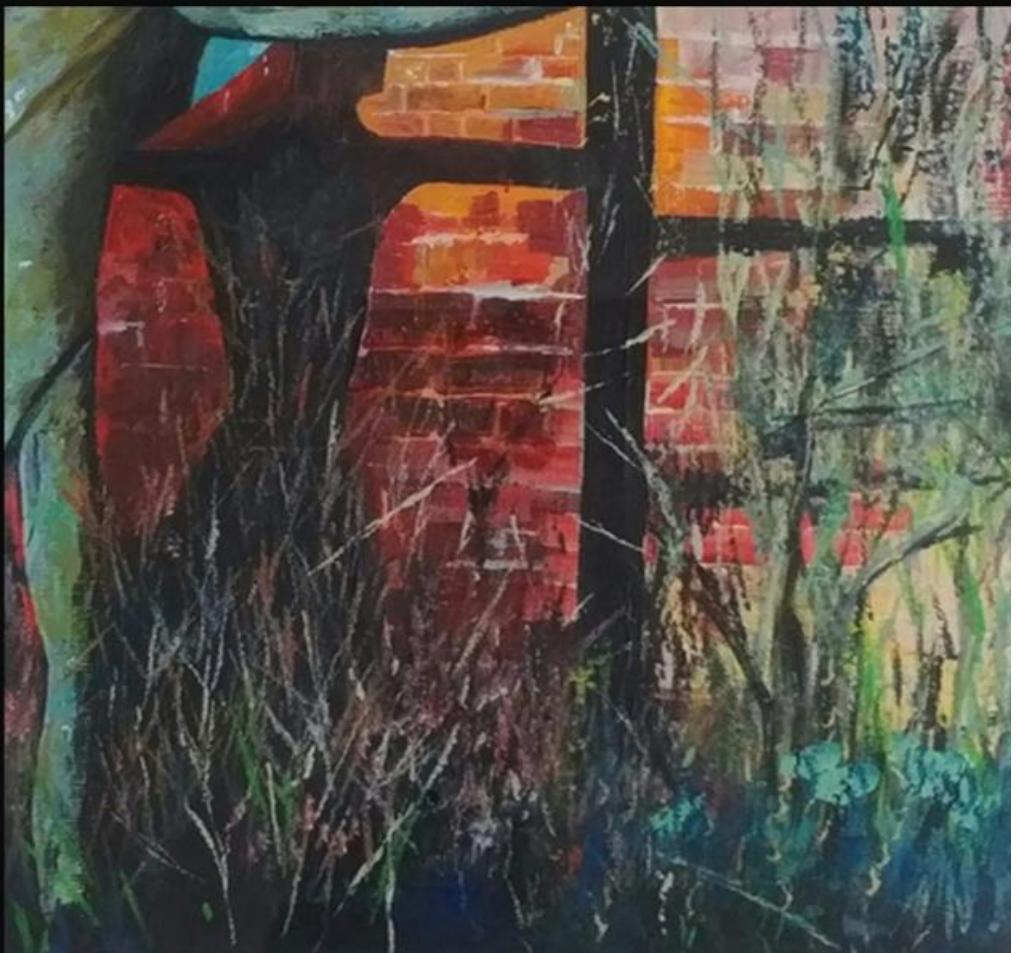


PLACES OF LIGHT AND DARK



Places of Light and Dark

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Readings and Reflections for Lent and Easter

Towards Lent 1
Monday 16 – Saturday 21 February

Light a candle and place a stone on a table.

The God of Light and Darkness, Day and Night is present.

Silence

God of the flickering flame,
God of the enduring rock,
God of the here and now,
and of all eternity,
speak to us in silence and sound,
in the space and in the word,
that this time be truly rich with meaning,
and filled with a desire to grow in your love and purpose.
Amen.

Silence

*Let all who are faithful offer prayer to you;
at a time of distress, the mighty rush of waters
shall not reach them.
You are a hiding place for me;
you preserve me from trouble;
you surround me with glad cries of deliverance.*

Psalm 32.6,7

The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat for in the day you eat of it you shall die.” Genesis 2.15-17

To understand their place in the world, their responsibilities, and the presence of good and evil, those who composed the creation stories, now contained in what we call the Book of Genesis, considered that God had issued instructions by which they might live and not perish. Failure to live in accordance with God's will would lead to suffering and death.

No life is without struggle.
No household, community, nation is without struggle.
It seems that we are destined to wrestle with choices that will bring light or darkness.

What will be your struggle today?
How will you face the decisions that will impact upon you and upon those about you?

