

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Creation Time – Week Two

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost –13 September 2020

The Faith Nurture Forum would like to thank the Creation Time 2020 writing group for their thoughts on the fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost.

Our new online music resource is now live: [here](#) you can listen to samples of every song in the Church Hymnary 4th edition (CH4). The search function allows you to bring up a list of songs by keyword, tune, theme, author, composer and metre, covering all of the indexes in the hymnbook. The site features Weekly Worship and thematic/seasonal playlists, alternative settings and background information on the hymns.

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Introduction

Creation Time / Season of Creation is a worldwide call to prayer and action from 1 September to 4 October (the Feast of St Francis of Assisi). September's reflections on the lectionary passages are set against the background of the extreme urgency of the climate crisis and the challenges that confront every one of us: to change our own lives and to support and encourage others in the just transition to a world where all will be better able to weather the turmoil that undoubtedly lies ahead. The Covid-19 crisis, overlaying this, had broken by the time these pieces were being written, and the additional pressures on writers who have contributed may be noted.

Our writers are drawn from a variety of church backgrounds and pastoral contexts, and all share, as Pope Francis has said, a 'Common Home', and have a contribution to make to the healing partnership of Christ with God's Creation. In our readings and our thoughts on them, we see, ever more, that the most environmental themes of all are compassion, forgiveness, hope, and the empowerment of the love of God. These are threads that run throughout the whole of Scripture, and sustain us in our partnership with Creation day by day.

[Exodus 14:19-31](#)

I write this on Holy Saturday 2020. Tonight in the Roman Catholic liturgy of the Easter Vigil we read this passage of the exodus of the Israelites from plague-ravaged Egypt. A foundation story for Jews, for Christians it prefigures that Passover achieved by Christ in His death and resurrection. These events will be remembered, proclaimed and our lives touched by their power. Yet I write, and fear you might be reading, in a plague-hit land, in which interdependence and communion is expressed by isolation.

Yesterday I listened to people from the West Bank and Gaza, who fear the Covid-19 plague will tear through these territories. As I write, the fate of the Palestinians seems in the balance, and the balance is oppressively controlled by Israel. Themes in the Old Testament (including Jonah, unconventionally taken to Nineveh in Assyria) and above all in Jesus' life, show that although God's relationship to the Jews is special, yet God's love is for all. There is a huge new journey to be undertaken by the modern state of Israel to the only sustainable future: justice for all. It requires miracles that might dwarf the parting of the Red Sea in changing hearts and minds of those determining and defending its policies. As Christians, shouldn't we be helping miracles to happen, offering our own seemingly tiny loaves and fishes?

In the UK, and world-wide, humanity has similar journeys of transition to make, to reach a promised land sustainable for us all. At this time of Covid-19 it is the poorest in society, and those who selflessly serve who are the ones who suffer so terribly, crucified in part by political choices over years.

There is a promised land, whose outline we can begin to discern against the storm clouds. We live in a world of plenty – of enough for all, but there will never be enough for all to prosper if the greedy and power-hungry determine who is chosen and who is dehumanised. Covid-19 is far from the first disease to emerge from distorted relationships with Creation. As with pollution and greenhouse gases, short-term profiteering by a few endangers us all.

May I ask:

- What outline of a promised land and what directions of fruitful travel do you see as you look at the world and its crises?
- What threatens to engulf us as we move in those directions?
- Where do you see the Spirit acting and beckoning us?

I heard a number of Bethlehemites say in a recent webcast seminar, “We might feel hopeless, but Easter gives hope for a better future. Hope grows when we come together.” Easter is not a festival that comes and goes once a year, but is the life-giving mystery at the heart of what it is to be human, at the heart of what it is to be a creature and part of this beautiful Earth.

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Psalm 114

I'm not a preacher, I'm a chorister. My encounter with scripture is singing it, or framing its reading with music. Each Sunday, at matins and evensong, we gather to sing psalms, wondering at the strange phraseology of Hebrew poetry mediated through Myles Coverdale. We're born and rooted, not into a tradition that Christ initiated, but one that He too was born into. I'm Christ's psalm-sister.

Singing psalms puts words to a faith that is beyond the cerebral. I can *discuss* the bible; I can *sing* music where words are incidental; but only sung psalms are words from the heart. I didn't know this until I suffered a serious bereavement, when I found that the only words which articulated what I was feeling were the psalms: words I'd sung for decades, wondering why we sing these strange words. They waited for me.

