

30th April 2023 – PLYMOUTH

Beltane: Fertility, fire and feast – led by Rev Kate Whyman

1. **INTRO MUSIC** Beltane, Lisa Thiel (4'59")

<https://youtu.be/qCsddmu9Lvs>

2. **WELCOME/CHALICE LIGHT**

Welcome to you all. You are welcome whoever you are, however you're feeling. You are welcome here just as you are.

Tomorrow is both May Day and Beltane. In the Celtic calendar Beltane marks the halfway point between the Spring Equinox and the Summer Solstice and is considered to be the midpoint of the year, and the beginning of summer. The word 'Beltane' originates from the name of the Celtic God 'Bel', meaning 'the bright one' and the Gaelic word 'teine' meaning fire. So together they make 'Bright Fire', or 'Goodly Fire'. Traditionally bonfires were lit at this time of year, to honour the Sun and to enlist the support of the God Bel, and so to nurture the future harvest and protect the community. The ancient Celtic customs are being revived, to some extent, in our modern world, including in Unitarian worship, and our celebration this morning will include readings, songs, and rituals that are associated with Beltane and its links with fertility, fire and feast.

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 as a symbol of the Celtic festival of fire, Beltane. May it light a fire in our own hearts.

3. 1st HYMN 158 (P) The flame of truth is kindled

The flame of truth is kindled,
our chalice burning bright;
amongst us moves the Spirit
in whom we take delight.
We worship here in freedom
with conscience unconstrained,
a pilgrim people thankful
for what great souls have gained.

The flame of thought is kindled,
we celebrate the mind;
its search for deepest meaning
that time-bound creeds can't bind.
We celebrate its oneness
with body and with soul,
with universal process,
with God who makes us whole.

The flame of love is kindled,
we open wide our hearts,
that it may burn within us,
fuel us to do our parts.
Community needs building,
a Commonwealth of Earth,
we ask for strength to build it –
a new world come to birth.

Words © Clifford Martin Reed

4. **PRAYERS** *Prayer by Lyn Cox*

Creative spirit, source of life and love

We give thanks for this day and for the company of all those assembled here.

Thank you for the breezes of change, clearing our heads and bringing fresh ideas.

May they cleanse our minds of the oppressions and isms that divide us.

Thank you for the flame of hope, the heat of righteous anger, the warmth of compassion, and the fire of commitment.

May they bubble the cauldrons of transformation.

Thank you for oceans of love, rivers of connection, tears of relief, and pools of serenity. May healing waters flow over us and through us and among us, wearing down the sharp rocks of despair to bring joy in the morning.

Thank you for the good earth beneath us, around us, and within us.

May we take this clay and co-create a new realm of justice and beauty.

Thank you for all these and more.

We accept our gifts and commit to building, sculpting, painting, singing, and dancing them to abundant life.

Prayer for Beltane

Blessed be. Great earth mother!

We give you praise today

and ask for your blessing upon us.

As seeds spring forth

and grass grows green

and winds blow gently

and the rivers flow

and the sun shines down

upon our land,

we offer thanks to you for your blessings

and your gifts of life each spring.

One of the best known symbols of Beltane is the Green Man. Many churches have green men hidden in ceiling bosses or peering down from dark corners – including ourselves. When Christianity superseded paganism in Europe, the image of the Green Man was impossible to eradicate as it represented such a powerful force – that of virility, fertility and growth. The depictions vary enormously, but they have all include a face which is made from or entwined with leaves. The Green Man is an enigmatic figure – part light and part dark, part life and part death. He symbolizes the forces of nature and the cycles of the year.

POEM ‘Green Man in the Garden’, by Charles Causley

Green man in the garden
Staring from the tree,
Why do you look so long and hard
Through the pane at me?

Your eyes are dark as holly
Of sycamore your thorns,
Your bones are made of elder branch,
Your teeth are made of thorns.

Your hat is made of ivy-leaf
Of bark your dancing shoes,
And evergreen and green and green
Your jacket and shirt and trews.

*Leave your house and leave your land
And throw away the key,
And never look behind, he creaked
And come and live with me.*

I bolted up the window,
I bolted up the door,

I drew the blind that I should find
The green man never more.