Sometimes you make the right decision, sometimes you make the decision right. Phil McGraw

O God, who sets before us a path littered with dilemmas, grant that we come to our decision-making with a sense of courageous risk confident in your love for us. Amen

1st Sunday in Lent 22 February

Place: WILDERNESS Matthew 4.1-11



David Billings

Within this account there are many references to Jewish tradition and passages from what we know as the Old Testament:

To be *led by the Spirit* into the wilderness reminds us of God calling the people out of Egypt.

To be tempted by the devil is akin to Abraham's ten trials.

Moses fasted on Mount Sinai before returning to lead the people towards the Promised Land.

Forty days and forty nights evokes Noah, Moses in the wilderness period, Elijah and others.

To command these stones reflects Moses and Aaron striking the rock to bring water from it.

Each response from Jesus is a direct quote from the book of Deuteronomy.

We may find ourselves in a wilderness place – emotionally, spiritually, even physically – where there appears to be little or nothing to sustain us. Seemingly bereft of the capacity to lift ourselves out of this place maybe the one who recorded this period in the life of Jesus wanted to convey that even Jesus needed to draw on tradition, the teaching and experience of those who went before him that he might travel through to the other side.

When we feel that we have no option but to put up with the pain and misery, the loss and the dejection, remind us again, O God, that we are not alone in the predicament – that you and those who went before us set an example by which to walk towards liberation. Amen.

Towards Lent 2
Monday 23 – Saturday 28 February

Light a candle and place a stone on a table.

The God of Light and Darkness, Day and Night is present.

Silence

God of the flickering flame,
God of the enduring rock,
God of the here and now,
and of all eternity,
speak to us in silence and sound,
in the space and in the word,
that this time be truly rich with meaning,
and filled with a desire to grow in your love and purpose.
Amen.

Silence

*The LORD is your keeper;
the LORD is your shade at your right hand.
The sun shall not strike you by day,
nor the moon by night.*

Psalm 121.5,6

Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” Genesis 12.1-3

The human species has always been on the move. Throughout millennia, a desire to move has been part of our make-up, to be fully human is to move, explore, investigate, to look for something beyond our immediate.

However, this desire is not without risk - to leave behind the security of familiarity can make us vulnerable – there are lurking dangers in the unknown. Equally so, there may be rich rewards to be gained. Therefore, it is a constant battle whether we should step out or stay put.

Where will your faith take you today?
Will your reflections lead you into fresh and new insights?

People often avoid making decisions out of fear of making a mistake. Actually, the failure to make decisions is one of life's biggest mistakes. Noah Weinberg.

O God of all time, teach us to learn from the risk-takers of the past, that we may be reassured in our exploration of what it is to heed your words. Amen.



Nicodemus is not only a Pharisee but a leader of the Jews. He is from a group that normally appear to be opposed to Jesus, and as we later see, he is a member of the Sanhedrin, the body that oversees the affairs of the Jewish community. It is stated that he visits Jesus at night. For the writer night and darkness represent spiritual blindness – when Nicodemus came to Jesus, he was incapable of understanding the teaching, let alone the personhood of Jesus.

When night is a blind spot, it may feel as physical as any three-dimensional object, it is an obstacle, a curtain hiding that which is beyond it. Yet equally so it may seem as if it is not present at all; if it is a blind spot, how can we know that anything exists in that space?

Clearly the blind spot has already begun to lift for Nicodemus, something or someone has drawn the curtain back a little and given him a glimpse of something beyond it; his inquisitiveness has been piqued. This is but a beginning for Nicodemus; over the coming days further light will fall upon him and by the end of the week he will courageously accompany Jesus in broad day light.

**Reveal to us, O God, those things that are sufficient to draw us
further into your presence
so that the light begins to break in on our darkness,
and night gives over to day. Amen.**

Towards Lent 3
Monday 2 – Saturday 7 March

Light a candle and place a stone on a table.

The God of Light and Darkness, Day and Night is present.

Silence

God of the flickering flame,
God of the enduring rock,
God of the here and now,
and of all eternity,
speak to us in silence and sound,
in the space and in the word,
that this time be truly rich with meaning,
and filled with a desire to grow in your love and purpose.
Amen.

