

25th February 2023 – PLYMOUTH

Lent as a loving practice – led by Rev Kate Whyman

1. **INTRO MUSIC** Into the wild, Michael Brook (2'59")

<https://youtu.be/pAJVLpnyWkw>

2. **WELCOME/CHALICE LIGHT**

Welcome and good morning to you all, both here in church and joining online today.

We gather today, as we do each Sunday, to remember once again who we truly are, to build community together, and to open our hearts and minds to the divine mystery, to the Source and Ground of all being.

We are now in Lent. Unitarian minister Rev Ant Howe writes: '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, many choose to ignore it. But whatever we think about this season, 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.'

Let's begin our service, as is our custom, by lighting our chalice as a symbol of our free religious faith. (Do please light one with me if you are able.)

LIGHT CHALICE

We light this flame for the love at the core of one each of us, divine spark that yearns to burn more warmly and shine more brightly still. May we allow it to do just that.

3. **PRAYERS**

Sue Monk Kidd

[Divine Spirit, God of all Love...]

To be fully human, fully myself,
to accept all that I am,
all that you envision,
this is my prayer.

Walk with me out to the rim of life,
beyond security.
Take me to the exquisite edge of courage
and release me
to become.

Lenten prayer

God of life, may my choices be guided by your love so that all people may live to their full potential. Amen

4. FIRST HYMN 146 (G) True simplicity

'Tis the gift to be simple, 'tis the gift to be free;
'tis the gift to know just where we want to be;
and when we find ourselves in the place just right,
'twill be in the valley of love and delight.

*When true simplicity is gained,
to greet all as friend we shan't be ashamed;
to turn, turn, will be our delight.
'til by turning, turning, we come round right.*

'Tis the gift to be simple, 'tis the gift to be free;
'tis the gift to share our common destiny;
and when we find ourselves in the place just right,

'twill be in the valley of love and delight.
*When true simplicity is gained,
To greet all as friend we shan't be ashamed;
To turn, turn, will be our delight.
'Til by turning, turning, we come round right.*
Traditional Shaker song, arr. by David Dawson

5. **STORY** Map of the World – Jewish story.

There is this man who loves to read the Sunday newspaper, cover-to-cover. There is just one problem. This man has a five-year-old granddaughter who loves to interrupt him while he tries to do so. The man tries everything to keep her occupied, but to no avail.

Finally, one day, as he's trying to read, he comes across the travel section, and has an idea. There, across the whole front page, there's a map of the world. He rips the page off, and then tears it into little pieces. He calls his granddaughter over to him, and shows her all the little pieces. He says, 'Honey, here's a game for you. It's a puzzle. Go and get some sticky tape, and then see what you can do to put these pieces back together the way they are supposed to go.' She cheerfully agreed, and ran off.

Five minutes later, however, she was back, with the page all taped together. The man shook his head, amazed. Though he wondered if she had just put the pieces back haphazardly, a careful inspection revealed the map was perfectly reconstructed. He looked at his little girl in disbelief – she must surely be a genius!
'How did you figure it out so quickly?!' he asked. She shrugged, and said, 'It was easy. On the other side of the paper there was a picture of a person. I know what a person looks like. I just put the person together, and the whole world fell into place.'

6. **READING** Richard Rohr from *Wondrous Encounters: Scripture for Lent*

"There are two moments that matter. One is when you know that your one and only life is *absolutely valuable and alive*. The other is when you know your life, as presently lived, is *entirely pointless and empty*. You need both of them to keep you going in the right direction. Lent is about both. The first such moment gives you energy and joy by connecting you with your ultimate Source and Ground. The second gives you limits and boundaries, and a proper humility, so you keep seeking the Source and Ground and not just your small self."

7. **SECOND HYMN 9 (G) So simple is the human heart**

A little sun, a little rain,
a soft wind blowing from the west –
and woods and fields are sweet again,
and warmth within the mountain's breast.
So simple is the earth we tread,
so quick with love and life her frame,
ten thousand years have dawned and fled,
and still her magic is the same.

