

Sunday 3rd May 2026 'A Service to Celebrate Beltane' Sheila Evans

Opening Music: 'One of the most beautiful Celtic melodies'

Find it here: https://youtu.be/_8vW3Z2wjcE?si=IoSUf0bcYrY3KdDi

Welcome: Good morning and welcome to each and every one of you, on this May morning, whoever you are, however you are feeling, and whatever you bring in your heart – joy, sadness, uncertainty or curiosity! You are welcome, whatever your faith or none. You are especially welcome if you are joining us for the first time, whether you are here in church, joining us via the wonders of technology on Zoom, or watching the recording online later.

Our Service today celebrates Beltane. Last Friday, 1st May, was May Day and Beltane, marking the halfway point between the Spring Equinox and the Summer Solstice. In the Celtic calendar, Beltane is considered to be 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. So, this morning's Service will include readings, and some rituals, associated with Beltane and its links with fertility, fire and feast. With acknowledgments to the Unitarian Earth Spirit network for producing a leaflet of these, and to Ann for bringing it back from GA for me!

We begin our service, as is our custom, by lighting our chalice candle as a symbol of our free religious faith. If you are at home and have a candle nearby, you may like to light it with us now.

Chalice lighting:

We light our chalice flame
For love and creativity,
For freedom, peace and justice,
For healing and wholeness;
For our common vision of a world flourishing
With equality for all.
May the spark of light and life
Shine brightly in everyone.

Opening words: By Hildegard von Bingen 12th Century Christian mystic, Benedictine abbess, and polymath

I am that great and fiery force
Sparkling in everything that lives
In shining of the river's course
In greening grass that glory gives
I shine and glitter on the seas
In burning sun, in moon and stars
In unseen wind, in verdant trees

I breathe within, both near and far
And where I breathe, there is no death
And meadows glow with beauties rife
I am in all the spirit's breath
The thundered Word, for I am life.

I invite you to join in singing our first hymn, which celebrates the theme of fire

1st Hymn: 158 (in 'Sing your Faith' aka Purple Book) '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
Of what great souls have gained.

The flame of thought is kindled.
we celebrate the mind,
its search for dee[est 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.

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Music: 'Morning Light' George James Webb, 1803 - 1887

Prayers: Time for prayer and reflection:

1. For the week's events: Let us pause and hold in our thoughts and prayers all those of our own church community and in the wider world, who are experiencing difficult, sad or worrying times, whether through illness, accident, or bereavement, war and conflict or natural causes.

There are countless people around the world in dangerous and desperate situations who we hold in our thoughts and prayers this morning. Let us include those of the Jewish community in Golders Green, who were subject to the violent attack in the week, and be thankful that the attacker was apprehended quickly and no fatalities ensued. Let us also be thankful that the unexploded bomb, the legacy of a past war, found within our own city, was detonated safely, with no injuries or damage. Let us give thanks for all in the Police, Emergency services and the bomb squad, who responded swiftly, running towards such situations to provide help, where the natural reaction would be to flee to safety. Let us give thanks for the ways in which the local communities pulled together in both instances to help and support those affected. May the spirit of

compassion and kindness prevail to heal the emotional wounds of all who are suffering from despair or fear, wherever they may be. No faith community, whichever faith it is, should not live in fear of persecution or attack of any kind. May the leaders of all nations be blessed with the skills of diplomacy and the compassion and wisdom to prevent further conflict and harm of any sort.

Let us be ever mindful that every one of us will be touched by sad as well as joyful events and so may we be moved to offer comfort and solace to one another. And let us give thanks for the happy events which lighten our hearts. May we contribute to, and benefit, from the resources of love and strength which our church community offers, to us and to the wider community outside our doors.... *AMEN*

Let us take a short pause for our own silent prayers

2. A prayer for this season, based on one by Lyn Cox

Creative spirit, source of life and love,
We give thanks for this day and for the company of all assembled here.
We give thanks for the breeze of change, clearing our heads, bringing us fresh ideas,
and cleansing our minds of oppressions and isms dividing us from our fellow beings.

Let us be thankful 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 to a better way of living.

Let us be thankful for oceans of love, rivers of connection, tears of relief, and pools of serenity. May their healing waters wear down the sharp rocks of our despair, to bring joy in the morning.

May we be thankful 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.

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.

Calling the Directions: North, East, South, West, Centre

North = Marianne

"Be with us, spirits of the North.
Bless us with the gifts of Earth –
The stability of the Mountains,
The abundance of meadows.
Hail and welcome!

