**3rd March 2024: PLYMOUTH UNITARIANS**

**Rev Kate Whyman – Spirit of the March Hare**

1. **PRELUDE** – The Hare’s Lament 5’02”

https://youtu.be/IpvS73yqJEc?si=vVQXrgUrED9TtySb

1. **OPENING WORDS**

Welcome to this first March morning service. Welcome to all of you here in person and all of you joining us online from wherever you may be. However, you find yourself this morning – whether feeling anxious, peaceful or curious, whether you come in joy or in sadness. Whatever your circumstances at this time, you are welcome here in this sacred space, to share in this time of worship together.

*Tania Marquez*

It is a wonder and mystery that our paths have crossed;
That in the immensity of time, in the vastness of space, we coincide here.
Let us be in awe at the ways in which our lives intersect and intertwine,
at the beauty we create when we gather.
May our coming together make us more compassionate,
more just, more caring, and more loving.
And may our hearts and minds be open to this offering.
Let us worship, let us marvel at the miracle of being here, right now,
and the Mystery that has brought us together.

And so, as is our custom, let us begin lighting our chalice as a symbol of our free religious faith. (Do light a candle at home)

May this flame invite us into magic, miracle and mystery. May it gently hold us here for this precious hour together in the warmth and light of the divine spirit.

This month we will mark the beginning of spring, we’ll take part in Earth Hour and of course we will celebrate Easter. But today, this being the start of March, I thought we might consider one of the animals frequently associated with the earth, the moon, with spring and Easter, and above all with mystery – the hare, and its connections with the spirit.

1. **1st Hymn 189 (P) We celebrate the web of life**

We celebrate the web of life,
its magnitude we sing;
for we can see divinity
in every living thing.

A fragment of the perfect whole
in cactus and in quail,
as much in tiny barnacle
as in the great blue whale.

Of ancient dreams we are the sum;
our bones link stone to star,
and bind our future worlds to come
with worlds that were and are.

Respect the water, land, and air
which gave all creatures birth;
protect the lives of all that share
the glory of the earth.

*Words © Alicia S. Carpenter*

**PRAYER by Adam Slate**

Spirit of Life, Spirit of Love,
Spirit of Hope, Spirit of Justice,
God known by many different names:
You have given us a day unique from any other.
You have connected us, all of us, with each other and with the world,
in ways that are largely a mystery to us.
You have given us little instruction other than to be present in our own lives,
to feel wonder at the creations of the universe, and to love one another.
You have put gifts and challenges in our paths, joys and sorrows, strengths and frailties, some of which we have already encountered, and others we have yet to discover.

On this unique day, may we receive exactly what it is that we need. Amen.

*Let us be silent now, and allow ourselves to be present here in the quietness.*

*May we allow anyone known to us who is pain or suffering of any kind to gently come into our hearts and our mind’s eye. May they be bathed in light and love, and find comfort and peace.*

*And we open our hearts more widely and fully, to all those beloved souls who are unknown to us, wherever they may be in the world. We remember those who are unwell in body or in mind, those who are grieving, those living in fear and in war, or suffering under oppressive systems or regimes. May all living souls find solace, freedom and wellbeing.*

1. **STORY** Saint Melangell and the Hare

King Jowchel of Ireland had decided that his daughter Melangell should marry a nobleman of the court. It was a match that would bring her wealth and security. But Melangell cared little for worldly possessions and pleaded with her father to let her live a simple religious life.

Her father was outraged and refused. So she left her home and her family and took refuge in the Welsh Pennant valley, which was a sacred place in the Bronze Age. Here she lived a solitary life, eating nuts and berries, and sheltering in a cave with only small creatures for companions.

One day Brochwel, the Prince of Powys, was out hunting. He startled a hare and, with his howling hounds, gave chase after it. They came to a thicket of brambles and thorns, and Brochwel was astounded to see Melangell kneeling, deep in prayer, with the hare calmly facing the hounds from beneath the hem of her cloak.
The terrified hounds retreated, cowering in awe, and refused to attack the hare.

When the Prince asked Melangell how she came to be there, she replied that she had lived alone in this place since leaving her home fifteen years earlier.

Moved by her courage and compassion he gave her enough land to create a sanctuary for others seeking peace and solitude.

Melangell agreed on condition that the land should be a refuge not only for people but also for those creatures who, like herself, had no choice but to flee when threatened.

And so Melangell became the Abbess of a small religious community and passed the rest of her days in this place. Many were the miracles she performed for those who sought shelter.