But when I softly turned the stair
As I went up to bed,
I saw the green man standing there.
Sleep well, my friend, he said.

5. 2nd 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

STORY

Once there lived a rich young squire who loved hunting animals for sport. He thought the woods and all its creatures belonged to him. The villagers, however, believed the woods provided a home to birds, squirrels and deer. They told their children that a Green Man lived in the woods who cared for all the creatures. Each winter they left food out for him to eat.

One hot day the squire rode into the woods, trampling nests and dens as he went. He came to a beautiful, clear pond, so he took off his clothes and jumped into the cool water.

While he was swimming, a hand reached out from behind a tree, took the clothes and led the horse away. When the squire got out of the water, he had nothing to wear! But he found a rope and fastened some leaves to it to cover himself.

Night came. The squire sheltered in a cave but he didn't sleep much. It was dark, he was frightened, and he kept hearing animal noises. In the morning, he saw that he wasn't alone. There was a goat, a chicken and a gourd for holding water. Someone had been living in the cave!

Gradually, the squire settled in to cave life. He fashioned a whole garment out of leaves. He ate eggs from the hen and drank milk from the goat. He befriended the small woodland creatures, and made sure they had enough food and water.

Soon he had a wild-looking beard and hair, and was covered head to toe with leaves. One day he came upon two small children. "Are you the Green Man?" they asked. "I

guess I am," said the man.

Winter came and went. The Green Man collected food the villagers left out for him, and shared it with his animal friends.

Then one warm Spring day a rich young man, a squire perhaps, rode into the woods and decided to swim in the clear, cool pond. He took off his clothes, and left them under a tree. The Green Man reached out a hand, took the clothes and the horse, leaving just a coil of rope. He used a sharp stick to trim his hair and beard, and rode back into town. But he had changed. He was now a friend to all creatures and each winter he left out food for the Green Man.

One way to celebrate Beltane is to sit silently under a tree, with your back against the trunk. Feel the energy of the tree and listen to the sounds of the woodland all around. Celtic Cellist Clíodhna ní Aidon took her cello into the woods to connect with the spirit of the trees at Beltane. This is what happened.

6. **INTERLUDE:** Forest Sounds with Cello for Bealtaine (Celtic Fire Festival)

<https://youtu.be/OOI4tzif1Kg>

7. **READING**

Fire is also an essential part of the Beltane festival. Even Christian mystics, such as St Teresa of Avila and Teilhard de Chardin, spoke of the burning fire of the divine within. Here is an extract from Teilhard de Chardin...

“Throughout my whole life, during every moment I have lived, the world has gradually been taking on light and fire for me, until it has come to envelop me in one mass of luminosity, flowing from within... The purple flush of matter fading imperceptibly into the gold of spirit, to be lost finally in the incandescence of a personal universe... This is what I have learnt from my contact with the earth – the diaphany of the divine at the heart of the glowing universe, the divine radiating from the depths of matter-a-flame.

8. **CHANT 229 Rise up o flame**

9. **FIRE RITUAL**

In the spirit of Beltane, fire is used both to purify and to unite or create. I invite you to think of something that you would like to 'purify'— meaning something that perhaps you'd like to leave behind, let go of, or leave alone for a time. Or something you would like to create or commit to – it could be anything at all. And you may like to light a candle as a symbol of your intention.

10. **Music** – Beltane Fire dance

11. **THIRD 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

12. CLOSING DANCE – MAYPOLE DANCE

The anthropologist Pauline Bambry, who has studied and written about Beltane describes it as: “a rural pre-Christian prehistoric tradition which saw communities come together after long winters of isolation. It marked their connection not just to nature but to each other.” Ribbons also played a part in the celebrations and young couples might choose to become ‘handfast on this day, by literally ‘tie-ing the knot’ using a ribbon woven around their joint hands as they pledged themselves to each other for a year and a day. And the origin of dancing around the maypole is unclear, but may have been another fertility rite. In our final ritual we will combine the idea of communities coming together to mark their connection to each other with the weaving of ribbons in a circle dance

And now for the feast!!