Silence

*O come, let us worship and bow down;
let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!
For he is our God,
and we are the people of his pasture
and the sheep of his hand.
O that today you would listen to his voice!
Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah,
as on the day at Massah in the wilderness,
when your ancestors tested me
and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work.*
Psalm 95.6-9

The LORD said to Moses, “Go on ahead of the people and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile and go. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.” Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarrelled and tested the LORD, saying, “Is the LORD among us or not?” Exodus 17.5-7

It is far from unusual for the people to fall out with God. It is a common feature within what we call the Old Testament that individuals and the whole community are prepared to take on God with their arguments, special pleading, and even accusations. The honesty is plain to see. Over the centuries this candour has been misrepresented by many to falsely suggest that the People of Israel, from their earliest times, have been recalcitrant, obstinate, and unruly, playing into the anti-Jewish mindset of many in society.

What would you shout to God about?
In what ways do you feel unheard?
Does God prefer a relationship that is mutually honest to one that is one way traffic?

I have not lost faith in God. I have moments of anger and protest. Sometimes I've been closer to Him for that reason.
Ellie Wiesel

O God of all life, in both times of spiritual famine and plenty, may we know you have never left our side. Amen.



RJN Photography

3rd Sunday in Lent 8 March

Place: THE WELL John 4.5-42

It is noon when the woman is drawing water from the well, in sharp contrast to the visit of Nicodemus which was at night. She knows what she is doing. The well is a gathering point, particularly for the women whose duty it was to draw the water for their household. It can also be a place of encounter according to tradition – the marriage of Isaac and Rebecca comes about because Abraham's servant encounters her at the spring (Genesis 24). The well, or spring, is a place of refreshment and renewal, of consideration and commitment. The woman Jesus encounters is a Samaritan; she is from a group of people that has a different take to that of the Jews on religious practice. Their northern ancestors had been left behind when the southern kingdom fell and taken into exile. After liberation, the returnees discovered that those that had remained had married their colonisers and developed their beliefs in a different manner.

At the well Jesus seeks refreshment from someone who came from a tradition different to his own. He was not afraid of engaging in a conversation that included an exchange of views. All too often our condemnation of those whose beliefs and practices differ from our own is swift. Opportunities for us to learn more from them and them from us, indeed even we of ourselves is lost. The well, a gathering place for refreshment can also be a place of reconciliation.

Give us sufficient courage, O God, to interact with those whose views not only differ but disturb us, that through respect and dialogue, we might find inspiration in our mutual engagement. Amen.

Towards Lent 4

Monday 9 – Saturday 14 March

Light a candle and place a stone on a table.

The God of Light and Darkness, Day and Night is present.

Silence

God of the flickering flame,
God of the enduring rock,
God of the here and now,
and of all eternity,
speak to us in silence and sound,
in the space and in the word,
that this time be truly rich with meaning,
and filled with a desire to grow in your love and purpose.
Amen.

Silence

*Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.*

Psalm 23.4

The LORD said to Samuel, “How long will you grieve over Saul? I have rejected him from being king over Israel. Fill your horn with oil and set out; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons.” Samuel said, “How can I go? If Saul hears of it, he will kill me.” And the LORD said, “Take a heifer with you and say, ‘I have come to sacrifice to the LORD.’ Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do, and you shall anoint for me the one whom I name to you.” 1 Samuel 16.1-3

It pays to read round a Biblical passage to consider what preceded it and what followed it; this instant is no different. Saul had been a disappointment, his reign had got off to a good start, but like so many who become drunk on success overstepped the mark. It was important that his successor reset the relationship between God and the people. Samuel listens to what God is saying, puts his disappointment behind him, and sets out to identify the one appointed by God to be the new king, who happens to be David.

How far does your disappointment in others hold you back?
Should you be looking for your confidence in people to be restored?
How might you go about that?

Disappointment to a noble soul is what cold water is to burning metal; it strengthens, tempers, intensifies, but never destroys it. Eliza Tabor

O God of hope and renewal, hold on to us when we stumble, lift us from the floor, and raise our spirits along with our eyes that we may realise what is still in store for us. Amen.



Benjamin Sow

4th Sunday in Lent 15 March

Place: THE PUBLIC SQUARE John 9.1-41

The granting of sight to a man born blind precipitates an investigation by those who question the veracity of the account. The man becomes the centre of a debate between what the writer calls 'the Jews' and Jesus. This is another occasion within the Gospel according to John where later debates in the Early Church on Jesus and his ministry took place - why and how Jesus did what he did whilst others could not accept him. It is as if those later debates in the church find their way into the account. This is also evidenced by the repetition of 'the Jews' in John's account, because almost all the players in the incidents were Jews – it was only later, at the time the account was written, that the believers were no longer seen as Jews.

Today we appear to shy away from public debate. Because so many want to be heard whilst not wanting to listen, we are in a place where an interchange of views can be frustrating and dangerous. We therefore avoid the public square, the traditional place of debate, where since the Ancient Greeks and Romans, through to the philosophers and political thinkers of the Enlightenment, have gathered to exchange ideas. Even the metaphorical public square is avoided. This only serves to leave us ill-informed whilst inappropriately confident that we alone are right anyway.

