

Worship at Home for March 14, 2021

Our very first Worship at Home was written for March 15, 2020. At that time few could have imagined that we would still be worshipping 'at a distance' a year later. Thank you for continuing to read these services, and may God be with us as we carry on with practices that keep us all safe and healthy even though they keep us apart physically.

This is a prayer by our United Church Moderator, Richard Bott, marking this year:

Holy One, it's been a year.

A year since the pandemic hit this part of the world,

and we realized that

- for the safety of each other and all of our neighbours -

we needed to be a congregation that wouldn't congregate.

Well, not in-person, at least.

We've found other ways.

Old technologies like paper mail and telephone trees,

and new technologies like 'zooming' and pastoral care by video.

We've found ways of being together,

with each other, and with you.

It's not the same -

and there are parts of it that we're missing -

(you're invited to name them here) -

but...

we've found ways to live the ministry you have given us,

to be Jesus' disciples,

to share your love,

with each other and with the whole world.

We remember those who have died from the virus.

We remember those who are ill.

We remember the healthcare workers, the researchers, the grocery clerks,

the delivery drivers - all who must work for the care of the world in their own

way.

We remember all those who are grieving.

All those who are afraid.

All those who wait.

And we pray.

So, on this anniversary,

we ask that you would help us to recognize each other

and to *know* that, in all of this,

you have been, are,

and always will be

with every part of your creation.

Give us strength to keep on.

Give us grace in our frustrations.
Give us hope for tomorrow.
Give us life, and life abundant,
that we might be people who live it in the world.
Physically distanced, but socially together;
faces masked, but hearts open;
hands washed, but ready to get to the work you have for us.
In Jesus' name,
carried by the wings of the Holy Spirit,
enmeshed in the Creator's love,
we pray.
Amen.

You may choose to read right through this document, stopping for your own reflection at any time, or only read the prayers or the scripture or reflection. You might read with family or friends, or alone. Links will take you to music that may enhance your experience as you move through the worship, but you might choose to visit them later, or not at all. Feel free to share this with anyone who might be interested.

In the Spirit

Rev. Joanne

We acknowledge that the land on which we gather is situated upon traditional territories of the Erie, Neutral, Huron - Wyandot, the Haudenosaunee and later the Mississauga of the Credit First Nations.

The territory is mutually covered by the Dish With One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant, an agreement between the Iroquois Confederacy and the Ojibway and other allied nations to peaceably share and care for the resources around the Great Lakes.

Today, this remains the home to many Indigenous people from across Turtle Island and we are grateful to have the opportunity to work in their community, and to share and respect Mother Earth.

Centering Prayer

Into our reminiscences breathe your compassion, God.
Into our thoughts for the future, breathe your hope.
Into this time of worship and contemplation, breathe your Spirit.
Amen

Opening Music "Bring Me to Your Light" *Pat Mayberry*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qxRcZRSOaOA>

Opening Prayer

You God, bring calm into hearts and minds and spirits
as we continue to live through pandemic times
as we wait for vaccines and hugs from family
as we continue to mourn what we have lost
as we search for hope and meaning.

You, God, create sacred space in our homes,
at our computers
in our hallways
in our yards or on our balconies –
windows into your mystery and
a presence that cannot be denied.

On this day, in this time we have taken to focus on worship,
give us strength to look back and courage to look forward,
in Jesus' name we pray.

Amen

Scriptures

Numbers 21:4-9 *NRSV*

From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. The people spoke against God and against Moses, 'Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.' Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, 'We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us.' So Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said to Moses, 'Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.' So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

John 3:14-21 *The Inclusive Bible*

As Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert,
so the Chosen One must be lifted up,
so that everyone who believes in the Chosen One
might have eternal life.

Yes, God so loved the world
as to give the Only Begotten One,
that whoever believes may not die,
but have eternal life.

God sent the Only Begotten into the world
not to condemn the world,
but that through the Only Begotten
the world might be saved.

Whoever believes in the Only Begotten avoids judgement,

but whoever doesn't believe is judged already,
for not believing in the name
of the only Begotten of God.
On these grounds is sentence pronounced:
that though the light came into the world,
people showed they preferred darkness to the light
because their deeds were evil.
Indeed, people who do wrong hate the light and avoid it,
for fear their actions will be exposed;
but people who live by the truth
come out into the light,
so that it may be plainly seen that what they do is done in God.

Reflection A Year of Light and Darkness

This serpent story from the Hebrew Testament book of Numbers is not one that often gets our attention. The Israelite people were complaining once again as they followed the long and difficult wilderness path, but this time instead of water gushing from a rock or manna appearing to feed them, God sends disaster. Poisonous snakes abound, biting and causing harm and even death. Very quickly the people repent, and ask Moses for help. God gives Moses – as God has throughout these stories – the means to save the people through the creation of a bronze snake upon which the people can focus, and live.