Later, in 1160, a Christian church was built on the site, which was surrounded by ancient yew trees. The church still holds her relics, and flourishes as a centre for healing and counsel.

1. **READING** All Things that Love the Sun (from Resolution and Independence)

All things that love the sun are out of doors;
The sky rejoices in the morning’s birth;
The grass is bright with rain drops; - on the moors
The hare is running races in her mirth;
And with her feet she from the plashy earth
Raises a mist, that glittering in the sun,
Runs with her all the way,
wherever she doth run.

*William Wordsworth*

1. **2nd 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*

1. **REFLECTION:** We come to a quiet time of reflection and contemplation.

Silence – candles of joy and concern???

1. **INTERLUDE:** ‘The Gloaming’, The Harehttps://youtu.be/3upOR9HoN9I?si=z4rYn8ete3dpjVL1
2. **ADDRESS** The spirit of the March Hare

My friend Alastair is obsessed with hares. He has pictures and sculptures of them, and hare-themed cushions – his house is becoming a shrine to hares. I asked him what it was he loved about them and he said he thought it was partly to do with their rarity, so a sighting is special, and their seasonality, when they appear spring is coming. And also he finds them beautiful but in a robust way – their speed and strength is alluring. Certainly the hare was of the animals who had spiritual significance for the Celts of the British Isles, and they turn up in other spiritual traditions too.

But first a little bit of background information …Although hares and rabbits are in the same family they are different species. Generally hares are larger than rabbits, with longer ears, and have black markings on their fur. In the British Isles and Ireland there are three types of hares: the Irish Hare, the Common or Brown Hare and the Mountain or Blue Hare. They are generally herbivorous (they don’t eat meat), have famously long ears, and are fast runners (even if they don’t always win the race!). They usually live alone or in pairs. Unlike rabbits, hares don’t bear their young below ground in burrows, but in what is known as a ‘form’, which can be a nest of grass or just a shallow depression. A hare less than one year old is called a leveret. The Irish hare is native to Ireland and carbon dating of fossils show they were present in Ireland as far back as 28,000 BC. Otherwise, hares in Britain were brought in by the Romans. So far, so ordinary.

However, in Irish folklore the hare is often associated with the ‘Otherworld’ (supernatural) community, which was thought to be reached through mists, hills, lakes, ponds, wetland areas, as well as caves, ancient burial sites, cairns and mounds. All those entities were seen as very powerful and the hares’ link to them sent a warning that anyone who harmed them might suffer serious consequences.

Hares were also associated with shapeshifting, the idea of one being changing into another. For example, there is a legend in which the Celtic warrior Oisin hunted a hare, and wounded it in its leg. Oisin followed the wounded animal into a thicket where he found a door leading down into the ground. He went in and came to a large hall where he found - not a hare, but a beautiful young woman sitting on a throne bleeding from a leg wound.

There is a link in folklore between hares and women but particularly those who were called witches or as we might say ‘seers’.

You may well know that Easter gets its name from the goddess of spring and the dawn, whose name is *Oestre* or *Ostara* (Oh-star-ah), and in some descriptions Oestre herself has the head of hare, and is the goddess of rabbits and birds. Either way, she is strongly associated with the hare—and later its cousin the rabbit. Hence the Easter Bunny has become an Easter symbol.

The hare is a fertility symbol linked to the spring season, which is also the rutting or mating season for hares. I have never seen it myself, but the usually shy, quiet hare can become very active at this time. They might run for miles and can even become aggressive and appear quite mad, hence the expression “As mad as a March hare.” They also box! This usually happens when a male is being too persistent with a female, when she will turn round and start fending him off.

The hare is also associated with the moon in many cultures, due in part to its night-time eating habits, and I think because the moon is also often associated with the feminine and the otherworldly.

At the beginning of this service you might have noticed the image of 3 hares who seem to be running round in a circle. Each has two ears, yet there are only three ears in total as each ear is shared by two hares. SHOW IMAGE. This image was actually from Egypt, but the symbol is found in many parts of the world, including in Buddhist cave temples in China and along the Silk Road as well as in our own Devon, particularly in several churches on Dartmoor where they are known as the ‘Tinners’ Rabbits’. Perhaps some of you have seen them? It’s a clever design – a trick or a puzzle you might contemplate or meditate on. In fact in some spiritual stories the hare is a trickster.

