

**1<sup>st</sup> September 2024 – PLYMOUTH**

**Delving into deep time, led by Rev Kate Whyman**

1. **INTRO MUSIC** Crossing the stone 4'17"

2. **WELCOME/CHALICE LIGHT**

Welcome to you all, whether you're here in the church or joining us online today. A special welcome to the members of the Executive Committee, as well as our Chief Exec Liz Slade and Operations Manager Andrew Mason. We're delighted to have you hear. Thank you for making the long journey to Plymouth.

Our opening words are from Katie Romano Griffin

Come, let us enter this space of hope and community.

Come, let us enter this space with our sorrows, our joys, our passion and compassion.

Come, let us enter this space with the stories of our ancestors, for their strength and wisdom beats in our hearts.

Let us be present to the beloved companions who move beside us.

and mindful that together we are building community.

Come into this space and let us worship.

The theme of our service today is 'Diving into deep time'.

But before we do that, 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*

May this flame be a symbol of the molten rock at the earth's core, the burning sun in the blue sky above us, and the divine spark in our hearts that unites us all.

3. **1<sup>st</sup> HYMN 62 (P) Here we have gathered**

Here we have gathered, gathered side by side;  
circle of kinship, come and step inside!  
May all you seek here find a kindly word;  
may all who speak here feel they have been heard.  
Sing now together this, our hearts' own song.

Here we have gathered, called to celebrate  
days of our lifetime, matters small and great;  
we of all ages, women, children men  
infants and sages, sharing what we can.  
Sing now together this, our hearts' own song.

Life has its battles, sorrows, and regret:  
but in the shadows, let us not forget:  
we who now gather know each other's pain;  
kindness can heal us: as we give, we gain.  
Sing now in friendship this, our hearts' own song.

*Words © 1979 Alicia S. Carpenter*

4. **PRAYER** The Lord's Prayer, Laura Dobson, from Worship resources on the UK Unitarian website

Spirit of Life, Ground of all Being, Our Mother and Father,  
Who are throughout the whole cosmos  
Holy are All Your Names  
Holy are we, whoever and however we are.

Your realm of love and justice come  
Through the actions of our hands  
And the desires of our hearts.

Open our hearts to those who live at the edges, in the shadows  
Let us welcome them in love  
And practise compassion towards all beings.

Give us what will nourish us today.  
Let us be grateful for everything we have.  
Forgive us when we miss the mark  
As we forgive those who cross our own boundaries.

Give us the strength to be honest with ourselves.  
In trying times, guide us on the right paths  
As we learn to trust our inner wisdom,  
And in times of joy and sorrow  
May we keep turning towards the Light of Love.

For You are the Source of all that has been, is now and will be,  
Let us honour your Indwelling Presence for evermore.

*Amen*

5. **STORY** 'Try to love a stone', from Richard Rohr 'What the mystics know'

Once upon a time, a small boy went to his rabbi and said he didn't know how to love God. "How can I love God when I've never seen him?" asked the boy. "I think I understand how to love my mother, my father, my brother, my little sister, and even the people in our neighborhood, but I don't know how I'm supposed to love God."

The rabbi looked at the little boy and said, "Start with a stone. Try to love a stone. Try to be present to the most simple and basic thing in reality so you can see its

goodness and beauty. Then let that goodness and beauty come into you. Let it speak to you. Start with a stone.” The boy nodded with understanding.

“Then, when you can love a stone,” the rabbi continued, “try a flower. See if you can love a flower. See if you can be present to it and let its beauty come into you. See if you can let its life come into you and you can give yourself to it. You don’t have to pluck it, possess it, or destroy it. You can just love it over there in the garden.” The boy nodded again.

“I’m not saying it’s wrong to pick flowers,” added the rabbi. “I’m just asking you to learn something from the flower without putting it in a vase.” The boy smiled, which meant he understood – or maybe he didn’t. Just in case he didn’t the rabbi chose the boy’s pet dog as the next object of loving and listening. The boy nodded and smiled when the rabbi talked about his dog; he even said, “Yes, Rabbi.”

“Then,” the rabbi went on, “try to love the sky and the mountains, the beauty of all creation. Try to be present to it in its many forms. Let it speak to you and let it come into you.” The boy sensed the rabbi wanted to say some more, so he nodded again, as if he understood.

“Then,” the rabbi said, “try to love a human being. Try to be faithful and loyal to them. After you have loved a stone, a flower, your little dog, the sky and the mountains, and a human being, then you’ll be ready to love God.”