The psalms don't teach, explain or reveal, as we ordinarily understand these words. When you sing the psalms, you voice the emotions of someone who lived 2,500 years ago. Just occasionally, with the right psalm on the right day, your emotions are in spine-tingling unison with the Psalmist, and you sing together across the millennia.

Psalm 114 is an extra spine-tingler for me because I remember how it is sung to *Tonus Peregrinus*. Whereas most of our psalm tunes were written in the past 400 years, the tradition is that *Tonus Peregrinus* was a Jewish tune, which Christians just kept singing (1). Christ Himself might have sung it.

Psalm 114 contains marvellous depictions of nature. In many psalms, nature is addressed as a co-worshipper. I built our church's environmental programme, 'earth be glad', around Psalm 96, an elemental chorus about divine justice on earth.

I've usually heard these nature psalms interpreted as wonderful imagery or metaphor, but this seems unsatisfactory to me. It assumes anthropocentrism and then finds it in scripture, rather than taking scripture at face value: 'obviously we know mountains don't *really* worship, so the Psalmist must not really have meant it.'

What I understand, singing this psalmist's words, is that humanity is inextricably, divinely linked with nature (not just biological, but also geological nature), as it fled, leapt, turned back, trembled, and did it again. I understand the psalmist as saying that nature and humans share the same grace, just as I believe the writers of Romans 8:19 and John 3:16 did.

But I also believe these writers all knew, with the modern environmentalist, that this is the Anthropocene. The human species has become so dominant, for good or ill, that a political event can reshape ecology as much as an ice age. Anthropocene effects were already apparent in Holy Land ecology by the time the Psalms were written.

We face a global crisis, of human causing. The responsibility is overwhelming: the Earth needs 'saving', but only through the 'salvation' of the human species. Singing the Psalms won't tell us what to do; but it does join us to a cloud of witnesses who have been articulating this for 2,500 years.

Is psalm-singing relevant in the middle of climate change and extinction? It is to me.

[1] The origins of the *Tonus Peregrinus* are lost in the mist of time, but there is enough evidence to give this tradition weight. See Lundberg 2004, Historiographical problems of the Tonus Peregrinus, Mattias Olof Lundberg, <https://www.biu.ac.il/hu/mu/min-ad04/PEREGRINE.pdf>

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Exodus 15:1b-11, 21b

The song of Miriam, the cruel glee of the redeemed powerless, brings us emotional truth, even if it's not hugely admirable.

In this poetic passage, injustice comes up against Creation in partnership with God. We're given an exultant song of triumph recalling the 'Great Acts' of God, and the closeness of injustice and avoidable 'natural' disaster (which we see right the way through the plagues narrative of Exodus).

The forces of nature are shown in uproar against complacent power and oppression.

It isn't that Nature is identical to God, but rather, they sing from the same hymn-sheet, and the forces of cause and effect seem to punish, on God's behalf, those who abuse their power as humans to shape and rule Creation. Likewise, natural forces provide the antidote to overweening pride and the determination to control, rather than collaborate.

It would not be helpful, in interpreting this passage, simply to try to explain away this incident as natural forces. The song demands that we encounter Creation personally, and realise that Nature will 'have it in for us' when we abuse and exploit.

Above all, it's a song: and songs amplify joy, love, hatred, sadness ... and in this case, triumph. Songs are powerful, dangerous, and useful in building up communities.

Should we even try to read it calmly? Without tambourines?

Let's leave aside for a moment – but not ignore or accept without reservations – the rather unattractive glorying in the downfall of others. Jesus, after all, asks us to respond with kindness and prayer to the outrages of our enemies, (Luke 6:27-8) and Paul synthesises feelings of revenge by means of the "burning coals" of kindness (Romans 12:20), which also refer back to the burning coals of Temple worship, making an offering to God. There is nothing of that here, and a congregation needs to be fully aware that Exodus (and the songbook of the Psalms) *only* become Christian Scripture when read through the lens of Christ. Here, love for the Egyptians is not given house-room, though some traditions of Passover celebration acknowledge that it is also right to weep for the tragedy of your foes.

What is distinctively different here from our experience of the most frequent outcome in life, is that the oppressors and perpetrators of injustice suffer, while the victims and the oppressed escape with the booty.

