

Call to Worship

*Let the morning bring me word of your unfailing love, for I have put my trust in you.
Show me the way I should go, for to you I lift up my soul. (Ps 143:8)*

Worship in song

Sing hymns and/or worship songs of your choice.

Reading from the Psalms

- Psalm 104:24-34

Prayer of declaration

Loving Father,

by your grace, and power alone, this is what we dare to say:

We will not allow our sins to separate us from you.

We will say "yes" to your offer of forgiveness.

We will not allow our fear to separate us from our mission.

We will say "yes" to your purposes.

We will not allow the hurts of the past rob us of our future.

We will be people of new beginnings and hope.

We will not be indifferent to truth or fail to seek it.

We will guard the truth we see in Scripture.

We will not come to church for what we can get from you.

We will seek your face because we love you.

We will not choose styles of worship that suit our tastes.

We will choose worship which gladdens your heart.

We will not insist on a life free of pain and grief.

We will seek a life which honours your name.

We will not claim your name but live carelessly.

We will allow your Spirit to transform our characters.

We will not be in despair for what we can't do.

We will embrace your Spirit and do what he can do.

We will not be indifferent to those who are lost.

We will befriend them and share with them the gospel.

We will not insist on our comfort and entertainment.

We will do all it takes to be faithful and finish life well.

Loving Lord, forgive us for what we have not been, and by you grace and your power,
make us to be your disciples, your children, and your church.

Assurance of forgiveness

When you were dead in your sins ... God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us ... he took it away, nailing it to the cross. (Col 2:13-14)

Prayer of thanksgiving

Loving Heavenly Father,

We bless you for the cross.

The cross is where the sins of the world meet the righteousness of God.

The cross is where the shame of the world meets the honour of God.

The cross is where the darkness of the world meets the light of God.

The cross is where the despair of the world meets the hope of God.

The cross is where the confusion of the world meets the wisdom of God.

The cross is where the end of the world meets a future with God.

The cross is where the judgement of God meets the love of God.

The cross is where the mystery of God meets the revelation of God.

The cross is where the purpose of God meets its fulfilment in God.

With a gratitude that is beyond words,

We thank you for the cross.

Holy Communion

Luke's gospel records the last supper Jesus had with his disciples as being a Passover meal. This meal celebrated the time when God's judgement "passed over" the Hebrew people.

Centuries earlier, God's people had been enslaved and cruelly abused in Egypt. As a result of this, God sent ten plagues of judgement on the land of Egypt. The last plague was the death of all first born animals and humans in the land. God told his people, through Moses, to take the blood of a lamb and smear it on the door posts of their huts. This would prevent the angel of death bringing God's judgement on those inside and the judgement of God would "pass over" them. Ever since that day, the Jews have celebrated the Passover day each year.

By making the last supper the Passover meal, Jesus was making it plain that the shedding of his blood on our behalf would cause God's judgement to "pass over" us. Our sins would be paid for by Jesus' blood.

Intriguingly, the ceremony of the Passover typically involved hiding half a loaf of bread. This was to symbolise the fact that the Messiah was still hidden and was yet to be revealed. It is therefore significant that Jesus takes the bread and instead of hiding it and eating the other half after a prayer of thanks to God, he says that the bread represents his body which would be broken and given in payment for the sins of all people (1 Cor 11:24). It was a dreadful prophecy about himself. It is significant,

however, that there was no emphasis on hiding half the bread. This represents the truth that the Messiah is revealed and has given all of himself to us.

(Say a prayer of thanks for the bread and the wine which represents the body and blood of Jesus sacrificed in order to rescue us back to God. Then share the bread and wine together.)

The Bible Reading

- Ruth 1:16

The Message: WHAT WAS ON GOD'S MIND WHEN HE MADE US? (Part2)

Covenant: Ruth

The story of Ruth in the Old Testament is a love story. It is a story of hope springing up from the ashes of grief and despair. Significantly for us today: it is also a story that teaches us a little more about the significance of 'covenant'.

To understand this, you first need to appreciate how God chose to enter into a covenant with Abram. This is because the story of Ruth has many parallels with that of Abram.

When God wanted humankind to know how much he wanted to be involved with us, he chose the strongest possible union between two people that would be understood. God chose a blood covenant (meaning, you became 'blood brothers').

The meaning and obligations of a blood covenant were clearly defined.

1. It was the strongest possible union between two people.
2. Both were duty bound to share everything.
3. Both were duty bound to help each other.
4. You were both considered as one.
5. It was indissoluble, broken only by death.