**6. POEM** Address: The Archaeans, One Cell Creatures, Pattiann Rogers

Pattiann Rogers is a poet and a scientist who seeks the spiritual in nature. The Archaeans have also been called extremophiles – single cells related to bacteria that survived in the most inhospitable (to us anyway) conditions at the dawn of life. Here she marvels at their combination of tenacity and ephemerality.

Although most are totally naked  
and too scant for even the slightest  
color and although they have no voice

that I've ever heard for cry or song, they are,  
nevertheless, more than mirage, more  
than hallucination, more than falsehood.

They have confronted sulfuric  
boiling black sea bottoms and stayed,  
held on under ten tons of polar ice,  
established themselves in dense salts  
and acids, survived eating metal ions.  
They are more committed than oblivion,  
more prolific than stars.

Far too ancient for scripture, each  
one bears in its one cell one text—  
the first whit of alpha, the first  
jot of bearing, beneath the riling  
sun the first nourishing of self.

Too lavish for saints, too trifling  
for baptism, they have existed  
throughout, never gaining girth enough  
to hold a firm hope of salvation.  
Too meagre in heart for compassion,  
too lean for tears, less in substance  
than sacrifice, not one has ever  
carried a cross anywhere.

And not one of their trillions  
has ever been given a tombstone.  
I've never noticed a lessening  
of light in the ceasing of any one  
of them. They are more mutable  
than mere breathing and vanishing,  
more mysterious than resurrection,

too minimal for death.

7. **2<sup>nd</sup> Hymn 233 (G) Others call it God**

8. **READING** Proverbs 8: 22-31. These are the words of Wisdom, also known as Sophia.

“The Lord brought me forth as the first of his works,  
before his deeds of old;  
I was formed long ages ago,  
at the very beginning, when the world came to be.  
When there were no watery depths, I was given birth,  
when there were no springs overflowing with water;  
before the mountains were settled in place,  
before the hills, I was given birth,  
before he made the world or its fields  
or any of the dust of the earth.  
I was there when he set the heavens in place,  
when he marked out the horizon on the face of the deep,  
when he established the clouds above  
and fixed securely the fountains of the deep,  
when he gave the sea its boundary  
so the waters would not overstep his command,  
and when he marked out the foundations of the earth.  
Then I was constantly at his side.  
I was filled with delight day after day,  
rejoicing always in his presence,  
rejoicing in his whole world  
and delighting in mankind.

## 9. REFLECTION

10. **INTERLUDE:** 'Earth song', Frank Ticheli

## 11. ADDRESS

The other day I watched the evolutionary cosmologist, Brian Swimme, begin a TED talk with a simple graphic showing how the universe has expanded from the big bang of 14 billion years ago to now. 'What's amazing to me,' he said, 'is that the elementary particles that make up our own bodies are right there at the beginning! This is not just the universe's story, it's our story.'

And some years ago, at a FUSE gathering in Worthing, Rev Jim Robinson, formerly minister of Rosslyn Hill Chapel and the keynote speaker, began by reminding us that we had each taken 14 billion years to be formed.

On both occasions I felt like a deep memory was being awakened. That at some level, deep below my consciousness, I'd known this for a long time. Maybe I'd known it for 14 billion years.

On the other hand the discovery that the earth was formed 4.6 billion years ago came as a relatively recent surprise to me. Though nowhere near as much of a shock as it came to people living at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It was in 1788 that James Hutton – now known as the father of geology – scoured the Scottish coast with two companions. What they found was radically challenging. The rock strata at Siccar Point, east of Edinburgh, showed beyond doubt that the Biblical account of time, in which the earth was said to be just a few thousand years old, couldn't possibly be true. It was far, far older. Dizzily so. John Playfair, one of the three explorers, said that 'The mind seemed to grow giddy by looking so far back into the abyss of time.' And Hutton himself wrote that time seemed to have 'no vestige of a beginning and no prospect of an end'.

The tumultuous journey the planet has been on, from being a ball of roiling volcanic rock, pounded by millions of asteroids, to becoming the beautiful blue and green globe we live on today has taken literally eons to unfold. And the story isn't over yet. As Robert Macfarlane says in his book 'Underland', 'It's only when viewed in deep time things come alive that seemed inert...The world becomes eerily various and vibrant again. Ice breathes. Rock has tides. Mountains ebb and flow, Stone pulses. We live on a restless earth.'