This, therefore, is a song of an authentic 'miracle' of justice, which therefore rightly combines awe and wonder at the power of Nature with awe and wonder at the power, majesty, and justice of God, who can cope rather better with the temptations of victory. Hubris – eventually – always harms those who give in to it. This passage showcases the sentiments that oppressors may expect to hear at their downfall: it could equally be the song of the Earth when humanity has to face the consequences of its exploitation. Is this what we want to hear?

And again, however powerful a human empire may be, Creation, in partnership with God, executes justice.

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[Genesis 50:15-21](#)

Our very practical habit of scooping a passage out of the river of scripture sometimes results in a caricature – a cardboard cut-out of what may be surprisingly complex characters handed down to us by the scribes and storytellers of the Old Testament.

Although this part of Genesis contains very mixed voices (including the glaring divine *non*-approval of Joseph's shocking and exploitative enslavement of the starving Egyptians in Genesis 47), this also plays up to the greatness of mercy, and its triumph over vindictive justice. The mercy that Joseph now shows humbly acknowledges the wisdom and mercy of God.

When we 'play God', it is not the God of love and mercy, or of justice – which is the gracious acknowledgement of need. Left to himself, Joseph might consider feeding his grudge, but since he defers to God, this is no longer an option. He gains credit from leaving the credit to God. There is no contradiction here.

As we become aware, first of the magnitude of the avoidable damage our fossil fuel-addicted culture has done to the Earth, and then to the victims of the wars and natural devastation that have resulted from that damage, then forgiveness, mercy, and a recognition of our common humanity become not just the right thing to do, but ultimately, our only hope. Tables can be turned; complacency is a very poor friend.

The miserable duplicity of Joseph's brothers, who seemingly invent their father's last wish for forgiveness, becomes irrelevant. They have deviously conspired to bring to mind what ought nonetheless to be obvious: reconciliation sets the scene for survival, and survival for reconciliation. The wellbeing of all is more important than ensuring that every last misdemeanour is punished.

And if our churches have not drawn closer across sectarian divisions following the COVID crisis, can we expect anything but judgment?

Rev David Coleman, EcoChaplain, EcoCongregation Scotland

[Psalm 103:\(1-7\), 8-13](#)

We cannot do justice to an experience of this text without making ourselves quite fully aware of its genre and purpose, in order to then discover what it has to offer us. As a *psalm*, it is part of the hymnbook of ancient Israel, and as such, part of a body that shaped – but perhaps did not absolutely determine – the spirituality of Jesus of Nazareth. It provided words to express joys, fears and yearnings, even on the cross. He carried it with Him, as we often carry the Lord's Prayer, even to our deathbed.

This is a richly spiritual song. Which is why, if we but look, it is in our savouring and cherishing of physical creation that we find images to express – and recognise – our daily encounter with God.

This then is a song, a creative poem of praise, and of trust, with both the strengths and weaknesses of poetry rather than a systematic textbook. Trust comes first of all, though emotionally powerful reasons to ground that praise and trust are also forthcoming.

Praise opens out in us an appreciation of all that we might otherwise overlook: every encouragement or liberation, large or small, without which our safety and joy, even such as it is, would not be known.

And this realisation can change us for the better: our own brows are readied for an experience of God's own crown: not a crown of domination and control, but of mercy and loving-kindness. Praise is neither passive nor neutral in its workings on those who praise.

"All that is within me"? That's lots! Life, breath, experience, kinship with all other living creatures, a partnership, yes even at the molecular level, with the cycles of the planet. Can we conceive of all these things, so often described in clinical or lifeless terms, nonetheless praising God in their own way? We each become a choir, full of complex harmonies.

We might have "diseases" that doggedly refuse to heal, though in truth, our bodies are constantly at work to heal, even the minor cuts and scratches. Note, also however, the closeness of moral and physical disease: "He forgives all your iniquity and heals all your diseases" (v.3). This points to the closeness, on a global scale, of injustice and environmental devastation (cf. Jeremiah 2:7 and many other prophetic sayings).

This psalm aims to feed our awe and wonder, though not with the casually *infinite* Earth. Heaven (always also meaning: the sky) and Earth, east and west, are contained within the limits and boundaries of Creation.

Finally, being aware of how many human fathers in the Old Testament make such a mess of their legacy (e.g. Jacob and Esau), verse 13 offers a best-case scenario for unconditional care and guidance. A father's children are his hope and his future. How can we live up to such trust and love?

