And a benediction said  
Over the living and the dead.

In fall their brightened leaves, released,  
Fly down the wind, and we are pleased  
To walk on radiance amazed.  
O light come down to earth, be praised!

**8. REFLECTION**

I invite you to join in a simple guided meditation.

Begin by placing your feet firmly on the ground and resting your hands in your lap, or wherever they feel comfortable.

Take a few slow, deep breaths.

And now allow your breathing to settle into its natural rhythm – there is no need to alter it, simply sit with it and observe it.

Follow the path of your breath as it rushes into your nose, flows down the back of the throat and down into the lungs. Follow its swirl there and its easy and cleansing path back out from within.

Do this until you feel calmed and focused.

Now imagine you have roots, like a tree, growing downwards from the soles of your feet, reaching through the floor and into the rich, fertile ground of Mother Earth. Allow yourself to feel grounded in the earth.

And now visualise light extending upwards like ethereal branches from the top of your head and connecting you with the bright, spiritual space of the cosmos above. Know yourself to be at one with spirit.

As you breathe in, you may like to imagine you are pulling energy up from the earth through your body and out in to the cosmos. And as you breathe out you may visualise yourself drawing down energy from the cosmos down through your body and into the ground.

Become aware of your self as a conduit between heaven and earth as we now enter a time of silence, which will be followed by music.

**SILENCE**

## **9. INTERLUDE:**

Ian Aisling - Light Through the Trees, <https://youtu.be/8ZUfeGpznRA>

## 10. ADDRESS

At a congregational service on Zoom some months ago, I invited people to bring contributions – thoughts, images, memories and so on – on the theme of holy places and sacred spaces that had resonance for them. Some of you were there and may remember this. I don't know quite what I expected people to share – maybe a cathedral they'd sat quietly in, or a mountain they'd climbed, or a grave they visited perhaps? I wonder, now, what holy place might come to mind for you? What I do know is that I was surprised that evening how many people spoke of their sacred spaces being trees. Trees in general, and specific trees they knew or remembered, which had meaning for them. Which were holy places. I shouldn't have been surprised, of course, because I have also experienced the sacred nature of trees.

I remember attending the Fez Festival of World Sacred Music in Morocco. It's a huge festival – still going – that showcases religious and spiritual music from all over the world and attracts audiences of around 25,000 people each night to the enormous 14<sup>th</sup> century palace courtyard of the Bab Makina, which is fitted out with huge screens and powerful sound systems, elaborate sets and impressive lighting. I saw sitar master Ravi Shankar and his daughter Anushka perform there and it was magical.

But the Bab Makina, for all its splendour and size, is not in fact the heart of the festival. That lies somewhere else entirely.

At 4 o'clock each afternoon a much smaller acoustic concert is held, also outdoors, in the courtyard of the Batha Museum, with its beautiful gardens and mosaics. Audiences of many faiths and cultures gather on scattered chairs or simply sit on the ground. The atmosphere is intimate, the music is gentle and the performances immediate, but what makes it so special is that the musicians perform under the shady umbrella of a magnificent 400-year-old Barbary oak tree.

Whatever their religion – and I have seen Jewish singers, Gregorian chanters, and a folk band from Uzbekistan perform there – and whatever the faiths of the audience,

everyone seems intuitively and implicitly to understand and respond to the sacred nature of this huge and ancient tree.

This very week, and much closer to home, I've been astonished and uplifted by the magnificence and splendour of the trees in Plymouth's own Central Park on my morning walks. They really are quite breathtaking, still dressed in their autumn colours. They turn a walk into a pilgrimage.

What is it about trees that they can have this profound effect?

Is it their stature, their strength, their resilience, their beauty? Is it the way they are quite literally grounded, while at the same time forever reaching upwards towards the sunlight? Is it that they stabilise the earth, and take carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere, and provide homes for other animals, and shelter and shade? Is it because they live long (the oldest tree in the UK is thought to be the Fortingall Yew in Perthshire, which is believed to be between 2000 and 3000 years old), or because they provide us with wood to build our homes with and paper to write on, as well as rubber, and fruit, and oil, and medicines and...on and on we could go?

Is it because of their shape, which seems to be a metaphor for life itself? They are – mostly – upright, as are we. They grow from, say, a tiny acorn into a sapling and then a mature tree – sounds familiar. They even get wider as they get older! Is it the way the leaves fall, reminding us of our own mortality and return to the earth? Or the way branches branch and branch again, echoing the process of evolution itself, even as they spread out cathedral like to enfold and hold us.

Could it even be because woods can be dark and frightening too – so that they also represent the shadow, the hidden, danger and the unknown? And in folklore and fairytales – think of woods and woodcutters, Hansel and Gretel, Little Red Riding Hood.

Probably all of this and more.

That trees resonate so deeply with us, is perhaps partly why some of us were so upset by the City Council's decision recently to cut down trees on Armada Way. Quite apart from the obvious loss to the city and ecosystem, it showed a basic lack of



respect to these wonderful life-forms. It felt that they had been dishonoured, disregarded, discarded.

And not surprising, then, that trees are prominent in so many faiths. I mentioned the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge in the garden of Eden, but think of the banyan tree, the bodhi tree, the yew, just to mention a few.

Even in this church – and Unitarianism is not particularly known for being rich in symbols – but even here we have a green man from the pagan tradition, a specially commissioned painting of ‘the tree of life’ in the earth spirit tradition, and now a – beautifully decorated – Christmas tree (thank you Christina and Rob). This year we even have the addition of sycamore branches to hang our cards on – thank you Marianne.

Relatively recently biologists have discovered that trees can communicate with each other. They do this through their roots and via the dense network of fungal threads that spread through the earth like the neurones in a brain, carrying information back and forth in the form of chemicals. This adds yet another level to the wonder, and the sense of magic and mystery of woods and forests, the intriguing idea that they share a rich intelligence and via a language we can't hear.

But above I would say that trees – like all living things – are spiritual beings. They share the same divine spirit, the same energy source and life force, as do we. Our own spiritual growth surely depends on us recognising and remembering that simple but profound truth. We are not here as masters and lords of an unconscious and inanimate planet, rather we are co-existers, collaborators, co-dependents, continuous with and ultimately inseparable from all life.

Our growth, our maturity and increasingly our survival depends on us appreciating this, and the wonder, the mystery, the beauty and the spirit of trees and of the whole of creation.

Blessed be.

### **3<sup>rd</sup> Hymn 66 (P) How wonderful this world of thine**

How wonderful this world of thine,  
a fragment of a fiery sun,  
how lovely and how small,  
where all things serve thy great design,  
where life's adventure is begun  
in God, the life of all.

The smallest seed in secret grows,  
and thrusting upward answers soon  
the bidding of the light;  
the bud unfurls into a rose;  
the wings within the whole cocoon  
are perfected for flight.

The migrant bird in winter fled,  
shall come again with spring, and build  
in this same shady tree;  
by secret wisdom surely led,  
homeward across the clover field  
hurries the honey bee.

O thou, whose greater gifts are ours -  
a conscious will, a thinking mind,  
a heart to worship thee -  
O take these strange unfolding powers,  
and teach us through thy Word to find  
the life more full and free.

*Words by Frederick Pratt Green, music by David Dawson*

## 11. CLOSING WORDS

May we leave this place today, knowing we are earth and spirit, body and soul

May we enter fully into each moment, grounded in what's real and reaching for what's possible.

Above all may we go in peace and in joy until we meet again.

Amen.

## 12. CLOSING VIDEO

Tree Song, Evie Karlsson

<https://youtu.be/Z6vFWmLXI3g>