

3rd September 2023 – PLYMOUTH

'Starting again', led by Rev Kate Whyman

1. **INTRO MUSIC** 'September morning', Gerard Fahy (4'02")

<https://youtu.be/C7zZju0f7n8?si=CF3O-cdYjZXSf5nR>

2. **WELCOME/CHALICE LIGHT**

Welcome to you all this morning. You are welcome just as you are and however you are feeling right now. Thank you for being here, for making the time to help create sacred space in and community together.

This is a community in which we try to support each other on our spiritual journeys through life. And this hour is, as always, a chance for each of us to realign ourselves with all that we hold sacred. It is an invitation to give thanks for the wonder of creation, to reconnect with the divine spirit, and to surrender to the divine mystery in the company others.

Then He who sat on the throne said, "Behold, I make all things new." (Revelation 21:5). Possibly the first time I've ever quoted from there! And maybe the last. But those words felt apposite for today as...

The theme of this service is 'Starting again'.

So, as is our custom, let us begin this time of words, music and contemplation by lighting our chalice 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 chalice in honour of first steps,
For beginning even when the path ahead is unclear

For the courage it takes to trust
that the way will reveal itself
that light will come to clarify our vision
that friends will be by our side.

3. **OPENING WORDS/PRAYER** Step Zero, by Rev. Gretchen Haley

If you had the chance to start again
To make your life from scratch
To decide what sort of person you would be
Who you would love, and how
The content of your days, your hours
What songs would you sing to yourself,
or with others?
What prayers would you let fall from your lips
Urgently and with praise,
With mercy, or hope?
What blessings would you name
and share,
with strangers, and friends?
If you could take now that first step
what journey would you begin
across deserts, or mountains -
or would you take to the sky,
so vast, and filled with light?
What work would you take,
what mischief would you make
with boldness, and bravery,
what failure would you embrace, and
what would you release,
and where
in the end,
would you return, and call home?

In this new day
on the brink of this new beginning
no magic wishing or wondering
is required
for such a chance
is always available
As with the in, and out of our breath
to begin now
to live like we mean it
to see with new eyes
the life that is already and always
available,
to respond to this gift
with wonder,
and gratitude
to join in this partnership
to tend this flame
even when it breaks our heart
to keep showing up
to go with courage
into this dawning day.

4. **1st Hymn:** 133 (G) How can I keep from singing?

My life flows on in endless song
Above earth's lamentation:
I hear the real though far-off hymn
That hails a new creation.
Through all the tumult and the strife
I hear the music ringing:
It sounds an echo in my soul –
How can I keep from singing!

What though the tempest round me roar,
I know the truth, it liveth.
What though the darkness round me close,
Songs in the night it giveth.
No storm can shake my inmost calm
While to that rock I'm clinging:
Since love prevails in heaven and earth,
How can I keep from singing!

When tyrants tremble, sick with fear,
And hear their death-knells ringing;
When friends rejoice, both far and near,
How can I keep from singing!
To prison cell and dungeon vile
Our thoughts of love are winging:
When friends by shame are undefiled,
How can I keep from singing!

American Gospel Tune, Early Quaker Song

5. PRAYER

The following is a Native American prayer, translated by Lakota Sioux Chief Yellow Lark in 1887)

Oh, Great Spirit
Whose voice I hear in the winds,
And whose breath gives life to all the world,
hear me, I am small and weak,
I need your strength and wisdom.
Let me walk in beauty and make my eyes ever behold

the red and purple sunset.

Make my hands respect the things you have
made and my ears sharp to hear your voice.

Make me wise so that I may understand the things
you have taught my people.

Let me learn the lessons you have
hidden in every leaf and rock.

I seek strength, not to be greater than my brother, or my sister
but to fight my greatest enemy - myself.

Make me always ready to come to you
with clean hands and straight eyes.

So when life fades, as the fading sunset,
my Spirit may come to you without shame.

6. POEM 'Having Come This Far', by James Broughton

I've been through what my through was to be
I did what I could and couldn't
I was never sure how I would get there

I nourished an ardour for thresholds
for stepping stones and for ladders
I discovered detour and ditch

I swam in the high tides of greed
I built sandcastles to house my dreams
I survived the sunburns of love

No longer do I hunt for targets
I've climbed all the summits I need to
and I've eaten my share of lotus

Now I give praise and thanks
for what could not be avoided
and for every foolhardy choice

I cherish my wounds and their cures
and the sweet enervations of bliss
My book is an open life

I wave goodbye to the absolutes
and send my regards to infinity
I'd rather be blithe than correct

Until something transcendent turns up
I splash in my poetry puddle
and try to keep God amused.