And yet alongside praise hope and trust, fear also finds a place in a right relationship, as presented by this ancient poet. Unwariness, complacency, and taking good things for granted will undo all the good. Your every choice matters. Be led by praise.

Rev David Coleman, EcoChaplain, EcoCongregation Scotland

Romans 14:1-12

At first glance, the strategy used by Paul may shock the reader: the Apostle uses the word “weak”, which implicitly amounts to describing the community of Rome as consisting of the “strong” and the “weak”. Are there strong and weak in Christianity? Let us not dwell too long on this. It seems to be a clever way for Paul to lead us into a reflection that will take us beyond divisions with mundane connotations.

Paul gives two examples of differing opinions: about food and about holy days.

He points to two opposing approaches: the “strong”, who eat everything and the “weak”, who eat only vegetables. The strong would represent a majority of people who don't care about eating any meat, even from animals sacrificed to Roman gods. The weak could represent Jews who have become Christians, who would like to continue to eat kosher, but who cannot because of Roman policy and therefore eat only vegetables. These weak ones would probably also include newly converted Christians, coming from philosophical and religious traditions that advocate vegetarianism. Paul presents the diversity of food choices in a radical way, between those on the one hand who would eat only vegetables and on the other hand those who would eat anything: two extreme cases that should provoke the reader, because they are both caricatures. In fact, no one eats strictly only greenery and no one really eats everything.

Concerning the religious calendar, a minority seems to want to respect certain sacred days, while the majority is indifferent to this.

Paul wants to put all these people in agreement on one point. It is essential for Christians that whatever they do, they do it for Christ, to whom they all belong. The Apostle emphasises the welcome of others – hospitality is first.

In general, Paul is very concerned about the unity of brothers and sisters. He wants the members of the communities to understand each other, to have the same thought (Philippians 2:2, Romans 15:5, etc.), and to be united before the Lord.

In order to interpret Paul's discourse properly and make his teaching fruitful for a Church today, it is important to understand that he is not asking the Christians of Rome to all have the same opinion. He is asking them not to arrogantly condemn or despise each other about opinions – a different matter altogether. In a spirit of unity and understanding, this leaves much room for debate among Christians, and we should welcome this sign, rather than worry about it.

During Creation Time, we can gain a powerful inspiration from this text. Indeed, opinions differ in the world and among Christians on what to do about pollution, global warming or the loss of biodiversity. Some believe that a ban on plastic straws is an important action, while others reasonably envisage an end to animal farming, fishing and oil. Like the community of Rome in the first century, it is important that Christians today do not condemn themselves on these opinions. On the contrary, they need to be debated within communities and, if some have the gift of prophecy, they should express what the spirit of God inspires them about God's creation.

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Matthew 18:21-35

The sheer and compelling practicality of reconciliation, and all the methodologies we might adopt to accomplish it, set in perspective not only the petty, but also the serious hurts that we choose to inflict on each other and the planet. Our complicity is universal; our friendliness to the environment is both laudable and relative.

We can choose to be so 'right' that we are wrong, underlined by Jesus' comment in Mark 10:18, that "No one is good but God alone."

The last thing any environmentally aware preacher should want is a revival of smug piety: a 'greener-than-thou' excuse to look down on others and limit our willingness to understand them, forgive them and, hardest of all, learn from them. If we seek a more faithful Christian/green way of life, faith and worship, then changing minds, including our own, will be more fruitful even than forgiving recurrent offences.

The kingdom of heaven (which we can read, for now, as the way things ought to be – and might well be – whenever/wherever God’s will is done) can only be described through the experiential medium of story, rather than the narrow-minded, statistically-based rules that Peter is hoping Jesus will give him.

How often will we fall into the trap that catches Peter? His negotiating position seems, perhaps, quite generous: to forgive seven times. But if we’re counting, then have we forgiven even once completely, rather than merely postponed unforgiveness “from our heart”. In the scary punchline in v.35, the word “also” reveals how we can shoot ourselves in the foot.

Forgiveness however, is only the first step towards reconciliation, and the transformation of relationships, which stands more chance of minimising reoffending than allowing things to stay as they are. In the stern teaching of Jesus, by the grace of God, our life is opened out rather than being closed down and written off. We are given permission, not to stop forgiving, but to be free to persevere – and it might be best for us to do so. We are accountable for our choices, but are given every opportunity, each day, to choose a better world for others and for ourselves.