A little love, a little trust,
a soft impulse, a sudden dream,
and life as dry as desert dust
is fresher than a mountain stream.
So simple is the human heart,
so ready for new hope and joy;
ten thousand years have played their part,
but left it young as girl or boy.

Music from Iolo Morgannwg, words from Stopford Augustus Brooke

8. **MEDITATION** – Joyce Rupp

Imagine you are sitting by a lake so clear you can see to the bottom of it.

Look into your heart and find this same transparency.

Gaze far inside. What do you see that you appreciate and treasure?

What do you notice that you would rather not have?

Sense divine love stirring through this lake of your deep self.

Become aware of how your integrity shines as divine love moves the waters of your soul.

Welcome the truth of your inherent goodness and be at peace with the gift of divinity stirring within you.

9. **SILENCE**

10. **INTERLUDE:** 'I am surrounded by love, Beautiful Chorus

https://youtu.be/mUdD_da-Nek

11. **ADDRESS**

'Love is what we are born with. Fear is what we learn. The spiritual journey is the unlearning of fear and prejudices and the acceptance of love back in our hearts.' So says Marianne Williamson.

'Your task is not to seek for Love, but merely to seek and find all the barriers within yourself that you have built against it,' says the Sufi mystic Rumi.

Both these quotations seem to me to speak to the spirit of Lent.

But most of us know Lent as a quiet, subdued – solemn even – festival in the Christian calendar. It commemorates the 40 days and 40 nights Jesus spent fasting and praying in the desert immediately after his baptism, when he was tempted by Satan – and of course resisted – and before he began he began his ministry. So not, then, near the time of the crucifixion at all, even though Lent precedes Easter in our yearly cycle.

I realize that many of us associate Lent with self-denial – it may be part of the baggage of a more traditional Christian upbringing for you, perhaps. Wikipedia cheerfully tells us Lent is a time for fasting, mortification of the flesh and repentance of sins. Yikes. But that it's also a time for prayer, alms-giving and simple living. I think as Unitarians we err towards that more gentle understanding. The word Lent actually comes from the Old English 'Lencten' meaning spring season. You could think of it as a sort of spring cleaning for the soul.

Above all Lent is intended as a time to get closer to God – to the sacred, to the divine, however you understand it. And the giving up of things is not meant to be punishment – we are not supposed to martyr ourselves for some sort of holier-than-thou spiritual point-scoring. The intention is rather to gently let go of those distractions that lead us away from our true selves, from the spirit or god within. And only you can know what those distractions – temptations, if you like – are for you.

I was talking to Jennifer, our student minister, the other day. (Actually she's starting her post as minister at Brighton Unitarian Church at the end of March.) She told me she had given up all media – TV, news, internet and so on – for a month and had found it incredibly liberating. She had heard about the earthquakes in Turkey and Syria, but not much else and hadn't missed the constant onslaught drama and bad news. She found she had more time and more headspace without it.

I have somewhat more modestly given up refined sugar for Lent, such as biscuits, chocolate, cake and so on – I say modest but anyone who knows me knows how much of those things I usually manage to stuff myself with. Both news and sugar can

easily become addictions, which might sound a bit over the top, but what I mean is that they start to control us, to take over our lives and distract us from more nourishing ways of being. And while letting go of them may initially feel daunting, it can ultimately be truly freeing and self-affirming. Letting go of the things that fill our minds and bodies with short-term hits and highs is not what I would call self-denial. It's self-love. It's taking care of ourselves and allowing space to breathe and to grow, time that which nourishes our souls and nurtures our spirits.

Clearing away even just a little of the clutter, the noise, the ever more competing calls for our attention is a great way of opening up our awareness to those core values we hold that ground us and centre us.

Of course if I was really brave I would let go of more than just sugar. I might practise letting go of judgment, which definitely *would* take practise. I might try trusting more and fearing less, or at the very least I could choose to notice when my fears arise and be curious about why. I could do that. I will do that.