May there be peace in the North " (A Candle is lit)

East = Delphine

“Be with us, spirits of the East.
Bless us with the gifts of Air –
The new beginnings of each dawn,
Hail and welcome!
May there be peace in the East “ (A Candle is lit)

South = Margaret

“Be with us, spirits of the South.
Bless us with the gifts of Fire –
The heat of passion,
The light of love.
Hail and welcome!
May there be peace in the South “ (A Candle is lit)

West = Ann

“Be with us, spirits of the West.
Bless us with the gifts of Water –
The fluidity of the stream,
The depths of the ocean,
Hail and welcome!
May there be peace in the West.” (A Candle is lit)

Centre = sheila

“Great Spirit in the Centre,
We greet and honour you.
We ask for your blessings,
Your guidance and your inspiration.
Grant us the gifts of self-knowledge and self-love.
May there be peace in all the Worlds.
Now we will welcome each other.
The light of love.
Hail and welcome!
May peace be with us“ (A Candle is lit)

Music: ‘Beltane Blessings‘

Fund it here <https://youtu.be/CssAkpLSLY0?si=GMcdzpdkSQQO5y9M0>

Reading 1: ‘This Day of Promise’ by Robert T. Weston

Here is a day of promise!
May it be so with me, with everyone!
Even if grey clouds scud overhead,
The storm clouds, rain and the breaking sunshine,
The blossoms bursting in pink and white,
The children gleefully running out to splash in puddles,
The grass green, and the buds
Straining into leaves on shrubs and trees,
And the birds singing joyfully, in the dawn,
Strutting the lawns as proud possessors.

Everywhere, life, life bursting through all fetters,
And the heart singing, protesting against gloom,

Shouting its defiance of clouds and cold;
The glad heart exulting in storm and sunshine alike.

This is a day that aches with the promise of life,
Life which will not be denied.
Let all hearts swell with acceptance,
For out of the earth, into the air and sunshine, out of ourselves,
There rises spirit in us.
Neither dark nor threat shall thrust it down.
It rises irresistible in us.
This is the season's gift.

2nd Hymn: 147 ('Sing your Faith' aka Purple Book) 'Spirit of earth, root, stone and tree'

Spirit of earth, root, stone and tree,
water of life, flowing in me,
keeping me syable, 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!*

Music: 'Leaving of Lismore' Traditional Scottish melody Arr by David Dawson

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Reading/poem: 'May Morning' by Lucy Ingrams
(For C. on Port Meadow)

You ask about the sequence of the flowers
from now, as we stop in a churn of may
under the night's whitening. Summer
nests in our palms and these answering nouns

play an air of it: *bugle speedwell purslane*
I follow the moth's flights upward – will
The cinder stars fall as rain?

Like dragon's wake, pits scorch
the meadow where last night's
beltan wasted and the horses graze
far off, unicorn- pale at the horizon
bedstraw trefoil clovers. You point
to a gleaming cloud-knot
it tips, sorcerer's gold.

The dogs run in the cloak of the wind,
Ears flush to their skulls, wolfish.
Any torn crack-willow limbs
gating our path (gestures of winter's
carnage) we climb – hitching our basket of talk over each
harebell scabious toodflax

and, with the sky, shadow
from this season of our lives (it is
only an underneath-things noticing)
tightens. Crossing the ribbon river
that washes all it sees to green, I count as
on – past the turning-time of chestnut leaves
- *Loosestrife woundwort selfheal*

Candles of aspiration:

In the spirit of Beltane, fire is used both to purify and to unite or create. We can do this in two ways today. Firstly: With our Candles of concern and Joy, if you like to mention a joy or concern, you're welcome to come and light a candle and speak briefly, or light silently. I'm also inviting 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 there might be something you would like to create or commit to – it could be anything at all. You are welcome to come up and light a candle **silently** as a symbol of your intention, there is no need to say anything at all. If our friends on Zoom would like us to light a candle silently please tell Lisa in the chat and we'll light one for you, anonymously.

Secondly: If you would like to put something into words, there is a basket with paper tags, which I will pass round. Take one and write your wish on it and at the end of the service, tie it to the little white tree on your way out to coffee. No need to put your name to it.

This is an old Beltane ritual, when people tied their wishes to a living tree, but this is an alternative and enables our friends on zoom to take part. So again, let Lisa know in the chat and we'll write one anonymously for you. While you are thinking, we'll play some gentle music, with seasonal images of a wildflower meadow. And if it

seems familiar – yes, it is! In the spirit of ‘reuse and recycle’, it’s the same one we played last week, as it seems appropriate for this occasion too.

