

2nd April 2023 – PLYMOUTH

The place to be... – led by Rev Kate Whyman

1. **INTRO MUSIC** Come, Seer Prophet Son

<https://youtu.be/d0a8cC1OihM>

2. **WELCOME/CHALICE LIGHT**

Come, come whoever you are! Welcome and good morning to you all, here in church, and joining online from wherever you may be today. You are indeed welcome whoever you are, and just as you are.

The theme for the month of April is 'Renewal', and today I'm thinking about the renewal of our own community, so our service today is called 'The place to be...'

Opening words from 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. Somewhere where we can be free."

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

LIGHT CHALICE

We light this flame this morning for this sacred place and all who come here.

3. **FIRST HYMN** Hymn 3 (G) Joy of living

We sing the joy of living,
we sing the mystery,
of knowledge, lore and science,
of truth that is to be;
of searching, doubting, testing
of deeper insights gained,
of freedom claimed and honoured,
of minds that are unchained.

We sing the joy of living,
we sing of harmony,
of textures, sounds and colours,
to touch, to hear, to see;
of order, rhythm, meaning
of chaos and of strife,
of richness of sensation,
of the creating life.

We sing the joy of living,
we sing of ecstasy,
of warmth, of love, of passion,
of flights of fantasy.
We sing of joy of living,
the dear, the known, the strange,
the moving, pulsing throbbing -
a universe of change.

Music by Melchior Teschner, harmony JS Bach; words by Deane Starr

4. **PRAYER**

The moment of prayer is an invitation to be calm in the midst of the tumult of the world and our over-busy lives, to bring together thought and feeling, mind and spirit,

and to find some centre -- some still point -- of perspective and peace.

Here in this sanctuary, which has been the home for so many thoughts and feelings, fears and hopes, may we feel free to look at ourselves with true honesty. May we be unafraid to face the decisions we have been trying to avoid, the doubts and questions it has been easier to ignore, the things we have tried to keep hidden not only from others but even from ourselves.

May we come to discover that there are resources within us and beyond us that are as hidden but as real as our secret doubts and fears. That new dimensions of the spirit within and without will be revealed to us as we confront ourselves honestly and come to understand that we are not isolated from the community of life and spirit, but that our soul's suffering connects us with the hidden suffering of others.

May we come to see that in our deepest loneliness we are not alone, and may we be emboldened by this vision to reach out to others in their need and so finally to discover that to give is not only more blessed than to receive, but that to give to others is to receive what we most need for ourselves.

Amen.

5. **STORY**

Today is Palm Sunday, which is a significant day in the Christian calendar. It's the day we remember Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey as the King of the Jews, as crowds of people waved palm leaves around him. It's a moment of triumph, of defiance, of bravery, of love...though of course we know how the story will turn out. Recently I've been having conversations with a few of you, in different situations, about the Bible, about the Trinity, about whether Jesus is god or human or both. I'm sure this period of Lent which we're in, with Easter approaching next week, raises these questions once again, and they are good questions. And I'll say more about them next week. But for now, I want to share this story, which I've shared before, probably every year or two in fact, which has something different to say to us about

the nature of the Messiah. I don't know its origin – it exists in many places. But I first encountered it in M. Scott Peck's book 'The different drum' which is about building community, something I believe we try to do here, and would wish for the world. This story is about a monastery that had fallen upon hard times. Once it was a great order, but now there were only five monks left: the abbot and four others. Clearly it was a dying order.

In the woods surrounding the monastery there was a little hut that a rabbi from a nearby town used for a hermitage. As he agonized over the imminent demise of his order, it occurred to the abbot to visit the hermitage and ask the rabbi if he could offer any advice that might save the monastery.

The rabbi welcomed the abbot at his hut. But when the abbot explained the purpose of his visit, the rabbi could only shake his head. "I know how it is," he said. "The spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same for me. Almost no one comes to the synagogue anymore."

The time came when the abbot had to leave. "It has been wonderful to meet and talk," the abbot said, "but is there nothing you can tell me that would help me save my dying order?"

"No, I am sorry," the rabbi responded. "I have no advice to give. The only thing I can tell you is that the Messiah is one of you."

When the abbot returned to the monastery his fellow monks gathered eagerly around him. "Well, what did the rabbi say?" "He couldn't help," the abbot answered. "The only thing he said, just as I was leaving, was that the Messiah is one of us. I don't know what he meant."

In the days and weeks and months that followed, the monks pondered this and wondered whether there was any possible significance to the rabbi's words.

The Messiah is one of us? If that's the case, which one? Do you suppose he meant the abbot? Yes, he probably meant Father Abbot. He has been our leader for more

than a generation. On the other hand, maybe he meant Brother Thomas. Certainly Thomas is a holy man. Certainly he could not have meant Brother Elred! Elred gets crotchety at times. But come to think of it, Elred is virtually always right. But surely not Brother Phillip. Phillip is so passive. But then, almost mysteriously, he has a gift for somehow always being there when you need him. Of course the rabbi didn't mean me. I'm just an ordinary person. Yet supposing he did?

