

1st December 2024

Rev Kate Whyman: PRESENCE

1. **INTRO MUSIC:** ‘Contemplation Suite: IV. Dream’ (4’58”), Julie Cooper.
<https://music.youtube.com/watch?v=bp3km9X23IM&feature=share>

2. WELCOME/CHALICE LIGHTING

Welcome to this morning’s service. Thank you to Nick for suggesting the opening music some time ago.

You are welcome whoever you are and however you are feeling today. Whether you are a member of this congregation, or a visitor. Whether you come in sadness or in joy, you are welcome here.

This morning is the first Sunday in Advent.

French philosopher Simone Weil said: ‘Waiting patiently in expectation is the foundation of the spiritual life’. To wait patiently in expectation sounds as though it’s about focusing on the future. But to wait patiently really means being willing to stay in the present. To be fully present with what is, paying attention while being alert to the signs and the signals within us and without. Expectation, in this context, is faith. It is not the expectation that a or b will necessarily happen, but faith that whatever happens it will be OK. To wait patiently in expectation, therefore, is to be here now, with mind and heart and eyes open, trusting in life as it unfolds.

Let us begin our worship - this time of celebration, contemplation and community - by lighting the first of our advent candles as well as our customary chalice. If you're at home, please light a candle with us now.

Words by Jezibell Anat

Let us come into a calm, clear place
where we can relinquish our clutter
and relax from busyness into being.

Let us settle into that calm, clear place
where the earth supports our bodies
and the community lifts our spirits,
where we can breathe in peace
and centre ourselves in love.

Let us welcome our calm, clear place
where our hearts can open
and our thoughts can expand
beyond the cobwebs of convention
into the creative flow of infinity.

May it be so.

3. 1st HYMN 43 (P) Gather the spirit

Gather the spirit, harvest the power.
Our sep'rate fires will kindle one flame.
Witness the mystery of this hour.

Our trials in this light appear all the same.

Gather in peace, gather in thanks.

Gather in sympathy now and then.

Gather in hope, compassion and strength.

Gather to celebrate once again.

Gather the spirit of heart and mind.

Seeds for the sowing are laid in store.

Nurtured in love and conscience refined,

with body and spirit united once more.

Gather in peace, gather in thanks.

Gather in sympathy now and then.

Gather in hope, compassion and strength.

Gather to celebrate once again.

Gather the spirit growing in all,

drawn by the moon and fed by the sun.

Winter to spring, and summer to fall,

the chorus of life resounding as one.

Gather in peace, gather in thanks.

Gather in sympathy now and then.

Gather in hope, compassion and strength.

Gather to celebrate once again

Words and music © Jim Scott

4. **PRAYER** Prayer for Presence, Steve Garnass-Holmes

Loving One,
free me from my self-enclosure,
to trust I am fully loved and heard,
so I can love and hear others.
Help me to be fully present, to be aware of myself,
my reactions, my wounds and fears and filters,
and to mindfully, lightly, hold them aside,
so I can be fully present for others,
truly listening, opening a space in me
for them to be safe, to be true, to be free.
May I be a spacious and welcoming presence,
to offer people the precious gift of being heard,
being seen, being witnessed.

5. **STORY** – ‘Peter and the Golden Thread’ by Robin Sharma (from his book *The Monk Who Sold His Ferrari*)

Peter was a young boy who could never live in the moment. When he was in school, he dreamed of playing outside. When he was outside playing, he dreamed of summer holidays. Peter never took the time to savour the special moments that filled his days.

One day, he was out walking in a forest near his home. Feeling tired, he decided to rest on a patch of grass and eventually dozed off. After only a few minutes of deep sleep, he heard someone calling his name. “Peter! Peter!” came the shrill voice from above. As he slowly opened his eyes, he was startled to see a striking woman standing above him. She must

have been over a hundred years old and her snow-white hair dangled well below her shoulders like a matted blanket of wool.

In this woman's wrinkled hand was a magical little ball with a hole in the centre and out of the hole dangled a long, golden thread. "Peter," she said, "this is the thread of your life. If you pull the thread just a bit, an hour will pass in seconds. If you pull harder, whole days will pass in minutes. And if you pull with all your might, months – even years – will pass by in days." Peter was very excited by this new discovery.

"I'd like to have it, if I may?" he asked. The elderly woman quickly reached down and gave the ball with the magic thread to the young boy.

The next day, Peter was sitting in the classroom feeling restless and bored. Suddenly, he remembered his new toy. As he pulled a little bit of the golden thread, he quickly found himself playing in his garden.

Realising the power of the magic thread, Peter soon grew tired of being a schoolboy and longed to be a teenager, with all the excitement that would bring. So again he held the ball and pulled hard on the golden thread.

