

## Fourth Sunday of Easter – Year C

**Sunday 11 May 2025**

The Faith Action Programme would like to thank Rev Dr Olive Fleming Drane, Mission Consultant at Kelvinside Hillhead Parish Church, Glasgow, for her thoughts on the Fourth Sunday after Easter.

Weekly Worship, based on the Revised Common Lectionary, is for everyone – in any capacity – who is involved in creating and leading worship.

It provides liturgical material that can be used for worship in all settings. Our writers are asked to share their approaches to creating and delivering this material to equip leaders with a greater confidence and ability to reflect on their own worship practice and experience and encourage them to consider how this material might be adapted for their own context.

We would encourage continual reflection on the changing patterns of worship and spiritual practice that are emerging from disruption and how this might help identify pathways towards development and worship renewal.

We may not all be gathered in the same building, but at this time, when we need each other so much, we are invited to worship together, from where we are – knowing that God can hear us all and can blend even distant voices into one song of worship.

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## Introduction

The lectionary readings for this season invite us to look beyond the boundaries of our existing congregations and out to the mission opportunities that are there all around us in today's Scotland. In recent years, there has been much agonising over mission, not only how we might make fresh connections with those who, as yet, are not people of faith, but also how what we typically do in our Sunday worship might connect with them and to reflect appropriately on the missional impetus that is at the heart of our faith. So, when I think about worship, my first question is always where to start and how to connect our inherited tradition – not only with the spiritual needs of the community, but also with the ways in which they express them. There's a whole library of insight and innovation out there to inform and encourage us in mission, but three things instantly jump out to me:

First, are the words *missio Dei*. The Latin isn't essential, but it's a neat way of referring to a very big idea, namely that mission isn't something we do for God, but is something that God is already engaged in (the words just mean 'the mission of God'). From start to finish, that is the message of the Bible – God reaching out in love to embrace the natural world and its people. In fact, it's more than that, for God is at work not just in the world we know, but in every part of the cosmos that we still wonder about. So, our response as people of faith, is to discover what God is already doing and joining in – and that might be very different from what we think God might be doing! This week's story of Tabitha highlights that very well.

The second thing is a question: What does this mean for us, as we join in worship? Indeed, what exactly do we mean by 'worship'? Is it the same thing as a Sunday service (an event), or is a Sunday service just one aspect of worship? And how might our answer to that shape what we do when we gather together? When we think about planning a service, one word that crops up all the time is 'liturgy'. This time, it's a Greek word, *leitourgia* meaning 'the work of the people'. We can never quite escape from these ancient languages and in this case, the history tells us that it's not just about what we do in a service, but also about contributing to the wellbeing of the community in every aspect of life. Years ago, I published some resources for all-age worship and coined a phrase that summed this up for me, describing worship as 'all that we are, responding to all that God is'. Centuries earlier, Martin Luther said something similar when he spoke of (everyday) work being worship, and more recently, when thinking of how this might be embodied when we meet together, my long time Australian friend, Rev Dr Craig Mitchell talks of 'curating worship', which he explains as "crafting an experience rather than presenting a bunch of content – hence immersive worship ... not more information but deeper engagement."

The third element here is people. Who will be present in our services? Context is absolutely crucial here, by which I mean pretty much everything: what's going on in the world – in our own country, in the local community, in our homes and in our personal lives. This requires more than just applying a formula to what we do and how we do it. It invites us to invest time in listening, observing who normally joins us on a Sunday, and through prayerful discernment, creating a space where together, we encounter God. Recognising that God is at work in our particular location, who might arrive unexpectedly? What is God saying to us about welcoming as Jesus would? You can see there's a lot to be thinking about for more than just this immediate period; this sort of prayerful discernment needs woven through our DNA.

This, by no means, sums up the whole of what mission can entail, but it's a significant starting point. When we gather, we need time to encounter God meaningfully, interact with each other, include those 'taking a look', so that in turn, we can be empowered by the Holy Spirit to engage in God's mission within our community. It's for all these reasons that from today's lectionary readings, my choice for further reflection is Tabitha's story in Acts 9.