Lent is somewhat solitary. It's not a carnival, there are no parties, fairy lights, feasts. Quite the opposite. It's really just about you and your God. It's about deepening the connection in ways that work for you, growing the relationship between you and the divine, which our friend Stephen Crowther always says 'may in fact be the most intimate relationship you have'. However, it's a relationship that can very easily get crowded out by the busyness, and the pace, and the stress, and the constant distraction of modern living. Lent calls to us to slow down and to clear space for seeking and connecting with your ultimate Source and Ground (as Richard Rohr puts it).

Perhaps you feel uncomfortable with this version of Lent, too. Maybe it sounds like we're simply swapping self-denial for self-indulgence. That there's a bit too much navel-gazing and not enough action for your liking.

In which case I refer you back to our story of the map of the world, when the man's granddaughter said 'I just put the person together, and the whole world fell into place.' And while I appreciate that the problems of the world may not be sorted out

quite as simply as that sounds – and that we do also have to act – our actions will surely make so much more sense, and will be so much more rooted and effective when they emerge from our Source and Ground rather than our smaller frayed and frantic selves.

It's when you 'sense divine love stirring through [the] lake of your deep self', as Joyce Rupp puts it, that I think you can start to trust that whatever you do will come from a good place and will be more helpful than harmful.

And as Parker J Palmer reminds us: 'Self-care (and self-love) is never a selfish act — it is simply good stewardship [he says] of the only gift I have, the gift I was put on earth to offer others. Anytime we can listen to our true self and give it the care it requires, we do so not only for ourselves, but for the many others whose lives we touch.'

Lent has begun but only just. There's still plenty of time – 6 whole weeks – if you wish, to make time to pray, or to give alms, or to let go of something that's really just getting in the way of you fulfilling your divine potential; or to take up something that might serve you (and maybe everyone around you) better.

And Poppy pointed out that the UUA have a Lent calendar with a word to reflect on for each day. The words themselves are inspired by our core values. Yesterday's was 'spark', today's is 'justice', tomorrow's is 'relationship'. I've posted that on our Facebook page if you're interested.

There are so many ways to spend this period of Lent, not in miserable self-denial or misguided self-recrimination – goodness knows that's no use to anyone – but rather instead in self-care, compassion and good stewardship of the only gift we have, the gift we were (after all) put on earth to offer others. Ourselves.

May it be so.

12. THIRD HYMN 33 (G) Do you hear?

Do you hear, O my friend, in the place where you stand,
through the sky, through the land, do you hear, do you hear,
in the heights, on the plain, in the vale, on the main,
in the sun, in the rain, do you hear, do you hear?

Through the roar, through the rush, through the throng, through the crush,
do you hear in the hush of your soul, of your soul,
hear the cry fear won't still, hear the heart's call to will,
hear a sigh's startling trill, in your soul, in your soul?

From the place where you stand, to the outermost strand,
do you hear, O my friend, do you hear, do you hear,
all the dreams, all the dares, all the sighs, all the prayers –
they are yours, mine, and theirs: do you hear, do you hear?

William Caldwell's 'Union Harmony', words by Emily Lenore Luch Thorn

13. CLOSING WORDS 'Beloved is where we begin', Jan Richardson

If you would enter
into the wilderness,
do not begin
without a blessing.

Do not leave
without hearing
who you are:
Beloved,
named by the One
who has traveled this path
before you.

Do not go
without letting it echo
in your ears,
and if you find
it is hard
to let it into your heart,
do not despair.
That is what this journey is for.

I cannot promise
this blessing will free you
from danger,
from fear, from hunger
or thirst,
from the scorching
of sun
or the fall
of the night.

But I can tell you
that on this path
there will be help.

I can tell you
that on this way
there will be rest.

I can tell you
that you will know
the strange graces
that come to our aid
only on a road
such as this,
that fly to meet us

bearing comfort
and strength,
that come alongside us
for no other cause
than to lean themselves
toward our ear
and with their
curious insistence
whisper our name:

Beloved.

Beloved.

Beloved.

Extinguish chalice

14. **CLOSING VIDEO** 'May you find a light', The Brilliance

<https://youtu.be/XjjeSN4kQjw>