Rev David Coleman, EcoChaplain, EcoCongregation Scotland

Sermon ideas

Different perspectives

To explore how we judge others and ourselves it may help to hear some of these stories imagined from different perspectives. Ultimately we hope to see through God's eyes, so we can follow God's ways – it is God to whom we are accountable, and God who will understand and forgive our falling short.

You might consider

- Exodus 14-15 from the perspective of an Egyptian widow; or a sea creature; or the sea itself (as personified in Psalm 114)
- Genesis 50 from the perspective of a frightened brother
- Matthew 18 as a slave's wife; or from the point of view of a country paying financial debts at the expense of healthcare/education/land/water; or from a nation endangered by climate change to whom we owe an enormous climate debt (read more about Debt Justice and Climate Justice on the [Christian Aid](#), [Tearfund](#), or [Jubilee Scotland](#) websites)
- Romans 14, as someone trying to work out what to eat to reduce their impact on the Earth (eat local meat/vegetarian/vegan?); or someone who has no choice of food because their land is no longer productive, the rains have changed or water sources have dried up (see [Christian Aid](#) or [Tearfund](#) websites).

Judgment/hypocrisy/accountability

Considering climate change, most people are open to charges of hypocrisy. Some observers seem to delight in finding inconsistencies in those trying hardest to reduce their resource footprints, as if it lets the observer off the hook. With national policy, it is easy to find large gaps between declarations of climate emergency and actual urgent changes. The massive responses to Covid-19 raise questions about what can be possible with appropriate political will (and will also highlight the consequences of such changes).

It has been said that the Church is full of hypocrites, but there's always room for more. We all fall short when we try to live in God's ways, in our care of Creation as in everything else. These different texts challenge how we deal with failings and hypocrisy, in ourselves or others.

The story of Exodus is very difficult: our other texts speak of forgiveness, reconciliation and liberation as God's ways, but the Egyptians see none of those. The song of triumph at least owns the human tendency to be concerned for one's own, which allows it to be questioned. Perceived hypocrisy and contradictions across different Bible stories are used as reasons to disregard God as a God of love, hope or transformation, so these can be worth exploring.

Hypocrisy is spelt out and judged most clearly in Jesus' parable in Matthew 18, where it leads to destructive punishment rather than restorative forgiveness. Judgment of others' actions, particularly if it leads to despising them, is rejected in Romans 14 and in Genesis 50.

One response to judgment of others, including of their hypocrisy, is accountability. Across these stories people are accountable to God for their actions, and how they affect nations (the Hebrew people), families (Joseph) and faith communities (Romans and Matthew). The Hebrew Bible readings also highlight that all of Creation is a measure of God's care (Psalm 103) and has a place in God's actions, therefore we are also accountable for how we live as part of God's creation.

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Prayers

Call to worship

Creation eagerly yearns for the Day of the Lord
when the sea will part again,
the mountains skip like rams
and the hills like young sheep.

Come.

Like the Earth, tremble at the presence of the Lord in this place;
come to the one who drew forth water from the rock,
who turned flint into a flowing stream.

Come and hear truth – strange speech for our age –
come and be transformed.

Come.

Prayers of approach, confession and pardon

O God of freedom

You led Your people of old
with cloud by day and fire by night.

You parted the sea with Your breath,
and saved Your people from oppression.

Free us, O God, in our own age,
from

...indifference in the face of poverty,

...ignorance in the face of fact,

...disbelief in the face of evidence before our very eyes.

Deliver us good Lord,

that we may allow the earth to heal.

Lord of the living and Lord of the dead,
we are conscious of our sin.

We are weak in faith,
quarrelsome in nature

and there is no health in us.

When we deny the science of climate change,
enlighten us.

When we continue to pollute our earth,
convict us.

When we exploit Creation,
chastise us.

When we fail to cherish the Earth, our fragile home,
change us.

When we fail to love the poor and oppressed,
forgive us.

Give us time, O God,
even at this late hour,

to change,

to turn away from destruction
and back to You.

pause

God is the fount of all mercy
and through the life, death, and new life of Jesus Christ
has shown us how to live,
calling us to renewed action and commitment.