*~ from Special Deliveries, New and Selected Poems
(Broken Moon Press, 1990)*

7. STORY about seeing things anew

During the Middle Ages, a traveller once came upon a place in France where a great deal of building work was going on. He began talking with the stonecutters and asking them about their work.

He approached the first worker and asked, 'What are you doing?' The man, very disgruntled, and obviously unhappy in his hard toil, replied, 'I'm cutting these huge boulders with the simplest of tools and putting them together in the way I've been told to do. I'm sweating in this heat and my back is hurting. What's more, I'm totally bored, and I wish I didn't have to do this hard and meaningless job.'

The traveller moved on quickly to interview a second worker. He asked the same question: 'What are you doing?' The worker replied, 'Well, I have a wife and children

at home, so I come here every morning and I work these boulders into regular shapes, as I'm told to do. It gets repetitive sometimes, but it helps to feed my family, and that's all I want.'

Somewhat encouraged, the traveller went on to a third worker. 'And what are you doing?' he asked. The third worker responded with shining eyes, as he pointed up to the heavens, 'I'm building a cathedral!'

8. REFLECTION

In order to start again, we may need to let something go. Invitation to write on a piece of paper something you'd like/need to release and drop it into the water (write it in the chatbox).

9. **INTERLUDE:** 'Step out of the shadows', Glen Hansard
https://youtu.be/XTjRp_urJK0?si=cG5ExhXZozRj_3uK

10. **POEM:** 'How to be hopeful', by Barbara Kingsolver

Look, you might as well know,
this device is going to take endless repair:
rubber cement, rubber bands, tapioca,
the square of the hypotenuse,
nineteenth-century novels, sunrise -
any of these could be useful. Also feathers.
The ignition is tricky. Sometimes
you have to stand on an incline
where things look possible. Or a line
you drew yourself. Or the grocery line,

making faces at a toddler, secretly,
over his mother's shoulder.
You may have to pop the clutch
and run past the evidence. Past everyone
who is praying for you. Passing
all previous records is ok, or passing
strange. Just not passing it up.
Or park it and fly by the seat of your pants.
With nothing in the bank, you will
still want to take the express. Tiptoe
past the dogs of the apocalypse
asleep in the shade of your future.
Pay at the window. You'll be surprised:
you can pass off hope like a bad check.
You still have time, that's the thing.
To make good.

11. **2nd HYMN: 83 (P) Just as long as I have breath**

Just as long as I have breath
I must answer, 'Yes,' to life;
though with pain I made my way,
still with hope I meet each day.
If they ask what I did well,
tell them I said, 'Yes,' to life.

Just as long as vision lasts,
I must answer 'Yes,' to truth;
in my dream and in my dark,
always that elusive spark.
If they ask what I did well,
tell them I said, 'Yes,' to truth.

Just as long as my heart beats,
I must answer, 'Yes,' to love;
disappointment pierced me through,
still I kept on loving you.
If they ask what I did best,
tell them I said, 'Yes,' to love.

Music Johann G. Ebeling, arr David Dawson; words © Alicia S. Carpenter

12. ADDRESS

September always feels like a new time for me. A starting again time. After all I started in September. My life began on one of the suddenly slightly cooler days of this mellow yet sunny month. I started school, of course, like all of you I imagine, in September. And college. And my first job, as it happens. And teacher training. And then two years of teaching. They all began in Septembers. And so did the next job in publishing. Much later I got married in September, and eventually, in another September, I also decided to leave that marriage. I began training for ministry in September 2012, and I moved from Brighton to Plymouth in September 2014. And here I am about to begin another year – a sort of halfway significant year. So you see why September feels like a significant time. A starting again time.

I think I may have shared with you before that my Biblical Studies tutor during my ministry training once said that religion is all about starting again. I'd never thought about it like that before but I think I knew what she meant. Religion is about hope, and possibility, and faith. Faith that something good will eventually spring from the ashes, that light will emerge from the darkness, that new life will begin again after death, that the world will keep spinning and September will keep coming around, year after year. Religion reminds us that not only each month, but each day is a new opportunity, indeed every moment is a chance to see afresh. These new chances to

awaken to the beauty and the love and the light never end. They just keep on coming, even if most of the time they pass us by unnoticed.

Starting again may look like the kinds of things I listed before: a new job, or a new training, a change of relationship or a house move, a retirement or redundancy, a birth or a bereavement. Any number of the many significant changes that happen in our lives - those that inspire us as well as those that devastate us – each one creates a threshold over which we must navigate our way anew. Find new strength in ourselves, be brave, take a risk, find a new balance and a new way to be. Find our place in the universe once more. Start again.