Suddenly, he was a teenager with a lovely girlfriend named Elise. But Peter still wasn't content. Instead, he dreamed of being an adult, so again he pulled hard on the thread and many years flew by in an instant. Now he found that he was middle-aged. Elise was his wife and Peter was surrounded by a houseful of kids.

But he noticed something else. His once jet-black hair had started to turn grey and his once youthful mother, whom he loved so dearly had grown old and frail. Yet Peter still could not live in the moment. Once again, he pulled on the magic thread.

Peter was suddenly a ninety-year-old man. His dark hair had turned white as snow and his young wife, Elise, had grown old and passed away. His children had grown up and left home. For the first time in his life, Peter realised that he had not taken the time to embrace the wonders of living. He'd never gone fishing with his kids or taken a moonlight stroll with Elise. He'd never planted a garden or read those wonderful books his mother had loved to read. Instead, he had hurried through life, never resting to see all that was good along the way.

Peter went out to the forest where he used to walk as a boy to clear his head and lift his spirit. As he entered he noticed the little saplings of his childhood had grown into mighty oaks. He laid down on a patch of grass and fell asleep.

After only a minute, he heard a voice calling. "Peter! Peter!" He looked up in astonishment to see the same old woman who'd given him the ball with the magic golden thread many years earlier. "How have you enjoyed my gift?" she asked.

"At first it was fun, but now I hate it. My whole life has passed before my eyes me having the chance to enjoy it. Sure, there would have been sad times as well as great times, but I haven't had the chance to experience either. I feel empty. I have missed the gift of living."

"You are lucky," said the old woman. "I will give you one last wish."

"Please can I go back to being a schoolboy and live my life over again?" Peter asked. And returned to his deep sleep.

Again, he heard someone calling his name and opened his eyes. He was absolutely delighted to see his mother standing over his bedside. She looked young and radiant. He realised his wish had been granted and he had returned to his former life.

“Hurry up, Peter. You sleep too much. You will be late for school if you don’t get up this minute,” his mother scolded. Peter gladly leapt out of bed and began to live the way he had hoped - a full life, one rich with delights, sadnesses and triumphs - but it only started when he stopped sacrificing the present for the future and began to live in the present.

6. 2nd HYMN 35 (P) Find a stillness

Find a stillness, hold a stillness,
let a stillness carry me.

Find the silence hold the silence,
let the silence carry me.

In the spirit, by the spirit,
with the spirit giving power,
I will find true harmony.

Seek the essence, hold the essence,
let the essence carry me.

Let me flower, help me flower,
watch me flower, carry me.

In the spirit, by the spirit,
with the spirit giving power,

I will find true harmony.

Transylvanian melody, words by Carl Seaburg based on a Transylvanian text © Alan Seaburg

7. **SECOND READING** – From ‘More than a cup of soup’, by Kathleen McTigue in *Falling into the Sky*

Not far from where I work there is a little hole-in-the-wall café, a good place to pick up a quick lunch. The woman who works behind the counter always looks glad to be there, doing what she’s doing, and she often knows her customers by name. Last week, there were at least half-a-dozen people waiting in line to be served, but she still lingered with an old man at the counter who already had his soup and bread in a paper bag. She asked after his health and then asked about his wife. She commiserated with him when he told her about their illnesses. When she said goodbye, she touched his hand lightly, smiled into his face, and told him she’d look for him tomorrow...

Watching her at work, it's easy to believe that some small corner of the world's fabric is being patiently, lovingly stitched back together, and that something more gets carried out of the door than a bag of bread and warm soup.

8. **REFLECTION Mini Body-scan Meditation** *Lóre Stevens*

This is a season when overwhelm and excitement and anxiety can easily dominate our entire state of being. Let's take a moment to practise centring ourselves.

Focus your attention on the parts of the body which are closest to the Earth. Scan your attention slowly upwards.

Focus your attention in the centre of the body, where air becomes breath, where what is not you becomes you, where the line between blurs, in a flow without ceasing. Scan your attention slowly upwards.

Focus your attention at the top of the body, where feeling becomes thought and thought becomes action.

9. SILENCE

10. INTERLUDE 'O come, O come Emmanuel', The Piano Guys

<https://music.youtube.com/watch?v=iO7ySn-Swwc&feature=share>

11. ADDRESS

Wendell Berry wrote:

*And we pray,
not for new earth or heaven,
but to be quiet in heart,
and in eye clear.
What we need is here.*

Stillness, quietness, clear of eye. All we need is here.

It feels hard to believe that, sometimes, doesn't it? Of course there are things we have to do just to stay alive and well – and there are things we love to do.

But what underlies them all, and supports them, and grounds them are the things we already have within us. Stillness, quietness, clarity.

In other words, presence.

People, naturally, have been asking me what I'm going to do when I retire. I want to say 'nothing', though I haven't quite had the courage. Of course I don't mean literally nothing, that would be impossible. And boring. What I mean is that I don't want to feel I have to fill up the time, or justify myself, or make it sound like I've got a big plan or some important project or role to fulfil.