As they contemplated in this manner, the monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect, on the off chance that one of them might be the Messiah. And on the off off chance that each monk himself might be the Messiah, they began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect, too.

Because it was situated in a beautiful forest, people still occasionally came to the monastery to picnic, to wander along its paths, even now and then to go into the dilapidated chapel to meditate. Without being conscious of it, they began to sense the aura of extraordinary respect that seemed to radiate out from the monks and permeate the atmosphere of the place. There was something strangely attractive, even compelling, about it. Hardly knowing why, they began to come back more frequently. And they began to bring their friends to show them this special place. And their friends brought their friends.

Gradually some of the younger men who visited the monastery started to talk more with the monks. After a while one asked if he could join them. Then another. And another. Within a few years the monastery had once again become a thriving order and, thanks to the rabbi's gift, a vibrant centre of light and spirituality in the realm.

6. **SECOND HYMN** 148 (P) Spirit of life (sung twice)

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. **READING** from 'Temple', by Steve Garnaas-Holmes

It isn't here, or there,
it isn't in a place,
it isn't a thing.
It is empty space.
It is the love between us.

It is not something that "is,"
but something that happens.
Like gravity that exists
only between objects in space,
the dwelling place of God
exists only in the love
we hold between us.

It is eternal.

When we enter that holy space
among us
which God creates
we enter God,
and nothing can remove us.

In the cool of the sanctuary
we listen to the music
and we breathe.

8. PARTICIPATION: QUESTION 1

Recently Gav described this place as 'the place to be'. I think he meant there seemed to be flourishing and energy and communication going on here, and good feeling. Kathy particularly liked this idea that we might be 'the place to be'. And Poppy thought we could use the phrase as a starting point to help us describe what we think we offer here.

So, perhaps we are the place to be ...healed.

Or the place to be...uplifted

Or the place to be...quiet

You get the idea?

So my first invitation to you this morning is spend a few minutes thinking about how you would describe this place, this community, this experience, beginning with the words

The place to be...

I've put out some post-it notes for people in church, and I hope those of you online might use the chat box, to suggest ways of completed the phrase 'Plymouth Unitarian Church is the place to be

You're welcome to chat – we are in café style here!

I'm going to give you 5 minutes.

9. REFLECTION

Go in,

into that inner chamber

beneath the where of you

and the how of you

and even the who of you

to the great I Am of you,

where hums your secret self,

the holy darkness

at the center where

the divine radiates out into you.

Go into that dark room
where your forgiveness
lies like a sleeping child;

like a child who has loved you
since the day she was born,
the Beloved waits to greet you.

10. SILENCE

11. **INTERLUDE:** April, by Gareth Malone

12. PARTICIPATION QUESTION 2

And now perhaps a more challenging question. It's another one of those questions that we keep coming back to, because it's one we need to keep asking ourselves if we are to avoid getting stuck or stagnant. And the question is what is our purpose?

For this I've given you a slightly larger bit of paper than a post-it note, but that's not so you can write an essay. I'm inviting you each to have a go at writing a single phrase or sentence that describes what you think is the main purpose of our church. Imagine you were trying to tell a friend, in a nutshell, not in a long meandering way, but concisely what you think we're trying to do here.

I mean is it...

- To convert as many people as possible to Unitarianism? (hope you don't think that's our purpose, by the way, it's just an example)
- To maintain a historic building for the good of the city?

- To provide a spiritual home for dissenters and misfits?
- To build a community that nurtures people on their spiritual journeys.
- To work towards community of love and justice.

These are just examples of what a purpose might be, but what do YOU think our purpose is?

Do feel free to discuss these ideas together. I'll collect them (they can be anonymous) and share them with you in a couple of weeks' time, and we'll how different or similar they are and see what we can come up with. If we could find a simple way of saying what we're about that we could agree on, I think that would be very helpful for our journey forwards.

13. **THIRD HYMN 167 (P)** There is a place I call my own

There is a place I call my own,
 where I can stand by the sea,
 and look beyond the things I've known
 and dream that I might be free.
 Like the bird above the trees,
 gliding gently on the breeze,
 I wish that all my life I'd be
 without a care and flying free.

But life is not a distant sky
 without a cloud, without rain,
 and I can never hope that I
 can travel on without pain.
 Time goes swiftly on its way;
 all too soon we've lost today,
 I cannot wait for skies of blue
 or dream so long that life is through.

So life's a song that I must sing,
a gift of love I must share;
and when I see the joy it brings
my spirits soar through the air.
Time goes swiftly on its way;
life has taught me how to fly.
For now I know what I can be
and now my heart is flying free.

Words and music by Don Besig, arr. David Dawson © Harold Flammer Music

14. CLOSING WORDS

Bless this house and those within,
Bless our giving and receiving,
Bless our words and conversation,
Bless our hands and recreation,
Bless our sowing and our growing,
Bless our coming and our going,
Bless all who enter and depart,
Bless this house, your peace impart.

Extinguish chalice

15. CLOSING VIDEO 'One voice', The Wailin' Jennys

<https://youtu.be/y-24qGCvo7A>