### [Acts 9:36-43](#)

The book of Acts is the second volume of an account of the beginnings of the Church's story, the first volume being the gospel of Luke. They are both addressed to the same individual (Theophilus, Luke 1:1-4, Acts 1:1) of whom nothing more is known, though given the emphasis on research and sifting of sources, we can reasonably assume he was what we would call today a public intellectual or influencer. The author is widely believed to have been Luke, one of Paul's companions and co-workers, and his personal travel diaries are incorporated into some central sections of Acts. While Acts is sometimes thought of as a history of the earliest churches and the spread of Christian faith from Jerusalem to Rome, it is obvious that it is not history in the way a 21<sup>st</sup> century person might write it. It is rather a series of snapshots of different times and places, showing how and why trusting in Jesus was so widely welcomed in the many cultures of the Roman empire. Insights into how the Gospel made sense to Jewish communities stand alongside completely different accounts of how it connected with the aspirations of devotees to the traditional Greek deities.

Then we come to this homely story in which the hero is just an ordinary woman who was "devoted to good works and acts of charity" (v36). We know nothing at all about Tabitha (Dorcas), other than her name and the fact that she was handy with the ancient equivalent of the sewing machine, and that her friends thought they'd lost her. The way the narrative is crafted is instructive here in light of Luke's intention of showing how the good news of Jesus was communicated in these early days of the Church. You might have expected the

highlight of the story to be the amazing way in which Peter was instrumental in her restoration, but that's almost passed by as coincidental. The main emphasis is on her indispensability to the mission of the church, in particular to "widows" (v39). Widowhood was a problematic category in the ancient world, as it still is in many places today. It meant a loss of identity and purpose, becoming a 'non-person' whose option was to hope another man would come along and marry you (unlikely), or you would end your days on the streets with no friends and no support networks. This is except for the likes of Tabitha, who loved Jesus and knew how to make and mend clothes and recognised the missional opportunity that those skills gave her. The story makes no mention of her age or whether she herself was a widow, but it does make clear that while she was doing her sewing, she gathered around her a group of those who were widows, and it's a safe assumption that as well as talking about fabric and stitches, she also spoke about Jesus.

It is a striking example of how an ordinary person connecting with other ordinary people can do extraordinary things in mission. And it's a tribute to Peter that though he had never met her, or her circle of widows, he recognised that she was doing what he could never do and responded to the request of her friends to support them in their time of need. The story of Tabitha and her friends is one that speaks so eloquently into our context today, as we struggle to discover what mission might look like in our own situation.

## [Psalm 23](#)

This is probably one of the best-known and loved Bible passages ever – not just for regular churchgoers, but even for those with little or no connection to Christian faith. There can hardly be anyone in Scotland who has not, at some time, been moved by these words, sung at so many funerals and other civic occasions to that well-known tune *Crimond*. It oozes comfort and reassurance of God's caring presence with us throughout life, whether we're in the "green pastures" of verse 2 or the "darkest valley" of verse 4. That's definitely the narrative that the psalmist (whether literally David, or some other) intended to describe and celebrate and from which, millions of us have taken comfort for generations past. But in a missional context, I wonder what today, the average person might make of the notion that God is a shepherd?

Specialist shepherds are far fewer than once was the case, and leading sheep in pleasant pastures is not at the heart of what we now expect them to do. The average city dweller probably never thinks about shepherds at all, and if they do, it's more likely to be someone riding a quad bike to round the sheep up, probably aided by a couple of dogs. And they're unlikely to end up in a sheepfold as a place of safety – more likely to be packed into a truck to be taken off for 'processing', before they end up on our dinner tables. Insofar as the

typical unchurched person ever thinks of what we are about as Christians, this might well be the sort of image they have of God – the exact opposite of the loving care implied by this psalm in its original context.

It's always 'context-context-context' when it comes to how we think about God and express our faith. Crofting probably offers the closest contemporary comparison to the background of this psalm. The shepherd here is not an employee of some industrial corporation, but a small-time, family person whose few sheep were their most valuable possession, providing them with a bit of central heating in their home (animals and people regularly slept in the same space), wool for clothing, companionship, and eventually, income from the meat that would be sold to richer individuals, rather than feeding the family. When you put it like that, the psalm really is saying what you've probably always thought – that, for all sorts of reasons, we are of great value to God, though like all metaphors, we can end up in absurdity if we insist on seeing some deep meaning in every single detail.

