

Welcome and Notices

Call to worship

We gather as the children of Abraham,
descendants, part of the many nations
God promised to him.

We gather to worship the Lord our God,
the maker of the stars,
the one who calls us to follow.

We gather united in our love for God
and offer this time of worship.

Praise: Will you come and follow me

Will you come and follow me
if I but call your name?

Will you go where you don't know
and never be the same?

Will you let my love be shown,
will you let my name be known,
will you let my life be grown
in you and you in me?

Will you leave your self behind
if I but call your name?

Will you care for cruel and kind
and never be the same?

Will you risk the hostile stare
should your life attract or scare,
will you let me answer prayer
in you and you in me?

Will you let the blinded see
if I but call your name?

Will you set the prisoners free
and never be the same?

Will you kiss the leper clean
and do such as this unseen,
and admit to what I mean
in you and you in me?

Will you love the 'you' you hide
if I but call your name?

Will you quell the fear inside
and never be the same?

Will you use the faith you've found
to reshape the world around
through my sight and touch and sound
in you and you in me?

Lord, your summons echoes true
when you but call my name.

Let me turn and follow you
and never be the same.

In your company I'll go

where your love and footsteps show.
Thus I'll move and live and grow
in you and you in me.

All Age intro

The story of Abraham and Isaac becoming the father and mother of all nations is a very familiar one. When they entered into that special covenant with God, they had no idea where it would end up.

Subsequent generations quickly realised that God's calling upon their lives would not just for them, but for the whole world. In her work as a Chartered Legal Executive, Janine has come across the work of an organisation called International Justice mission.

They are a Christian based, global organization that protects people in poverty from violence. They partner with local authorities in 20 offices across 13 countries to combat trafficking and slavery, violence against women and children, and police abuse of power.

Their vision is to save millions, protect half a billion and ensure that justice is accessible to all. Janine has prepared a short quiz using the flags from the countries represented by International Justice Mission. Take a look to see how many countries you can name from the flags you will see.

Video – International flags (International Justice Mission) - Janine

Prayer / Lord's Prayer

Creator God, if we are lucky enough
to be able to see the night sky through the glare
of artificial light and the fog of pollution,
we are as awed and amazed by it
as human beings ever were.

With the Psalmist, we shiver with awareness
of how small and insignificant we are
in the eternal scheme of things;
we marvel at the possibility that we might
nevertheless matter—and matter to you.

With Abraham, we try to count the stars,
and, having failed, think of all the people
who came before us, and those who will come after;

our biological heirs and our spiritual ones;
those who will remember us when we are gone,
and keep our name alive, and write the next chapter
of the never-ending story of your love.

Gracious God, as we prepare once again to walk
with Jesus on the road that has only one end,
we pray that his spirit may be with us,
enabling us to grieve—and keep on going;

to hurt—and bear the pain;
to question—and go on trusting in your goodness
and the ultimate victory of love.

Remind us of your promises, O God,
and of our calling to help you to fulfil them
in the fleetingly brief time that we are here on earth.

May we play our part in the eternal struggle
of light against darkness, goodness against evil,
love against hatred, hope against despair,
trusting you for all that we may not live to see.

We praise you, O God, for the deep mysteries
of our faith, and ask you to keep us faithful
to the one who has called us to leave everything
to follow him through death into everlasting life.
Amen.

Reading: Genesis 17:1–7,15 –16

Sermon: Naming and Covenant

Time can be a strange thing can't it? Time seems to rush forward sometimes, and yet on other occasions it just seems to drag. I'm sure we've felt things dragging by quite slowly over the past year, particularly during the times of lockdown.

I think Lent sometimes feels like a time where the days can appear to slow down a touch. Unlike the four weeks of Advent—the other significant season of preparation and repentance in the liturgical calendar—that seem to zoom by in the fury of the holiday rush, the journey of Lent is a slower one, a more cautious one, perhaps even more so this year!

The pace of Lent is perfect for Abram and Sarai. They are well into their nineties, and with many years behind them, they are obviously going to be more reflective than those much younger.

They are going to be more contemplative, more aware of the mistakes they have made and the wounds they have caused—all of which is appropriate for the Lenten journey.

Sometimes we need a slower pace and a place to listen and pray carefully, to confess our sin, and turn toward God before we become aware of God. Perhaps that is the state Abram and Sarai are in as the seventeenth chapter of Genesis begins.

In this chapter, the Lord God appears to Abram, and in the space of a few verses the future of Israel and the church turns dramatically on two significant events: naming and covenant.

At the age of six, little Daniel fell off of some playground equipment and hit his head. Fearing he might have a concussion, his mum, who was a nurse, woke him each hour throughout the night to check on him.

Every hour she would gently shake him and ask, "What's your name?" By the middle of the night, Daniel was tired of all the interruptions. When his mum came in at 5:00 a.m., she saw something peculiar on his head.

As she looked closer, she saw a piece of paper taped to his forehead. The message written in crayon said, "My name is Daniel."