Reflective video of a Wildflower Meadow

3 mins 53 secs

Find it here: <https://youtu.be/5ivyA-wOkUY?si=tzPA1fvpNDwla6Dk>

~ Address: A Day of Promise ~

Can a day of promise begin with ... ‘grey clouds, storm clouds and rain scudding overhead’, as Robert T Weston, the American Unitarian Universalist minister noted in his poem which I read earlier? Well, he *does* also mention children gleefully running out to splash in puddles, and sunshine breaking through! He could have been describing a typical English day in May!

The season is bursting with new life - young animals, nestlings, bees and butterflies, and all around, the trees are coming into leaf, almost like something being said, as Philip Larkin observed. Every branch and twig gifts a new variety of shades and hues of green. My Mum, who was born on May Day Eve, loved this, ‘green shimmer’ as she called it.

The field at the end of the close where I live, is bounded by hawthorn hedges, now pied with creamy blossoms, their fragrance so heavy in the air, it is almost intoxicating. Each day enjoys a few minutes more light, and warmth - when the wind drops! No wonder in days long ago, before the modern comforts of substantial housing, central heating and electric lights, people rejoiced in May. Many beliefs, legends and traditions arose around Beltane, this cross-quarter point between spring equinox and summer solstice. It is one of the four great hinges of the year, a time of increasing fertility of plants and animals, and increasing food supplies after the ‘hungry gap’ of late winter, when stores ran low.

The old Celts celebrated with Fire Festivals, beginning at Moonrise on May Eve (30th April) They surely would have rejoiced when the Moon was Full, as happened this year. They lit special bonfires, believing that the flames, smoke and ashes had protective powers. When it was time for the cattle to be taken out to the summer pastures, they were driven between the smoke of these ‘balefires’, to bless them with health and fertility for the coming year.

The Celts believed that humans also benefitted from the fires. So, every household hearth was extinguished, then relit from a single sacred bonfire, shared by the whole community. They leapt over the flames to ensure good health (well, I suppose if you could do that, you had to be healthy!) I have heard that Pagans today still leap over the Beltane fires to bring good fortune, fertility (of mind, body and spirit) and happiness through the coming year.

They honoured the fertility of their gods with gifts and offerings, which sometimes included animal or even human sacrifices. Later these evolved into less blood thirsty celebrations: going ‘a -Maying’, that’s bringing branches of greenery indoors, especially

Hawthorn in bloom, which at other seasons was considered very unlucky! Dancing around maypoles, with their obvious nod to male fertility. In the evenings, young men and women went into the woods to collect blossoms, light fires and enjoy each other's company. This often led to handfasting, where if they stayed together for a year and a day, their union was officially recognised.

With food becoming more plentiful at this season, there was much feasting and general merry making – even today we refer to the 'merry month of May'

Another old tradition was the May Bush: a thorn bush decorated with flowers, ribbons and bright shells, leaving a wish with each one. Our little ceremony this morning is a modern version of this very old custom. Remember to tie your wish to the little white tree on the stage on your way out to coffee.

The Green Man and the May Queen originated in pre-Christian times. The Green Man is a mythical figure, a guardian of the forests, often shown as a face or sometimes a complete human-like being, made of leaves, and branches. He represents growth, and renewal, and the powerful connection between humans and the natural world. Some people see a connection with the Celtic god Cernunnos, associated with fertility, and the untamed aspects of nature. At Beltane, the Green Man awakens from his winter sleep, bringing life and energy back to the earth. The new Christian religion accepted him, because he represented too powerful a force to eradicate - that of virility, fertility and growth and many churches of various denominations, including our own less traditional branch, are home to at least one Green Man - how many have you found? (at the last count, we had 3!)

The origins of the May Queen can be traced back to early European pagan traditions, eg Roman goddess Flora, the Norse goddess Freyja, and the Celtic goddess Brigid. All were celebrated as the earth awakened from its winter slumber. She embodies the gentler side, of love, beauty, and fertility, often shown as a young woman, adorned with flowers and a crown of blossoms. She represents the arrival of spring and new beginnings. A local girl is chosen to represent the May Queen at the head of a procession, with other young girls attending her. This tradition continues to this day.

The Green Man and the May Queen represent the ancient interplay of light and darkness, life and death, and the cycle of the seasons, especially relevant at this season of renewal. They are powerful symbols reminding us of the importance of balance and harmony in our lives and with the natural world.