### [Revelation 7:9-17](#)

This is another passage where context is everything, in fact, multiple contexts are at play here, which probably explains why most churches avoid thinking too much about the book of Revelation. In its original Greek, the first sentence in the book tells us that it's "the *apokalupsis*", a word that literally means the revealing of things that you might not otherwise notice. In this case, the revealing comes to John, a Christian exiled at a time of persecution, on the island of Patmos, in the Aegean Sea, near Greece. It's unclear if this was one of the well-known Johns mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament or, an otherwise unknown believer who just happened to have the same name. Either way, he had been banished to Patmos during a period of persecution, either during the reign of the emperor Nero (AD 54-68), or a bit later under Domitian (AD 81-96). Those debates are relatively inconsequential for our purposes here; the inclusion of this passage in today's lectionary readings highlights, in a different way, what we've already said about the importance of context in relation to Psalm 23.

The context here is a series of visions received and reported by John, in which he gets a glimpse of what God is doing that serves as a way of understanding what he and others were enduring during this time of persecution. Its message can be summed up along the lines of 'what you are seeing and experiencing isn't the whole story, in fact it's not even the most important bit of the story'. This way of looking at things can be traced back for at least a couple of hundred years before John's time, as a means of coming to terms with the reality that good people don't always have a good life. In fact, obedience to God's way can

often result in persecution, imprisonment and even death, so how can that be squared with any sense of divine justice?

You can see how this is already taking us into a challenging theological landscape, and one that is probably easier to explore in a discussion group, rather than a Sunday sermon – though there are strong resonances with what’s going on in the world right now. As in Psalm 23, the imagery of the lamb features, but this time it isn’t us who are the lambs – it’s Jesus. That very fact underlines what we said earlier about context. This time, the metaphor derives from Old Testament sacrificial practices, connecting them with the fact that, like John and his compatriots, Jesus was also persecuted and killed, and suggests that just as the sacrificial lambs of previous generations accomplished some mystical spiritual purpose, the same can be said of Jesus. In some way, that is never explained in what we might regard as logical terms, but when viewed from God’s perspective, unjust suffering can be the pathway to new life and fresh possibility. There is much more that could be said about this passage and even if it seems alien to the experience of our congregations, it’s the sort of message that makes lifegiving connections with those dislocated and suffering in today’s world.

### [John 10:22-30](#)

If we only had the three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke), we would assume that Jesus had little to do with the religious and political establishment in Jerusalem until the very end of His life and ministry. John on the other hand, reports numerous occasions when He visited the city and its temple – often for the celebration of the various annual festivals that not only marked the changing seasons of the year, but also connected the people with different episodes in their history. Though scholars have occasionally suggested that there is some incompatibility between placing Jesus on the margins in Galilee and also engaging at the centre of national life in Jerusalem, these narratives complement one another and even if we combe them all, we still have nothing like enough material to fill three years of anyone’s life, let alone someone who seems to have been as active as Jesus.

The occasion in John 10 is “the festival of the Dedication”, which is more familiar to us as Hanukkah. It was a relatively recent innovation, marking the tumultuous time in the second century BC when the Greek ruler Antiochus IV Epiphanes had desecrated the temple, banned traditional practices of Jewish spirituality, and persecuted anyone who disagreed with him. After a short period of guerrilla warfare, spearheaded by the family of the Maccabees, Antiochus was defeated and the temple re-dedicated. The suffering of faithful people during this period was a major catalyst in the emergence of what we now call apocalyptic literature, offering a different (divine) angle on such undeserved suffering, so there is a connection here with the passage from Revelation in this week’s readings.



If you're looking for a connection with another reading though, Psalm 23 and the shepherd/sheep imagery might be more immediately obvious. In answer to a question about His identity, Jesus uses that metaphor in a way that reassures his followers that, like the sheep of the psalm, their relationship to Him ensures their safety and security. He doesn't actually call Himself the shepherd here, though the earlier part of this chapter has one of those "I am" pronouncements, which does exactly that while also assuring His questioners that it's not just Him (Jesus of Nazareth) making that promise because "the Father and I are one" (vs 30). Depending (again!) on context, this passage along with the one from Revelation could have a powerful message for marginalised people, while challenging the comfortable about how they might cope with persecution.