In the twilight of their lives, God would do for Abram and Sarai the impossible. They would be the ancestors of many nations, their heirs more numerous than the stars in the sky.

In this new arrangement with God, Abram and Sarai are given new names: Abraham and Sarah. Names are important, and when someone's name changes, something inside that person usually changes along with it, or wants to change.

The couple didn't appear to have a problem with the name change. What became the problem was what the names meant. In the Old Testament, names always reflect the character and destiny of the person.

For Abram it was "Father of nations" and for Sarai "Mother of all nations." It must have been such a difficult thing for them to believe in a promise with no power to make it come true. Everything God said was going to happen in the future – the land, the son, the blessing.

The promise was amazing, but I'm sure they couldn't help thinking to themselves - what about the here and now?

But if you think about it, what better way to live than in the grip of a promise, and a divine one at that? Who in their right mind would give that back? To wake every morning to the possibility that today might be the day.

To remain wide awake all day long, noticing everything - the way the shade of the olive tree processes from west to east, and how the smell of the fields changes from green grass to yellow hay as the sun heats up overhead.

To search the face of every stranger in case it turns out to be an angel of God. To take nothing for granted. Or to take everything as granted, though not yet grasped.

To handle every moment of one's life as a seed of the promise and to plant it tenderly, never knowing if this moment, or the next, may be the one that grows.

To live like that is to discover that the blessing is not future but now. The promise may not be fully in hand. It may still be on the way, but to live reverently, deliberately, and fully awake - that is what it means to live in the promise, where the wait itself is as rich as its end.

All it takes are some regular reminders, because as long as the promise is renewed, the promise is alive, as vivid as a rainbow, as real as the million stars overhead.

That is what Abraham and Sarah found out, anyway. For two dozen years they lived in the promise, watering every seed that fell upon their paths without losing sight of where they were going or who had set them on their way.

There were good times and there were bad ones, but insofar as they were all God's times, they were all good times, rolling out ahead of the old couple like a red carpet for them to walk upon.

Never did this seem more true to either of them than the spring morning of Sarah's ninetieth year, when she came in to her husband drying her hands on her dress and said (with eyes sparkling), "Abraham, I have something to tell you."

The gift of Genesis 17 is its reminder that God has something to tell you and me. That reminder is all about blessing and promise, naming and covenant. We are followers of the One who established a never-ending covenant with Abraham and brought that covenant to fullness in Jesus Christ.

Even in the darkness of Lent and under the shadow of the cross, the promise that God made to Abraham remains. And in this precious moment God says to you and to me – here is another reminder – I am your God, and you are mine forever.

This is a covenant that cannot be broken, even as we follow the one named Emmanuel, whose destiny is our destiny: the cross, the grave, the skies.

Prayers of Intercession

Great Storyteller God, we do not know
how many other tales may be unfolding
in other realms of being far from ours,

but we are glad to be part of this one;
this mixture of comedy and tragedy,
mystery and farce, in which we find ourselves
not just characters, but co-authors of the saga
that began when you spoke those first,
momentous words, "Let there be...."

We are grateful for others who have left
a record of their stories:
their hopes and dreams; their joys and sorrows;
your promises, and the extraordinary ways
in which they came to be fulfilled.

And for the story of Jesus, in whose life
our lives are reflected back to us,
as they are not yet but may one day become.

We pray for all who find themselves today
at a sticking-point in their story,
not sure which way to go,
or if the old signposts are reliable:
those who are finding it hard to go on hoping
or waiting for your promises to be kept.

We pray for those who hoped for children once,
and now no longer do;
for those who dreamt of who they might become,
and what they might achieve,
and now just keep on keeping on;

for those who are old in years, and need to know
that their life has a purpose;
for all who lose their lives too soon,
and all rage at life's unfairness.

Loving God, if the story we have chosen to believe
is true, you are not just its author, but one of us;
one with us in all life's twists and turns.

Remind us of that when the way is hard, and faith
is nigh impossible. But remind us, too, when
the clouds lift and the sun begins to shine again,
and life is good, so that we can share our joy with you,
and give you the thanks and praise that you deserve. Amen.

Benediction

With thankfulness for our ancestors,
and in anticipation for the part we play today
for generations to come,
may we go with the assurance of God's covenant
alive and well within us,
knowing that we are part of God's story.

Praise: To Abraham and Sarah

1. To Abraham and Sarah
the call of God was clear:
'Go forth and I will show you
a country rich and fair.
You need not fear the journey
for I have pledged my word:
that you shall be my people
and I will be your God.'

2. From Abraham and Sarah
arose a pilgrim race,
dependent for their journey
on God's abundant grace.
and in their heart was written
by God this saving word:
that you shall be my people
and I will be your God.'

3. We of this generation
on whom God's hand is laid,
can journey to the future
secure and unafraid!
rejoicing in God's goodness
and trusting in this word:
that you shall be my people
and I will be your God.'