What I would like is for the things I do to emerge, gradually, from a place of stillness and quietness. I yearn to have the time to allow that to happen. And I'm curious to see if I can manage to 'wait patiently in expectation', and to discover what might unfold if I can.

I think it's hard to trust that our mere presence in the universe is valuable. That just 'being' here is in itself a gift to the world. And so the temptation is always to fill any available space with activity and noise. Some of that – maybe even most of it – is covering up feelings of inadequacy, or shyness, or lack of self-esteem, or lostness. It conceals the fear that we are not enough.

Of course, it's enjoyable and enlivening to have conversations, to laugh, to share stories, to inspire and challenge, and to be inspired and challenged in return. Friendships and relationships rely on our interactions with each other.

But in the end it is our attention that is most valuable, it is our simple presence that is most meaningful, not our attempts to impress or be clever.

And the beautiful thing is that we can all offer our attention. And we can all learn to be present. "What we need is here." Right here, in our hearts.

At this time of the year, there is much to distract us. Lots to enjoy and lots to get stressed about. Plenty of wonder and magic as well as poignancy, sadness, loneliness. It's a season that can take us on an emotional roller coaster of anticipation and disappointment, joy and despair. Sometimes we just have to roll with it all, let those feelings come and go as they must, trying not to cling on to them too much. This is life, after all, and as Peter in our story realised, a mix of experiences gives life its richness.

But this advent season is also – traditionally - a period of fasting, of simplifying, of quietening in preparation for what is to come. And so we need some tools with which to navigate it. When you find yourself spinning on the festive Wurlitzer remember... Pause. Breathe. Light a candle. Take a walk. Sit in silence. Look at the moon. The stars. The sea. Take those moments of pure presence.

For in each one of them is all you really need.

I'd like to share a poem I came across recently, which speaks to the sense maybe we all have that somewhere along the way we missed the instructions for how to live this life. It's called

'What You Missed That Day You Were Absent from Fourth Grade' and it's by an American poet called. Brad Aaron Modlin

Mrs. Nelson explained how to stand still and listen to the wind, how to find meaning in pumping gas,

how peeling potatoes can be a form of prayer. She took questions on how not to feel lost in the dark

After lunch she distributed worksheets that covered ways to remember your grandfather's

voice. Then the class discussed falling asleep without feeling you had forgotten to do something else—

something important—and how to believe the house you wake in is your home. This prompted

Mrs. Nelson to draw a chalkboard diagram detailing how to chant the Psalms during cigarette breaks,

and how not to squirm for sound when your own thoughts are all you hear; also, that you have enough.

The English lesson was that *I am*
is a complete sentence.

And just before the afternoon bell, she made the math equation
look easy. The one that proves that hundreds of questions,
and feeling cold, and all those nights spent looking
for whatever it was you lost, and one person
add up to something.

*Our final sing celebrates some of the things we might do when we allow
ourselves to be moved by joy and love and inner quietness rather than
what we might find ourselves doing out of fear or anger or insecurity. And
how doing what we love can be the best thing not only for us for the
world.*

12. 3rd HYMN 133 (P) Play trumpet, cello, harp and flute

Play trumpet, cello, harp and flute;
play organ, violin and lute.
Write poems and read the written word;
Write plays, tell stories to be heard;
and let the cosmos all around
with love and justice then resound.

Paint pictures dark and painting bright;
Paint with a brush and paint with light.
Dance minuet and highland fling;
dance two by two and in a ring;

and let the cosmos all around
with love and justice then resound.

Speak words of comfort and of peace;
speak gently so that wars may cease.
Sing melodies and measured phrase;
sing songs to set the world ablaze;
and let the cosmos all around
with love and justice then resound.

Music Norman Cocker, words © Andrew M. Hill

CLOSING WORDS *Rev. Scott Tayler*

May awareness lead you on your way.
May you always *be* where you are,
free from the quicksand of the past
let loose from the imagined fires of the future.
And may you always hear the precious present calling you home.

13. CLOSING VIDEO

Alan Watts 'The unspeakable world'

<https://youtu.be/heksROdDgEk?feature=shared>

A few words about it...

I love his voice, and his spiritual writings were some of the first that made a real impression on me.

I don't always understand quite what he means, which in a way is a good thing because it forces me to grapple with it.

For example, when he says – don't be NICE people – I think he means don't just do what's expected of you. Be real.

And when he says that we need some kind of order or the force of liberation will blow the world to pieces – I think what he's saying is that we need some spiritual practices to ground us, and that lead us gently towards what he would call enlightenment. Otherwise the light would be too strong – like looking directly at the face of God. 'The current is too strong for the wire', he says.

But I'm not sure, and if you have other interpretations they are likely just as valid or more so.

Here he is.