But then, also, starting anew may not look like a change at all on the outside. No one may be aware of it except us. You might, and I'm sure you have, one day, or one moment, experienced a sudden change of heart, or a waking up to some new insight, a sudden realisation, a moment of awe and wonder, that might have changed your life. Maybe it's a change of perspective. Suddenly the menial task you have been doing and being bored by takes on a grand vision, like the man who understood that he wasn't just moving rocks, he was building a cathedral. You might call it a religious experience, or not. But it might change everything for you, or change something significant at least. We can't plan these moments, they come to us as grace. But we can be ready for them and open to receiving them. We can be willing to see a greater vision when it's offered to us rather than shutting it down or looking the other way. We can be open to seeing the divine in all that is.

I had what could be called a religious experience – though I certainly didn't think of it that way at the time – when I was about 14. I wasn't doing anything special, just sitting at the dining room table doing some homework, I think. But for some reason, out of the blue, it suddenly seemed blindingly obvious to me that the person I referred to as 'I' – this experience of I-ness, was the same for us all. That the 'I' who looked out at the world through my eyes, was the same 'I' who also looked out through everyone else's eyes too. Of course there's a Kate who is different from Steve, say, or Linda. But those differences are relatively superficial. Behind those we are basically just the filters through which Spirit, or God, or the Universe – the Divine however you understand it – is looking and experiencing itself.

I don't know whether that makes any sense to you. But that moment was the dawning of a light for me and the beginning of an awareness of a spiritual life. (Although I'm not sure it happened in September!)

Everything is always starting again. School. Each new breath, each new heartbeat, each new day. And this is both unsettling as well as the greatest gift we are given. This river of life we live in is constantly on the move, carrying us along with it. We are invited to join in fully with it, wherever it may take us. Yes, maybe through the rapids and over the rocks and in the whirlpools. Sometimes stuck in the shallows or the stagnant pools. We might resist where it takes us, or fight it, rage at it or delight in it, or surrender to it. All these options are open to us. Above all, though, we can choose – over and over again – to be ready and forever thankful for yet another new chance to start again.

As Barbara Kingsolver says in her poem 'How to be hopeful',
'You still have time, that's the thing.
To make good.'

May it be so.

13. **THIRD HYMN** 186 (P) We are travellers on a journey

We are travellers on a journey
which brought us from the sun,
when primal star exploded
and earth in orbit spun;
but now as human dwellers
upon earth-planet's crust,
we strive for living systems
whose ways are kind and just.

We are travellers on a journey
which grows from human seed,
and through our birth and childhood
goes where life's path may lead;
but now we are delving deeper
in quest of greater worth
and reaching unknown regions
and planets of new birth.

We are travellers on a journey
through realms of inner space
where joy and peace are planets
that circle stars of grace;
and when we find the stillness
which comes at journey's end,
there'll be complete refreshment,
a resting place my friend.

Music Henry Hugh Bancroft, words © Andrew M. Hill

14. PRAYER. 'The Courage to Continue on the Journey', by Lyn Cox

Spirit of Life and Love, known by many names and yet fully known by none, we give thanks for this time and this place of renewal. We give thanks for the ability to begin again: after the disaster, after the tragedy, after the loss, after meeting the challenge set before us.

Grant us the courage to continue on the journey, the courage to speak up for the wellbeing of others and ourselves and the planet. May we forgive each other when our courage falls short, and may we try again.

Grant us hearts to love boldly, to embody our faith and our values in living words and deeds. May our hearts open to embrace humility, grace, and reconciliation.

Grant us the ability to learn and grow, to let the Spirit of Love and Truth work its transformation upon us and within us.

Grant us the spirit of hospitality, the willingness to sustain a fit dwelling place for the holy that resides in all being.

Grant us a sense of being at peace in the world, even as we are in motion. Let us cultivate together the strength to welcome every kind of gift and all manner of ways to be on the journey together. To this we add the silent prayers of our hearts.

15. CLOSING WORDS by Eric Williams

Blessed is the path on which you travel.

Blessed is the body that carries you upon it.

Blessed is your heart that has heard the call.

Blessed is your mind that discerns the way.

Blessed is the gift that you will receive by going.

Truly blessed is the gift that you will become on the journey.

May you go forth in peace.

16. CLOSING MUSIC 'Woyaya', Osibisa

https://youtu.be/BwckMpR9V-Q?si=ch0jvM7hM6_Fj8CD