Through the ministry of the Church
may you receive pardon, peace, and wisdom,
that you may use your time well,
be filled with grace,
and help to renew the earth.
Amen

Prayer of illumination

Spirit of God,
who danced at Creation's birth,
dance with us now,
as we hear the Word read and proclaimed,
that we may be changed,
renewed
and empowered for mission,
Amen

Blessing

May the One to whom every knee shall bow
and every tongue give praise,
enfold you in loving kindness.

May the One who was nailed to a tree for challenging the powers,
give you grace to challenge the lies of this age.

May the One who sustains Creation
inspire such love in you,
that you remain unsatisfied until the Earth is healed.

And may the blessing of Almighty God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
be with you and all whom you love
now and always.
Amen

Or

And may the blessing of Almighty God,
the Triune God,
be with you and all whom you love
now and always.
Amen

Rev'd Andy Braunston is a URC minister, working with a group pastorate in the south of Glasgow. He co-ordinates the online 'Daily Devotions' for the United Reformed Church, a project that grew hugely in scope during the 'lockdown' crisis this year.

Prayers of intercession in Creation Time

The situation was changing so fast at the height of the Covid-19 crisis that particular pressing concerns could not be anticipated. We therefore offer a framework of intercessions to take us through the Season of Creation.

Let us pray with Christ:

God, who makes us with the Earth
God, who gives us to the world
God-with-us in our struggles:

Hear our fears and needs

Hold our hand as You walk beside us

Advise, encourage and guide us.

We pray for the world:

Reflect on some of the key global news events this week.

- Are there people or communities in need, or others that can be thankful?
- Are there reports of progress or setbacks to bring to God?
- Can we pray in sorrow or in hope for events that make us feel overwhelmed?
- Can we hear the Earth's voice in any of these stories that we need to bring in prayer?
- Which of our human, animal or environmental neighbours do we need to bring before God?
- Bring our enemies and those we fear to God today and

- Pray for peace throughout Creation

**God-with-us,
Hear our fears and needs
Hold our hand as You walk beside us
Advise, encourage and guide us.**

We pray for the Church:

- Give thanks for the faithfulness of the church community, and its undergirding of prayer
- Acknowledge any national or local divisions within the church and pray that God's wisdom and discernment will be sought
- Seek guidance on how the Church can increase and weave environmental concerns into our life and work
- Pray for a desire to experience the joy of a deeper fellowship with all Creation

**God-with-us,
Hear our fears and needs
Hold our hand as You walk beside us
Advise, encourage and guide us.**

We pray for ourselves:

- In silence, we bring our personal concerns to God, who knows and understands our deepest thoughts
- Ask God for support and perseverance when we struggle, and a sustaining sign when we get things right
- Pray for those beside us, acknowledging and respecting what they cannot share with us
- Ask God for a sense of impatience for change, rather than accepting the way things are
- Pray for peace in our hearts, and the fuller joys of Christ in our lives.

**God-with-us,
Hear our fears and needs
Hold our hand as You walk beside us
Advise, encourage and guide us.
Amen**

Alternative Material

This material has been supplied by kind permission of **Spill the Beans** and allows you to explore the readings or theme of the service in creative ways that include everyone gathering for worship.

New material from Spill the Beans is provided in the latest issues available from their [website](#).

Bible Notes

Deliverance – [Matthew 18:21-35](#)

The parting of the Red Sea and the exodus of the people of God from Egypt. For a certain generation it inevitably conjures up images of Charlton Heston and the Cecil B. de Mille epic motion picture *The Ten Commandments*. If you have seen the images from that film then they will undoubtedly have shaped what you see when you read this story.

There is no doubt that this is an intensely dramatic scene. Having been finally granted leave from Egypt after the loss of the Egyptian firstborns, Moses leads the Hebrews away, only for Pharaoh to change his mind and set chase.

The scene is set for the clash between the Hebrew slaves, with God on their side, and the mighty power of Pharaoh and his army. A desperate plea is raised from the Hebrews to God that they be delivered from their impending doom.

The message comes to the Israelites: “Do not be afraid...” It is the same message that is repeated by God countless times throughout the Old Testament, usually when the Israelites face an adversary, and, of course, it is the same message that Jesus also brings to the disciples when they cower in fear after his death.

What is it that we are afraid of in our own lives? Or in the life of the church? The chaotic and destructive nature of a body of water, so readily seen in the tsunami in Japan in March 2011, is a great symbol for all that has the power to overwhelm us in life. It is no wonder that the ancients often used water and the seas as a shorthand to describe that which tends to chaos.