We do not know if there actually was an outbreak of poisonous snake bites in the history of the Hebrew people that might have inspired this odd story, but we do know that God provides a way to healing and wholeness once the people have opened themselves to God's forgiveness. They are to look up, to see an image of what is threatening them, and in that recognition also find life.

We do know that a virus continues to threaten us – not sent by God, not a retribution or punishment, even though it might sometimes feel that way. We do know that many people have died, and many more left without income, without security, without hope, without physical connections to community, without a beloved family member.

Where do we look for healing and hope, and new life today? We do look to the medical community – represented for us in the caduceus, that snake-wrapped pole symbol that is perhaps reminiscent, although not directly related to, the snake that Moses created. Doctors, nurses, care-givers, researchers, public health officials, epidemiologists and many more have given us numbers and predictions, dire warnings and protocols, but also hope in treatments and vaccines, and tender care by those on the front lines.

Perhaps we look to our faith and faith communities – no longer meeting in person, but still gathering and still searching and still caring for others. The symbols associated with that faith, like our buildings and baptismal fonts, community halls and crosses cannot be visited physically, but they can still draw our attention and our imaginations, and still be a source of both comfort

and healing for bruised and battered spirits. Like Jesus lifted on the cross and pointing to God, the 'bronze serpents' of our own lives can allow us to be directed to the One who provides.

In John's gospel, Jesus reminds us of this story from the history of his people in a prophetic way that points to his own journey to the cross. But he says so much more about God's extravagant love, about God's light in the world and how it can expose truth despite those who would prefer the darkness. We might ask ourselves where the darkness is found in our lives and our society right now. What haven't we wanted to expose to God's light?

The pandemic has allowed some darkness in our world to be brought into the light – Black Lives Matter, justice and inclusion for BIPOC people, the state of care in long term care facilities – all these sources of darkness have been more light-filled, and can continue to be if we can maintain a desire for truth and justice.

So let us lift our eyes and recognize both where our fear, our darkness has come from, but also how, in faith, we might move to a light-filled and God-centered life. A caution here from the book 2 Kings and the story of King Hezekiah – he finds Moses' bronze serpent that is now hundreds of years old, and realizes that some people have been treating it as more than a symbol pointing to God, but somehow an object to be worshipped itself. He destroys the statue to end that practice. We do not worship the medical community, even though it can save lives. We do not worship a church building, a communion table or an empty cross, even though they point us to God's presence.

We do worship God, our Source, and Jesus, so full of God's presence that we can call him God's Beloved One. We are called to a love so profound that it changes us, and lights the world around us. We are called to persevere, to name our truth, to shine with whatever light we can to lift each other and illuminate each other's paths away from darkness. In that we are not alone, God provides a focus for us in Jesus, a path to healing and wholeness and hope.

What have been your darkest pandemic moments? Where do you find light?

Music: "Bathe Me In Your Light"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pyB9yvqMSck>

A Prayer

Holy One, in the midst of our pandemic-shaped lives, sometimes it is hard to be grateful. Yet the promise of spring and new life hangs in the air, and we have cause for thanks. The promise of Easter glimmers on the horizon, and we can rejoice.

Generous God, in the midst of our pandemic-altered lives, we find individuals ready to risk all to care for others, and our hearts are grateful. We see communities finding new ways to be together, and we appreciate all that they offer.

Loving God, in the midst of our pandemic-structured lives, we can see your invigorating and inspiring Spirit at work

in the development of vaccines and the hope that they bring,
in the lives of front line workers who continue to care despite
challenges and burn out.

We see your Spirit alive when others keep their distance for our sake,
when masks cover the smiles that we know are present so that we can be healthy.
Send your Spirit, God, to inspire world leaders to ensure that all humanity has
access to care, and to vaccines, and to justice.

Compassionate God, in our pandemic-focused lives, make space in us for
your light of hope and love to shine so that we can pray earnestly and
fully for those so adversely affected in this time –
the ill, the homeless, the abused, the underpaid and underemployed.
Help us to turn away from the darkness of greed, despair, fear and anxiety, God.
In that turning, help us to live in your light – sharing hope, sharing resources,
sharing prayer and sharing community with all your people.

Source of All – light and hope, care and compassion, justice and peace,
continue to be with us as we walk through these challenging times – just
as you walked with Jesus on his road to Jerusalem and into the light of
your truth. Amen

Closing music: “Nearer my God, to Thee” the Worldwide Virtual Choir & Orchestra
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o1trWhBvZTs>

Blessing

We are sent out in love, by God who “so loved the world”
to share that love as best we can.

We are sent out in hope, by the One who God sent,
to share truth and light as ever we can.

We are sent out accompanied by the Spirit,
to walk together in this Lenten/pandemic time however we can.
Amen

An Irish blessing including “Be Thou My Vision”
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TascsWZPj8U>