**Remind us again, O God,
of the incompleteness of our understanding,
that we may listen with deeper humility and greater respect. Amen.**

Towards Lent 5
Monday 16 – Saturday 21 March

Light a candle and place a stone on a table.

The God of Light and Darkness, Day and Night is present.

Silence

God of the flickering flame,
God of the enduring rock,
God of the here and now,
and of all eternity,
speak to us in silence and sound,
in the space and in the word,
that this time be truly rich with meaning,
and filled with a desire to grow in your love and purpose.
Amen.

Silence

*Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD.
Lord, hear my voice!
Let your ears be attentive
to the voice of my supplications!
If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities,
Lord, who could stand?
But there is forgiveness with you,
so that you may be revered.*

Psalm 130.1-2

The hand of the LORD came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord GOD, you know." Then he said to me, "Prophesy to these bones and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you and will cause flesh to come upon you and cover you with skin and put breath in you, and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the LORD." Ezekiel 37.1-6

This is God's response to a people that believed they had nothing left to offer, that their time had passed, and without any hope. Ezekiel acts as God's messenger and brings life where there was only death before. The utter desolation has been overcome by the breath of God's spirit, the very same spirit that brooded over the chaotic waters of creation.

Consider a time when you experienced a transformation.

When did you feel lifted by say the scent of freshly mown grass, or by a kindly word or generous act?

We delight in the beauty of the butterfly but rarely admit the changes it has gone through to achieve that beauty. Maya Angelou

**O God, whose Spirit transforms the world and those within it,
breathe life into our bodies, hope into our souls, and love into our
hearts. Amen.**



Mads Schmidt Rasmussen

5th Sunday in Lent 22 March

Place: A HOUSE OF GRIEF John 11.1-45

The reaction of Jesus to news of his friend's illness and death may be perplexing. Firstly, he appears to dismiss the illness as insignificant. He delays a visit and only announces his intention to go when he declares that Lazarus had in fact died. The disciples hint at the dangers that would face them should they return. It may even be that Thomas was being sarcastic when he suggested they should all go and get killed with him.

This may be one of those very rich occasions in the life of Jesus when his experiences resonate greatly with our own. Grief does strange things to us. The initial shock on hearing news of an illness might mean we are incapable of realising the seriousness of the situation – this can't be so. Once the gravity sinks in it might be that we respond in ways that may be for us uncharacteristic – we must drop everything and go. We may even overlook the cost of doing so – and go to extraordinary lengths to exhibit our love or address any regret we may have.

Again, John's account of the Gospel addresses the light and dark, day and night – where those who live in light do not stumble but those who live in darkness trip up. A household of grief may be a place of deep darkness, but the presence of Jesus may bring light, and help us come to terms with what has happened.

**In trouble and in pain, in loss and grief, step into our home, O God,
and shed your healing light on us that we may not stumble
but step resolutely forward. Amen.**

Towards Palm Sunday

Monday 23 – Saturday 28 March

Light a candle and place a stone on a table.

The God of Light and Darkness, Day and Night is present.

Silence

God of the flickering flame,
God of the enduring rock,
God of the here and now,
and of all eternity,
speak to us in silence and sound,
in the space and in the word,
that this time be truly rich with meaning,
and filled with a desire to grow in your love and purpose.

Amen.

Silence

*Open to me the gates of righteousness,
that I may enter through them
and give thanks to the LORD.
This is the gate of the LORD;
the righteous shall enter through it.
I thank you that you have answered me
and have become my salvation.
The stone that the builders rejected
has become the chief cornerstone.
This is the LORD's doing;
it is marvellous in our eyes. Psalm 118.19-23*

The LORD God helps me; therefore, I have not been disgraced; therefore, I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame; he who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together. Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me. It is the LORD God who helps me; who will declare me guilty? All of them will wear out like a garment; the moth will eat them up. Isaiah 50.7-9

It is easy to be crushed by our critics, by those who seem to have set against us, especially when we can see no reason for their dislike of us. They can inflict great harm upon our confidence in ourselves and our trust in others. Isaiah is one of many in what we know of as the Old Testament who experiences opposition. It would appear that anyone who stands on the side of God, whose words and behaviour stand in sharp contrast with that of those about them, is going to experience being shunned, ridiculed, or worse. Holding on to the knowledge that we are not only in good company but best of all that God is with us, are maybe the only things that give us the stamina and resilience to press on.