When you entered into a blood covenant, an elaborate ritual was involved. Typically, it involved the following:

- 1) You exchanged coats, signifying that 'all I have, I share'.
- 2) You exchanged sword-belts, signifying that you would share your enemies. In other words, your enemies would become mine.
- 3) An animal was cut down the backbone and you both walked between each half in a figure of eight pattern. This signified unity.
- 4) Those entering into a 'blood covenant' cut their wrists, joined hands and let their blood mingle whilst they raised their other hand and swore the terms of the covenant. These covenant scars were proudly born. It represented unity – at a cost.
- 5) You shared names. (Smith and Jones became Smithjones and Jonesmith).
- 6) You shared a meal.

When one of the two people entering into blood covenant is God, obviously certain modifications to the procedure had to be made. So, what did God do?

What Was On God's Mind

- Step 1+2) God dealt with the coat and sword-belt aspects simply by making a statement. He said: *I am your exceeding great reward. Don't be afraid. I am your shield.* (Gen 15:1)
- Step 3) God ordered animals to be cut in two and for Abram to walk between them in the image of a smoking pot (Gen 15:9-10. Note also Jer 34:18)
- Step 4) Circumcision. (Gen 17:10-11) It is, perhaps significant that God chose the covenant scar to be on that member of the human body that males find hardest to control!
- Step 5) God exchanged names. The 'ha' from the unpronounceable word meaning 'God' was given, so Abram (esteemed father) so that he became Abraham, meaning 'father of many' (Gen 17:15). Similarly Sara had her name changed to Sarah (Gen 17:5).

Being in covenant meant that Abraham was no longer his own, he belonged entirely to God. In the same way, being in a covenant relationship meant that God bound himself irrevocably to Abraham. This was why God was bound to help Abraham have a son, even though he was very old and his wife was well past child-bearing age. That's why God changed his name to Abraham, meaning 'father of many.' It was a sign that God would fulfil his covenant promise.

Abraham passed his covenant on, by divine permission (Gen 17:7), to his descendants, who became the Children of Israel (the Jewish people). This meant that God was duty bound by his covenant to help his people when they were faithful to his covenant. And God was faithful to his people – always. This fact inspired the writer of Chronicles to say:

O Lord, God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven or on earth you who keep your covenant of love with your servants who continue wholeheartedly in your way.
(2 Chron 6:14)

Having got this basic understanding of covenant, we can now talk about Ruth, a woman from the nation of Moab.

Whereas God took the initiative in calling Abraham into a covenant with Ruth, it is a foreigner, a woman and a widow, who takes the initiative to freely enter a covenant with God. The beautiful truth this illustrates is that there was room for a foreigner, a woman, and a widow, i.e. the most vulnerable, lowly person in existence, to choose to be in a covenant relationship with the God of the universe.

That, I reckon, is amazing!

The fact that a foreigner could do this reminds us that the charter God gave the Jews was for them to be *a light to the nations* (Is 49:6). In the story of Ruth, we see a foreign widow pick up God's invitation, through the Jews, to be in a covenant relationship with him.

The significance of this is: if Ruth, as desperate and ordinary as she was, could do this, so can you.

So, may I ask: Have you picked up God's invitation to be in a covenant relationship with him?

God calls the broken and the most unlikely to be with him.

I should perhaps remind you that the nation of Moab was usually at war with the Jews. Their nation descended from Lot, Abraham's nephew. Lot's son was called Moab and his people became the Moabites.

The Moabites were a brutal lot. They refused to help the Hebrew people as they prepared to cross over the Jordan to take possession of Canaan. They later developed strong ties with Egypt and their gods. Some of their practices could become pretty nasty – even including sacrificing their children to their gods, e.g. Chemosh (2 Kings 3:27). Certainly, during much of their history, they made opportunistic raids on the Jews. This explains why there were often oracles and diatribes written against them in the Old Testament (Is 15-16; Jer 48; Ezek 25:8-11).

Now let me tell you the story of Ruth, the Moabitess.

Ruth's story begins with a Jewish couple migrating east of the Dead Sea to the land of Moab to escape a famine that had occurred in Israel. This couple produce two sons, both of whom married Moabite women. Tragically, the father and both sons died.

The Jewish mother, Naomi, obviously had a wonderful relationship with both of her widowed daughters-in-law. The qualities the daughter-in-laws saw in Naomi were such that both of them decide to leave their own nation, culture and relatives – everything they knew, and return with Naomi to Bethlehem in Judah.

Naomi is concerned for the two young women and tries to persuade them to stay in Moab where they can marry again. One of the two young widows, accepts Naomi's wisdom and stays. However, the other one (who is called Ruth) cannot bear to be parted from Naomi. There was something she saw in Naomi's nature, culture and faith that made her never want to leave her.