A lot has been written about where these events took place. Was it the Gulf of Suez? The Gulf of Aqaba? The Red Sea or the Sea of Reeds? While this is interesting, ultimately it is not

important to the message. This passage is imaginative history. It is the retelling of a people's history as they look back on the journey they have undertaken generation upon generation.

What is clear right from this early stage as Moses and Aaron lead the people out of Egypt into the desert wandering, is that this new community is learning what it means to live with God's presence. The pillars of cloud and fire become a symbol of God's presence that will later be fulfilled in the Ark's presence.

In the past that sense of community as being rooted in God's presence was similarly held within our own society – we were a God-fearing people. It was taken for granted. But what of today?

Most people in our communities have a limited understanding of the presence of God in their lives, and have grown up outside the community of faith in which that understanding can develop and be nurtured. So where does the church begin in growing a community of faith today?

If community is being in God, how do we communicate that to people who do not know of the Bible's witness to that good news? The obvious answer is that the people of faith within the church must be that witness to their communities if real community is to be built. A daunting task, but we are not to be afraid of it.

Retelling for Young People

Use either lining paper painted blue or a long piece of blue material. Invite everyone to stand with you on the sea bed. Ask them what it is like, what the ground is like, and how they feel. Ask them these questions throughout this activity.

Tell the story of crossing the Red Sea in your own words. Move along the material as you do so. As you ask everyone how they feel, write those feeling on a stone and lay it on the material. You should hopefully have a whole range of emotions.

Ask everyone to walk quickly or slowly, varying their speed depending on what is happening. You could make the crossing quite exciting, imaging what you might see in the wall of water: sharks, big waves, spray, etc.

They could respond to various words: the response to 'water' could be 'splish, splosh'; 'rock' could be 'rumble, rumble'.

Activities

During the activities it is important to connect the story with life by talking about the themes of the story at an appropriate level. Remember that for most young people of Sunday School age they still have a very literal understanding of a story such as this. Simple themes like trusting God when all looks hopeless can be drawn out.

The craft is not an end in itself but a way of engaging in conversation with people and to help focus on the story.

Gathering activity

Ask folk to share a time when they have been absolutely sure of God's presence. Was that presence calming?

Give everyone a sheet of paper and fold in half. On one side of the fold write those things that bring anxiety to them and on the other side those things that bring hope. Play some music while this is done. This activity helps people enter the story with the Hebrews with the Egyptians behind them and the Red Sea before them.

*Either: **Crossing the River** – You will need: paper, hula hoops, tables turned upside down.* This can be used to explore the idea of trying to get everyone to safety across the water.

Using the equipment you have provided the children have to cross the room using only that equipment. Their feet cannot touch the floor unless they are on the paper or the upside down table or in the hula hoop.

*Or: **Water Relay Race** – You will need: plastic cups, two basins or buckets per team.* The theme is trying to get across the sea while keeping safe and dry.

A simple relay race of getting one bucket of water into another bucket at the opposite end of the room using the plastic cups. To make it more fun you might want to put a pin hole in the end of the cups. Remember... water dries up and doesn't damage! However, if the weather is good, then this game can easily be transported outside.

Reflection

When life conspires
to churn us up
and froth us around,
God is.

When it seems we've reached the limit
and can go no further,
God is.

When there's no way forward
and no way back,
God is.

And God, being God,
breathes calm,
opens up new horizons
and leads us through.
Thanks be to God.

Prayers

Call to worship

We come to the water's edge,
between slavery and freedom,
Egypt and the Promised Land,
but dare we get our toes wet?

All-Age Prayer

Living God,
we have packed up
and we have left Egypt.

And our rucksacks are full
of hope,
of promise,
of longing for a new land,
of the thoughts of milk and honey,
of the idea of freedom,
of living in a safe place,

of knowing everyone's name,
of living in community,
of freedom for everyone.

These are the hopes you fill us with.

Not Moses,
not the Israelites,
not the Chosen People,
not the Hebrew Nation,
not Joseph's ancestors,
not Abraham's children.

But us.

You fill us with hope
for changing the world,
for making it free,
for living with each other in friendship.

Your dream,
in us.

Help us fulfil it.

So be it.

Amen

Closing prayer

No matter the task ahead,
no matter the fear in our hearts,
no matter the questions and doubts,
no matter the water lapping at our feet,
we go in confidence to serve God.
For with him all things are possible,
and in him we can trust.