## Sermon ideas

The Tabitha story must be one of the shortest narratives in the entire book of Acts and gives us only the barest information about her. Was she perhaps a widow, which might explain why her friends were themselves widows? She certainly spent a lot of time with these marginalised individuals and was intimately aware of their needs. She was what we today would think of as an ordinary lay member of this faith community. But she was really good with a needle and thread – and she was known as a follower of Jesus. Her skills matched the needs of a significant group in her community. I wonder if there are people like that who come to mind when you think of your people?

It would be easy to dig around in the text to try and find some deeper meaning, but spiritual formation begins with inspiration rather than information, so let me share a personal story. A number of years ago I wanted to tackle my 'stash' of unfinished projects, mostly a variety of crafts. The church I was at had been refurbished and had an old under-croft area that was underused, but had great facilities and much better space than any of our homes. So, I (and a friend who was also a crafter), set about identifying others with unfinished projects who might also join us. A handful of us got together and a younger person with a journalistic background set us on a fast track to advertise ourselves for free in the 'clubs column' of the local newspaper. Our faith was so strong we thought we would be happy if anyone at all turned up, but within three weeks we had a steady group of over thirty who only continued to grow – so much so, that within the first year we held an exhibition of the participants' work and several hundred came to take a look, including movers and shakers from the local community, who in turn, publicised our work through their own networks. Looking back at this through the lens of the Tabitha story, there are some significant reflections. The most obvious one is the way it connected with people who brought their skills – and in due course their spiritual concerns – into community building. I think of someone I'd met in the swimming club who had no connection with any sort of church, but



who I invited to take a table and share her crafting skills with the others. I also think of one of our regular attendees who I noticed looking a bit down one week, so I paused to chat and she told me her husband was having surgery the next day. I asked if she would like us to pray for him and her response was interesting: “Would you be allowed to do that, as I don’t attend this church?” As far as I know, she didn’t attend any other church, but I assured her we would. I called her after the surgery to hear how he was and promised to continue praying. The next week she announced to everyone, “My husband is so much better, if you need prayer this is where to ask!” From that small incident, others shared their needs. The group produced a basket for prayers to be gathered each week, and a spontaneous prayer life emerged. At Christmas, I asked what they’d like to do. Predictably, they wanted carols and cake, but I also introduced Wild Goose Worship Group’s *Cloth for the Cradle*, as it echoed something authentic about our crafting. The outcome was like the end of John’s gospel, “If all the stories were written down...there wouldn’t be space.” Certainly not here!

A couple of things I learned are worth mentioning. Folk often voiced negative feelings about themselves and their ability, repeatedly telling me that, “I’m not creative”. Plainly, this wasn’t true, but it was good news for them when I assured them that, “You are a person made in the image of God, how can you not be creative?” Doing things together can create a space for more honest and lifegiving conversations. The other thing is that some of my church colleagues were concerned that I was missing a missional opportunity because I resisted their idea that we should have an epilogue, in which they thought I should ‘share the gospel’ with those who attended. But the focus on corporate prayer that emerged at the group’s insistence, as a consequence of praying for the surgery of a man I’d never met, turned out to be far more spiritually transformational than any “talk” from me could ever have been. The only downside of that whole enterprise was that I never did get to complete my own unfinished projects! But I had so many deep pastoral conversations weaving around encouraging, admiring, listening and just getting to know folk. Who would have thought that stitching and sewing, weaving and painting, crafting and creating could have so many missional consequences? Tabitha clearly did! I wonder how many other unknown ‘Tabithas’ might be hiding in plain sight in our congregations? When I preach on this passage, I’ll ask that question, quite possibly, holding a time of silence and/or invite some response.

## Prayers

### Gathering prayer / Call to worship

[we all say together the lines in bold]

Welcome to a calm place

**where we put aside our daily cares**

Welcome to an honest place  
**where we wake up to the world's troubles**

Welcome to a quiet place  
**where we sit in solitude for a while**  
Welcome to a rowdy place  
**where we open our ears to the world's cries**

Welcome to a peaceful place  
**where we are reminded of what is good**  
Welcome to an unsettling place  
**where we see more clearly what is wrong**

This is God's world – beautiful  
**This is God's world – broken**  
We are here – broken and beautiful  
**We are here – broken and beautiful**  
May this be a calm, quiet and peaceful place  
**May this be an honest, rowdy, and unsettling place**