The sacred marriage between the Green Man and the May Queen represents the union of male and female energies, the balance between the natural world and human spirit, and the renewal of life, and the interconnectedness of all living beings.

Labor Movement and International Workers' Day

In the 19th century, May Day took on a new significance as International Workers' Day. This commemorates the labour movement's fight for an eight-hour workday. The date was chosen following the Haymarket Affair in Chicago on May 4, 1886. A peaceful labor protest turned violent, resulting in deaths of both workers and police. In 1889, socialist groups and trade unions internationally designated May 1st as a day to support workers' rights, now widely observed in many countries.

In UK, in 1978 The Callaghan government made the first Monday in May, a statutory day off : the early May Bank Holiday.

And last, but by no means least – traditional dancing especially Tradition of Morris Dancing. Originally a European, it became entertainment at the English royal court in the 15th century and soon became part of English village life. The name Morris is believed to derive from "Moorish". Morris dancing has various styles, each with its own history and characteristics. The tradition has seen a revival in recent years, with modern Morris sides performing in the summer, including pubs, village greens, and town squares across Britain. The dance is often associated with spring and early summer festivals, like May Day, and is performed by groups of dancers both men and women, dressed in traditional costumes, accompanied by music and props like sticks and handkerchiefs. Local groups have been out in force over the past few days.

The Padstowe Obby Oss, the Helston Furry dance and the floral boat at Kingsand, Cawsand and Millbrook are local traditions celebrating this wonderful season, of renewal, of good overcoming the forces of darkness and hope for better days ahead.

Each one of us deserves, indeed *needs*, some enjoyment to lighten and fortify our hearts and spirits, for whatever life has in store for us.

As Robert T Weston puts it,

‘For out of the earth, into the air and sunshine, out of ourselves,
There rises spirit in us.
Neither dark nor threat shall thrust it down.
It rises irresistible in us.
This is the season’s gift’.

So let's go out, and rejoice in that gift!

Final Hymn: 42 in ‘Sing your Faith’ (aka ‘Purple Book’) ‘From the light of days remembered’

From the light of days remembered burns a beacon bright and clear,
guiding hands and hearts and spirits into faith set free from fear.

When the fire of commitment sets our mind and soul ablaze;
when our hunger and our passion meet to call us on our way;
when we live with deep assurance of the flame that burns within,
then our promise finds fulfilment and our future can begin.

From the stories of our living rings a song both brave and free,
calling pilgrims still to witness to the life of liberty.

When the fire of commitment sets our mind and soul ablaze;
when our hunger and our passion meet to call us on our way;
when we live with deep assurance of the flame that burns within,
then our promise finds fulfilment and our future can begin.

From the dreams of youthful vision comes a new prophetic voice,
which demands a deeper justice built by our courageous choice.

When the fire of commitment sets our mind and soul ablaze;

when our hunger and our passion meet to call us on our way;
when we live with deep assurance of the flame that burns within,
then our promise finds fulfilment and our future can begin.

Music: 'The Fire of Commitment' Jason Shelton, b.1972

Words: Jason Shelton and Mary Katherine Morn Words and Music © 2001 used with permission.

Calling in the Directions: West, South, East, North, Centre

West = Ann

"In the name of the Great Oceans and the element of Water,
We thank the spirits of the West
For the gifts of fluidity and depth.
Hail and Farewell." (Candle is extinguished)

South = Margaret

"In the name of the Great Sun and of the element of Fire,
We thank the spirits of the South
For the gifts of light and love,
Hail and Farewell." (Candle is extinguished)

East = Delphine

"In the name of the Great Winds and the element of Air,
We thank the spirits of the East
For the gifts of breath and beginnings,
Hail and Farewell." (Candle is extinguished)

North = Marianne

"In the name of the Great Mother and of the element of Earth,
We thank the spirits of the North
For the gifts of stability and abundance,
Hail and Farewell." (Candle is extinguished)

Centre = Sheila

"Great Spirit in the Centre, Thank you for sharing your blessings,
Your guidance, and your inspiration.
As we go on our way,
We carry you with us always." (Candle is extinguished)

Closing words: 'Beltane Blessing' by Rev Laura Dobson

This day and every day
May you know love, within and without
May the buds of your imagination
Blossom and bloom into ripe fullness
May you flourish and flower
Like the incredible beautiful Being you are

Extinguish Chalice:

Closing video: Beltane Border Morris dancing the Beltane Fire dance 3 mins

Watch it here: <https://youtu.be/fniZzaViEZc?si=-IJDDkcDzPvSf27p>