Let us know your presence with us

This week and each week.

Amen

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Musical suggestions

You can hear samples of these suggestions in the 'Weekly Worship' section of <https://music.churchofscotland.org.uk/>. This new online music resource will allow you to listen to and search the breadth of music available in the Church Hymnary 4th edition (CH4).

You will find hidden gems and alternative arrangements to familiar songs that will inspire creativity and spark fresh curiosity about how we best use music in worship.

- CH4 161 – “O God, our help in ages past” – A song about our faith in God who is our shelter from the storm
- CH4 361 – “Forgiveness is a gift from God” – The folk melody isn’t too complicated even if you don’t know it
- CH4 414 – “Come, you faithful, raise the strain” – Places the Exodus passage into a wider Christian context
- CH4 443 – “He is Lord” – Based on the scripture quoted in Romans 14:11
- CH4 524 – “Jesus Christ, our living Lord” – Picks up the theme in Romans about making ourselves accountable to God
- CH4 693 – “Help us forgive” – Asks for Christ’s help in forgiving others

CH4 726 – “When we are living, we are in the Lord” – A beautiful Mexican song which connects with the Romans text

- “Freedom is coming” (WGRG) – Response to the psalm and picks up the escape of the Israelites from Egypt
- “10,000 Reasons” (<https://songselect.ccli.com/Songs/6016351/10-000-reasons-bless-the-lord> / <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XtwIT8JjddM>) – A modern classic if you are using the alternative psalm
- “Living Hope” (<https://songselect.ccli.com/Songs/7106807/living-hope/> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u-1fwZtKJSM>) – Jesus is our living hope and the one who sets us free.

- New hymn-poem – “One day I said sorry out loud to the Earth” (Rev David Coleman)
– Forgiveness is one of the prime environmental issues. Here we contemplate whether the Earth might forgive us for the damage we, as a species have done, based on this week’s gospel passage from Matthew 18. I’m also keen here to present a different position from the widespread but toxically negative attitude that, ‘We are the virus with which the Earth is infected.’ We should and can be a blessing for the planet. Can be sung to Stowey [CH4 230] or tunes using the metre 11 11 11 11 (e.g. St Deinio / Columcill, or the first 4 lines of “Flow gently Sweet Afton”)

One day I said “sorry”, out loud, to the Earth.
“I’m sorry I trampled each day since my birth.
and burned, tarred and wasted the gifts in my hands
and passed off my greed as my Father’s Commands.”

“Dear child”, said the Earth, “Since God shaped from my clay
humanity – one with my creatures that play.
There’s much of delight, as you till and protect,
and bring forth great wonders, and love and respect.

“But yes, for this moment, you’re way out of line:
in selfish employ of your talents and time;
with poverty even of three billion kin
I’ve shown you already the mess we’re all in.

“You’ve hurt me: I lash out, but I keep no grudge
and God who shapes all of us judges the judge.
I just want the pain and extinction to stop
I couldn’t care less now, who comes out on top!”

“Earth longs to forgive you” – a voice: was it Christ?
“When debt’s written off, shackles are sacrificed.
Forgiveness frees debtors to dance and rejoice:
change course, choose forgiveness, know you still have choice!”

In addition to the [Creation Time playlist online](#), the following songs are also suitable throughout this season:

- MP 1170 – “Indescribable” – The wonders of creation show us how amazing God is
 - MP 1268 – “Creation sings the Father's song” – Picks up themes of Christ’s return bringing peace to all creation
 - “Let creation sing” (Hillsong) <https://songselect.ccli.com/Songs/4433390/let-creation-sing> – Inspired by Psalm 148, which describes all of creation praising the Lord
 - “From life’s beginning / Let praise resound” (Resound Worship) https://www.resoundworship.org/song/from_lifes_beginning_let_praise_resound – An uplifting call to worship, almost stadium anthem-like
 - “Come one, come all” (Malcom Gordon) – <https://malcolmgordon.bandcamp.com/track/come-one-come-all-2> – Written by a Presbyterian minister from New Zealand, this is based on Psalm 65 and would be particularly appropriate for communion during Creation Time
- “Rejoice in all your works” (Wendell Kimbrough) <https://wendellk.bandcamp.com/track/rejoice-in-all-your-works-psalm-104> – A setting of Psalm 104 which concludes with a nice Trinitarian creation doxology

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