God of the stillness  
**we settle and wait for You**  
God of the storm  
**we hold fast and wait for You**  
Meet us, greet us  
**Shake us, remake us**  
We trust and we tremble  
**We worry and we hope**  
There is no place that is not Yours  
**There is no time that is not Yours**

**This is Your place**  
**This is Your time**  
**We are Your people**  
**Carry us today, we pray**  
**Amen**

By Craig Mitchell, *Deeper Water: prayers for immersive worship* (MediaCom Education: Richmond, South Australia, 2021, page 16). Used with permission. For other resources and

to download this book, visit <https://craigmitchell.com.au>

### **Confession / Repentance** (based on Psalm 23)

(This could be said by the congregation.)

O Lord, You are our shepherd, and yet we want.  
We lie down when we could act,  
We stir the pot when we could offer peace,  
We wander tempting paths instead of following You.  
We see courage and comfort in earthly things rather than in You.  
We hate our enemies and refuse to break bread with them,  
We see scarcity even when You offer us abundance.  
We pray for forgiveness, for Your goodness and mercy,  
So that we might dwell in You, in Your grace, forever.  
Amen.

By Beth Merrill Neel, <https://holdfasttowhatisgood.com/> Used with permission.

### **Forgiveness**

Friends, hear this good news and accept the grace of God:  
you are forgiven, you are free to go and live in the light of God's love.  
In the name of the Father who created you and waits to welcome you home,  
in the name of the Son who searches for you,  
in the name of the Spirit who brings the healing of forgiveness and calls you to do the same,  
you have been set free.

**Amen**

### **Intercessions: prayers of thanksgiving, concern, hope**

*Context and immediacy is everything when we think of what to pray for, especially in the volatile state of the world right now, so the words here are offered more as a few ideas than readymade intercessions. They will almost certainly need some adjustments to take account of what is actually happening on this date.*

### **Thanksgiving**

God of creation, we give You thanks for the gift of life.  
We may be created from the dust of the earth,

but You welcome us into a life of spiritual abundance,  
as we commit ourselves to journey with Jesus.  
You have designed us to be with one another,  
and we express our appreciation for this community of Your people,  
journeying through life together and embraced by Your divine presence.  
We give thanks for our wider friendships and for our families  
and the many bonds of care that connect us all.  
May we never forget our indebtedness to those who give us nurture and support.  
Lord in Your mercy,

**Hear our prayer**

### **Concern**

Jesus our shepherd and redeemer,  
You spoke eloquently of the fragility of human life,  
and we see the evidence of this all around us today in a world full of conflict and violence.  
We pray especially for those for whom the transience  
and fragility of life is their daily reality,  
living with scarcity and danger as constant companions.  
We pray for men, women and children who are starving and living in rubble,  
and in the shadow of ferocious war.  
We pray for those in our own neighbourhood who feel they are alone, afraid, or abandoned  
and who do not know the love of God.  
We remember all who are suffering today – and pray that You transform the hearts of all  
who choose hate instead of love,  
for politicians and world leaders who are driven by the attraction of power and disruption.  
We remember especially the work of Christian Aid, its workers in places where their very  
lives are at risk  
and for leaders who seek to navigate the narrow path in a world of ambition and  
exploitation.  
We bring before you those known to us who struggle with their human fragility –  
that they may discover in their weakness a renewed sense of Your love.  
Lord in Your mercy,

**Hear our prayer**

### **Hope**

Spirit divine, You never leave or forsake us,  
and though we are mortal, we live in the present hope of eternal life with You.  
Inspire us to live faithful lives, so that by being with You,

we can be filled with a transcendent love, peace and hope that we can carry out into the world.

Enliven our attention, energise our spirits,  
fill us with Your abundance and guide our steps, as we walk confidently on the path You have set before us.

We turn to You in the faith-filled hope of reconciliation and resurrection.

May we know You more clearly, love You more dearly, and follow You more nearly,  
as You call us from darkness to light, from despair to hope, and from fear to love.

Lord in Your mercy,

**Hear our prayer**

**Amen.**

### **Blessing**

May Christ the Good Shepherd,  
who laid down His life for the sheep,  
draw you and all who hear His voice to be one within the fold;  
and the blessing of God Almighty –  
Creator, Redeemer, and life-giving Spirit –  
be with you now and forever.