While in the Far East and Middle East, the 3 hares are often found in ornate metallic carvings, or in glass or ceramic, in Devon the motifs are roof bosses on church ceilings. Many are medieval and made of wood, or even plaster.

But what do they mean? Are they meant to drive away evil influences? Or bring good fortune, maybe? There is no consensus about this. It has been suggested that those found in churches might represent the trinity. I imagine we might interpret them as showing the cycles of the seasons, or the eternal circle of life and death, or perhaps the interconnectedness of all life.

To me, it is not surprising the hare has been given spiritual significance as it seems to encapsulate some of the characteristics of the spiritual world as we might imagine it, and even experience our own encounters with it. For example, we know that the hare is fleet of foot, having grace as well as speed. We know that hares are shy and come out at dusk, and that here in the UK at least they are usually solitary and relatively rare. Hares are animals that seem to inhabit the twilight, the liminal world, beyond time, mysterious. In other words, they are otherworldly. They are elusive, we have to look for them to see them, and it’s easy to imagine how they might seem to change form in the half-light. While they can also be spirited and energetic, which makes them unpredictable creatures who are associated with both the good and the sinister.

Whatever the reason, hares seem to have some resonance for us. They symbolise something glimpsed, at a slant perhaps, something that exists both in reality and in myth, and which also points us towards another dimension, however we might understand that.

I’ll finish with a story from the Buddist tradition of Jataka tales called the Hare on the Moon.

In this story the Boddisatta (who will eventually become the Buddha) takes the form of a hare who has three friends, a monkey, an otter and jackal. The hare persuades his friends that they should all practise generosity and offer food to beggars on the next full moon day, which is an auspicious day. The animals all agree.

When the day comes, the monkey and jackal collect mangoes and meat that they have found, while the otter catches some fish. But the hare realises that all he can offer would be grass, which is no use to humans to eat. So he decides instead that he will sacrifice himself as food.

Sakka, the Lord of Heavenly Beings, hears about this and decides to test the hare. So he takes the form of a beggar walking through the woods, and when he reaches the hare he asks him for food. At that moment the hare notices some sticks burning nearby, so he immediately jumps onto the fire to sacrifice himself as food. But he does not get burnt, in fact he is completely unhurt. And is naturally very surprised by this miracle.

At that moment the Lord Sakka reveals himself and lifts the hare up to the heavenly realm, and places the hare’s image on the moon so that his example of generosity will be seen for ever.

1. **3rd HYMN: 88 (P) Let it be a dance we do, which reminds me of the dance the 3 hares seem to be doing.***Let it be a dance we do.
May I have this dance with you?
Through the good times and bad times, too,
let it be a dance.*

Let a dancing song be heard.
Play the music, say the words,
and fill the sky with sailing birds.
Let it be a dance.
Let it be a dance.
Let it be a dance.

Learn to follow, learn to lead,
feel the rhythm, fill the need
to reap the harvest,
plant the seed.
Let it be a dance.

*Let it be a dance we do.
May I have this dance with you?
Through the good times and bad times, too,
let it be a dance.*

Everybody turn and spin,
Let your body learn to bend,
and like a willow in the wind,
Let it be a dance.
Let it be a dance.
Let it be a dance.

A child is born, the old must die,
a time for joy, a time to cry,
take it as it passes by.
Let it be a dance.

*Let it be a dance we do.
May I have this dance with you?
Through the good times and bad times, too,
let it be a dance.*

Morning star comes out at night,
without the dark there is no light,
if nothing’s wrong then nothing’s right,
Let it be a dance.
Let it be a dance.
Let it be a dance.

Let the sun shine, let it rain,
share the laughter, bear the pain,
and round and round we go again.
Let it be a dance.

*Words and music © Ric Masten*

1. **CLOSING WORDS.**

*Marjorie Newlin Leaming*

Remembering that the universe is so much larger than our ability to comprehend, let us go forth from this time together with the resolve to stop trying to reduce the incomprehensible to our own limited expectations, so that wonder—that sense of what is sacred—can find space to open up our minds and illumine our lives.

*Hafiz*

Where is the Door to God?

In the sound of a barking dog,

In the ring of a hammer,

In the drop of rain,

In the face of Everyone I see.

Or, as he might have written, in the mysterious energy of the March Hare.

May we find doors to the Divine everywhere we look, and cultivate the imagination to go through them.

1. **CLOSING VIDEO:** ‘The White Hare’, Seth Lakeman

https://youtu.be/1oRYPigPAgo?si=PyCouFNlZ2Kj8E0Z

1. **NOTICES**