When have you felt that someone has it in for you despite, or because of you standing up for what is right and true?
How did you respond?

Character cannot be developed in ease and quiet. Only through experience of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened, ambition inspired, and success achieved. Helen Keller

O God of refuge and strength, bring light to the shadows cast across our relationships with those who are set against us, that hearts and world may be transformed for the better. Amen.



Ryoji Iwata

6th Sunday in Lent Palm Sunday 29 March

Place: URBAN SPACE Matthew 21.1-11

For centuries preachers and commentators have contrasted the positive reaction Jesus received from the crowd as he descended the Mount of Olives into Jerusalem with that of the crowd that called for his death later in the week. Often, they have gone on to condemn the fickleness of the people because the crowd's adulation turned so quickly into betrayal. That seems to be a given for many. However, according to this account of the day, when Jesus entered the city his presence already elicited different responses from the people. Some would rejoice at his arrival, some were concerned about the claims being made about him, and some had no idea who he was. It does not require a stretch of imagination to consider that the opinion and judgment of the people did not change over the course of the week – maybe those who accepted or rejected Jesus had already made up their minds and stuck to it, maybe they came from the second and third groups mentioned above.

Today's urban space could well be cyberspace, where views are transmitted online. Like any form of society, social media is made up of a range of opinion. Just as judgments were formed that over time became the accepted truth, so it is that in our world one perspective can come to override others, though more quickly so. We are in danger of overlooking the wisdom of considering a diversity of opinions.

**Keep from us, O God,
the easy acceptance of general opinion over disputed fact.
May we be open and receptive
to that which we might come to know as undeniable truth. Amen.**

Holy Week

Monday 30 March – Saturday 4 April

Light a candle and place a stone on a table.

The God of Light and Darkness, Day and Night is present.

Silence

God of the flickering flame,
God of the enduring rock,
God of the here and now,
and of all eternity,
speak to us in silence and sound,
in the space and in the word,
that this time be truly rich with meaning,
and filled with a desire to grow in your love and purpose.
Amen.

Silence

*Let all who seek you
rejoice and be glad in you.
Let those who love your salvation
say evermore, "God is great!"
But I am poor and needy;
hasten to me, O God!
You are my help and my deliverer;
O LORD, do not delay! Psalm 70.4,5*

*Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my spirit upon him;
he will bring forth justice to the nations. Isaiah 42.1*

When God chooses someone for a special task, they will not be abandoned, they will not be left to their own devices, but they will be equipped by God to face all the challenges that come before them. Even the most difficult of situations can be turned into a victory of sorts when God is at hand, reassuring us, strengthening us, steeling us. God's servants have often commented that they would not have been able to accomplish all that they did without God's help. We are given extra impetus and purpose when we act not out of selfish interests but for the greater good as set down by God.

What has been the achievement you are most proud of?
Where was God in this?

Everyone has inside of him a piece of good news. The good news is that you don't know how great you can be! How much you can love! What you can accomplish! And what your potential is! Anne Frank

O God of our dreams, who implants within us a vision of creation and humanity reconciled and restored, nudge us further into the people you would have us be so that we may live in fulness of life. Amen.



Tim Wildsmith

Easter Sunday 5th April

Place: THE TOMB John 20.1-18

As we have seen, darkness has great significance in John's account; again, it is present in this re-telling of the resurrection. Mary Magdalene arrives so early that daylight has not yet broken – *it was still dark*, physically dark yes, but spiritually dark too because Mary is still unaware of what has taken place. Neither Mary nor the two disciples who came to the tomb after her had at this stage seen the risen Jesus – Mary thought the body had been removed, whilst the next to arrive *saw (the tomb was empty) and believed*. Believed what exactly? After all, according to John these disciples still *did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead*. Did he just come to believe Mary's testimony that the tomb was indeed empty? It is not clear; maybe the writer meant it to remain that way for now; after all, it is only after the other two have left that the Risen Lord appears to Mary.

Tombs may speak a great deal about the deceased within them; apart from their size and design, the epitaph can tell us much in just a few words. 526,000 British military personnel from the First World War have no known grave. The Tomb of the Unknown Warrior, set alongside those of monarchs and dignitaries in Westminster Abbey, contains just one body but represents each of the lost. The empty tomb of Jesus represents not the dead but the risen; the victory over death won by Christ ensures that no one is cast in eternal darkness but that each may rise to the light.

**You rose from death, O Christ, signifying the final victory
of goodness over evil, of light over darkness,
grant that we may live in the unrelenting joy of this assurance.
Amen.**