**Amen**

## **Musical suggestions**

*God Welcomes All* (GWA) is the new supplement to Church Hymnary Fourth Edition. This exciting new collection features over 200 hymns and songs in a wide range of styles by writers from Scotland and around the world.

The full music and words-only versions are now available; and digital resources, including the expansion of the existing Church of Scotland music website, will be published in due course, with streaming functions and further information on each song; backing tracks; and lyric videos. *God Welcomes All* is available to order from

<https://chbookshop.hymnsam.co.uk/books/9781786225573/god-welcomes-all>

Our [online music resource](#) is on the Church of Scotland website; you can listen to samples of every song in the Church Hymnary 4th edition (CH4) and download a selection of recordings for use in worship. You will also find playlists for this week and liturgical seasons and themes on the *Weekly Worship* and *Inspire Me* tabs.

You can find further musical suggestions for this week in a range of styles on the [Songs for Sunday blog](#) from Trinity College Glasgow.

Music and singing are very subjective and dependent on local culture in both church and neighbourhood. The suggestions here pick up themes from the various scripture passages:

- GWA 169 – “My days are in your hands” – relates well with the themes of Psalm 23.
- CH4 14, 15, 16 and 17 – offer a choice of hymns based on Psalm 23.
- CH4 166 – “Lord of all hopefulness” – asks God to be with us throughout each day.
- CH4 192 – “All my hope on God is founded” – a hymn of gratitude for all God gives us.
- CH4 544 – “When I needed a neighbour, were you there” – Connects to the sermon theme and story of Tabatha.
- A suggested playlist of songs from CH4 throughout the season of Easter can be found on the Church of Scotland website (<https://music.churchofscotland.org.uk/inspire-me/playlist/easter> )

Two hymns from *Hymns for Today's Church* ('HTC') pick up on themes from the scripture passages:

- HTC 417 – “Lord Jesus Christ, you have come to us”
- HTC 527 – “God is our strength and refuge” (to the tune of the Dambusters March)

## Reflecting on our worship practice

Since the start of the pandemic in 2020, the way we worship has changed and we need to reflect on the changing or newly established patterns that emerged and continue to emerge as a result of the disruption.

We can facilitate worship for all by exploring imaginative approaches to inclusion, participation and our use of technologies in ways that suit our contexts. This is not an exhaustive list, but some things we could consider are:



- Framing various parts of the worship service in accessible language to help worshippers understand the character and purpose of each part. This is essential for creating worship for all (intergenerational worship) that reflects your community of faith.
- Holding spaces for reflection and encouraging prayer to be articulated in verbal and non-verbal ways, individually and in online breakout rooms.
- In online formats the effective use of the chat function and microphone settings encourages active participation in prayer, e.g. saying the Lord's Prayer together unmuted, in a moment of 'holy chaos'.
- If singing in our congregations is restricted, we can worship corporately by using antiphonal psalm readings, creeds and participative prayers.
- Using music and the arts as part of the worship encourages the use of imagination in place of sung or spoken words.
- Use of silence, sensory and kinaesthetic practices allow for experience and expression beyond regular audio and visual mediums.

The following questions might help you develop a habit of reflecting on how we create and deliver content and its effectiveness and impact, and then applying what we learn to develop our practice.

- How inclusive was the worship?  
Could the worship delivery and content be described as worship for all/  
intergenerational? Was it sensitive to different "Spiritual Styles"?
- How was the balance between passive and active participation?
- How were people empowered to connect with or encounter God?  
What helped this? What hindered this?
- How cohesive was the worship?  
Did it function well as a whole?  
How effective was each of the individual elements in fulfilling its purpose?
- How balanced was the worship?  
What themes/topics/doctrines/areas of Christian life were included?
- How did the worship connect with your context/contemporary issues?  
Was it relevant in the everyday lives of those attending and in the wider parish/  
community?  
How well did the worship connect with local and national issues?

How well did the worship connect with world events/issues?

- What have I learned that can help me next time I plan and deliver worship?

## Useful links

*God Welcomes All* can be ordered from [Hymns Ancient & Modern](#)

You can listen to samples of every song in the Church Hymnary 4th edition (CH4) and download a selection of recordings for use in worship [here](#)

You can find an introduction to spiritual styles online [here](#)

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