This prompts me to ask: What is it that a people see in my faith, and in the quality of what I do with my family, that makes people want to be like me and learn about my God?

So, what are the parallels between Abraham's covenant with God and Ruth's covenant with God?

- 1) Both began by them taking a journey, not knowing where they were going, but simply placing their trust in God. Just as Abraham '*went out, not knowing where he was to go*' (Heb. 11:8), Ruth '*left [her] father and mother and [her] native land and came to a people that [she] did not know before*' (Ruth 2:11).
- 2) Both Abraham and Naomi (Ruth's future mother-in-law,) needed to migrate because of famine.

'Now there was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to live there for a while because the famine was severe' (Gen. 12:10).

and:

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to olive for a while in the country of Moab (Ruth 1:1).

What Was On God's Mind

3) Abraham's wife, Sarah, was childless. Ruth was childless. Because both entered into a covenant relationship with God, God was duty bound to ensure that both would eventually have children.

Let's continue with Ruth's story.

In order for Ruth to stay within the orbit of Naomi's nature, culture and faith, she makes an explicit covenant statement that will change her life forever. She says to Naomi: *'your people shall be my people, and your God my God'* (1:16).

Her making this covenant statement, changed everything.

A childless widow, a foreigner, now reaches out, and like the woman touching the hem of Jesus' garment to be healed, she steals her place with God and becomes someone in covenant with him.

As with Abraham's wife, Sarah, God miraculously intervenes and provides Ruth with a fabulous husband, Boaz and, significantly, children. In fact, she becomes the great, great grandmother of King David, and as such, an ancestor of Jesus Christ.

She is one of four women mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew, chapter one. The four women were:

- Tamar, an unloved servant used by her master
- Rahab, a prostitute who trusted in God
- Ruth, a foreign widow who trusted in God, and
- Bathsheba, a woman who had been sexually taken advantage of by a man in power.

That, I think, is eloquent testimony of God's priority... and God's heart.

So, have you accepted your covenant with God?

Prayers for others

Pray with passion for those things God has placed on your heart, remembering the persecuted church, world events, the sick and our leaders.

Benediction

Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with all of you. (2 Thess 3:16)

Are you ready?

1 Peter 3:8-9,13-18

Tell the children that each one of them is a messenger. The message we carry is the message of God's love for all people ... and the people we are to give the message to are those people we meet during each day.

- Give each child a badge with "God's Messenger" written on it.
- Give them each a scroll (the message) with John 3:16 written on it.

(The children can help to make and decorate their badge and scroll.)

Go on to say that the Bible tells us to be careful to deliver God's message of love to other people in a special way. We need to give the message to others in a way that will help them believe it.

The trouble is, that people know that what someone says is not always matched by what they do. For example, I may tell people I love them, but if I am always mean to them and hurting them, I don't really love them.

Do some ham acting with another teaching colleague.

Skit 1)

Have a pretend fight with your colleague in which you say things like: "You are horrible, and I hate your guts ...oh, by the way, God loves you so much that he gave his only son Jesus so that if you believe in him you will not die forever but have everlasting life with God."

Go on to read what it says in 1 Peter 3:8-9

Skit 2)

Play-act that you are stealing a five dollar note from the pocket of your colleague (have the \$5 note sticking out of the pocket slightly). Whilst you say, "Believe me, I am a trustworthy person you need to believe. What I say is true. Trust me when I tell you: God loves you so much that he gave his only son Jesus so that if you believe in him you will not die forever but have everlasting life with God."

Ask the children: "Would you believe what someone said if they behaved like that?"

Read 1 Peter 3:10-11.

Skit 3)

Play-act this scenario. "Hallo (name of your friend), I've got some very important things to say about God that will be good news to you. It is so important that it will change the way you live your life. It is so important that it will give you something to hope for all your life... The trouble is, I've completely forgotten what it is. I can't remember ... and I've also just decided that I'm too shy to share it with you anyway even if I did remember.

What Was On God's Mind

Read out from verse 15: "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope you have."

Skit 4)

Finally, act out this scenario. "Hey you. I've got an important message about God's love for you. I don't care that you are busy right now. I don't care about your ideas. You have to listen to me right now. I'm going to shout at you because I think you are stupid. This is the message I want you to remember and believe: God loves you so much that he gave his only son Jesus so that if you believe in him you will not die forever but have everlasting life with God."

Ask the children if they think the person would want to remember a message from someone who spoke and acted like that. Read out verse 15 again and emphasize the last sentence.

Teach verse 15 as a memory verse.

Ask the children to give their scroll to someone today who may not know Jesus, but to do this is a gentle and friendly way that helps them believe your message.