It seems incredible now to think that at the beginning there were no oceans here and no atmosphere either; that at various times in its story the earth has completely frozen over, that continents have formed and split and reformed, pushing up mountains and creating deep rifts and faultlines in the process; that life has evolved and been all but obliterated time and again, and yet, somehow here we are. Living and breathing on the same planet that dinosaurs once roamed – their extinction relatively recent at a mere 66 millions years ago.

[As an aside, I popped into our wonderful museum the Box last week to have another look at the fossils and the woolly mammoth and the skeleton of a long-extinct cave lion. You may know that this area of land we call Plymouth once lay under a shallow tropical sea, roughly where Madagascar is now. Which goes some way to explaining how the skeleton came to be discovered in Cattedown, very close to where our guests have been staying in fact.]

Stretching ahead, time is just as head-spinning. Our sun is expected to last another 5 billion years, which means there is probably another 1 billion or so years of life on earth, though quite what form that life will take we can't know. Right now in Finland geologists are burying high-level radioactive waste which will take at least 100,000 years (and some say a million) to be deemed no longer hazardous. That's long enough for the world to change utterly. A huge question for them, then, is how to ensure that people in the future – or whatever forms of life may be around by then – will know not to risk disaster by disturbing it.

In our story today the rabbi said to the little boy who didn't know how to love God, 'start with a stone'. Some of you have heard me speak before about the time last



year on sabbatical when I visited the Knap of Howar, a neolithic dwelling in Orkney in the northern island of Papa Westray (or Papay, as it's known locally). On the earthy ground of that remarkable, ancient 5000-year-old home lay a 'saddle quern', a large stone with a shallow hollow in which lay a slightly smaller stone, smooth and oval in shape, that was used for grinding grain. Something prompted me to kneel down on the ground next to it, to hold the grinding stone in my hands and move it slowly against the quern below. As I did this I experienced such a sudden jolt of connection, it was as though I was the woman (I assume) who had used it all those millennia earlier, or perhaps she was me. Either way, time had collapsed.

I mention it again now because I have struggled to describe that moment, what it meant to me and why it felt so sacred. But I just recently had a revelation about it. A phrase suddenly formed in my mind. The words that came to me were 'I was there'.

'I was there.' Where had I heard that before? Of course. From the voice of Wisdom, of Sophia, in Proverbs, in the Hebrew Bible. 'I was there.' Not me, Kate. I'm pretty sure she wasn't there then. But 'I' was there. The 'I' that dwells within me and within each of us – energy, awareness, wisdom, call it what you will. The 'I' that looks out through my eyes and yours, that peered through neolithic eyes, and neanderthal ones, that watched through the eyes of apes and cave lions, T Rex and the first fish that struggles out of the ocean onto land. And before that – way, way before that – the same 'I' that moved through jelly fish and sponges, bacteria and archeans; the very same 'I' that witnessed the first rains and the molten lava, and all the way back the big bang itself.

Wisdom says...

I was formed long ages ago,

at the very beginning, when the world came to be.

When there were no watery depths, I was given birth,

when there were no springs overflowing with water;

before the mountains were settled in place,

before the hills, I was given birth,

before he made the world or its fields

or any of the dust of the earth

I was there at the beginning. And so were you. And so was every living thing and non-living thing. And if that's true, then we'll all be there at the end too. We're all in this incredible struggle for survival and desire to do better – to be better – together. We can weep we can marvel at the pain and the wonder of it.

Looked at one way, the whole of human history is just scratching the surface of planetary history. And yet. The story of the planet – the journey of the whole universe – it is our story too. From a scientific as well as a mystic perspective, we've been here all along, and we'll be here for evermore. In fact Hutton was right, there is no beginning and no end. There is just the eternal now.

And if that seems too much to take in, if the idea of billions of years is just too overwhelming, the sheer expanse of creation too enormous to grapple with, the idea of timelessness beyond human understanding, then start small. Start with a stone. Try to love a stone. And see where it takes you. At least I think that's the journey I'm on.

Amen

## **12. 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*

### **13. CLOSING WORDS**

by Alex Brianson

O you who animate the universe  
You who are mother and father to us all  
You who give us the blessing of life  
You who live inside us and without  
May we learn to see You in creation  
And may we find in this a comfort  
And a celebration.

May we find a name for you that we can love –

A call sign to help us find You.

A mantra to mutter as we centre ourselves

And try once more to treat others as we would have ourselves be treated.

So may it be.

Amen.

**14. CLOSING MUSIC** <https://youtu.be/6Ojagf3S0Qo?si=MW0ARmzD9Vn2K6e->