

For God so loved the world that God gave the only Son. (John 3:16)

Gathering, Greeting and Call to Worship

Kirsty

Come and worship God!
Continue our journey together
Through good times and bad
Knowing that God travels with us.

Song: *Guide me O Thou great Redeemer - TiS 569*

*1. Guide me, O thou great Redeemer,
pilgrim through this barren land;
I am weak, but thou art mighty;
hold me with thy powerful hand:
bread of heaven, bread of heaven,
feed me now and evermore.
feed me now and evermore.*

*2. Open now the crystal fountain
whence the living waters flow;
let the fiery, cloudy pillar
lead me all my journey through:
strong deliverer, strong deliverer,
be thou still my strength and shield.
be thou still my strength and shield.*

*3. When I tread the verge of Jordan
bid my anxious fears subside;
death of death, and hell's destruction,
land me safe on Canaan's side:
songs and praises, songs and praises,
I will ever give to thee.
I will ever give to thee.*

SONG: Guide me, O thou great Redeemer, by William Williams,
from Together in Song, Harper Collins Religious, Collins PUBLIC DOMAIN

Acknowledgement of Country

to be advised

We acknowledge and respect
the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation,
the traditional custodians of this land
since time immemorial.
We are learning that the land
is not ours to own, but to look after;
and that if we listen,
we may hear in it the calling of the eternal Spirit.
**Responding to this call, we commit ourselves
to work for justice, reconciliation,
and care of the earth.**

Welcome and Introduction

Kirsty

Kirsty to invite Natalie Papworth to come forward

Welcome to Brunswick Uniting Church. Welcome if you are joining us here in this space or on the live-stream. Welcome if you worship here often or if it is your first time.

Today our worship will continue to be guided by God's covenant as we join the Israelites in the wilderness and reflect on trusting God in places of life and death. And we will add another sign of the covenant to the signs we already have: the rainbow of Noah, the stars of Abraham and the stones of the ten commandments. Today we add these snakeskins, shed to allow growth – more on that through the service.

At the start of the service we heard the bell, calling us to worship on this day the 4th Sunday in Lent.

If you were in Sydney Road last Thursday, you would also have heard our bell, sounding the alarm for climate change as part of a world wide, interfaith action. A number of members of our community where there and Ian wore this climate change scarf which Natalie has knitted, a scarf of many colours with each stripe depicting one year in the history of global climate change. It is a climate graph. Starting from 1919 with the cool 'blue end', the graduation of colour shows the rise in average global temperatures until 2019. It is a creation and climate justice initiative by Common Grace.

I'd like to invite Natalie to formally present the scarf to Ian.

(Pause while Natalie gives scarf to Ian and Ian puts scarf on and goes to ring bell. Natalie returns to seat)

As Ian goes to ring the bell once again,
let us take a breath and pause,
let us listen for the sound of the bell,
calling us into prayer.

Prayers of Adoration and Confession

Kirsty

God of wilderness journeys
Jesus, light of the world
Spirit of life,

You show us the way
In the midst of the wilderness
When all seems lost
You are there.
It is not just wilderness, but wilderness and hope, wilderness and life.

You hear our cries
You know our frustrations
You understand our doubts
You listen to our prayers and offer us a different future.

In the face of the cross
You show us what love is
You shine a light on the world
Bringing new life and guiding us to what is true.

Song: Lament – BUC Song project – Verse 1

*Why do we listen and fail to hear?
Why do we see and not perceive?
We have turned away and our heart has grown dull
Heal us, help us to grieve
Heal us, help us to grieve*

*Ooh... Ooh... Oh... Oh...
Ooh... Ooh... Oh... Oh...*

Forgive us when we do not see you,
When we do not see the way you set before us,
when we live without hope.

Forgive us when we complain,
When we are frustrated and doubt.
When we do not see your future.

Forgive us when we look away from the cross
Turning our back on love
and the light and new life that you give to us all.

Song: Lament – BUC Song project – verse 2

*Why do we listen and fail to hear?
Why do we see and not perceive?
We have turned away and our heart has grown dull
Heal us, help us believe
Heal us, help us believe*

*Ooh... Ooh... Oh... Oh...
Ooh... Ooh... Oh... Oh...*

SONG: Lament, by Shawn Whelan, 2013, written for the BUC Boundless Plains series.
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Word of Grace

Kirsty

God is with us in our wilderness
and journeys with us
bringing light and life.

And so we know that
Our sin is forgiven
Thanks be to God.

Bible Reading: Numbers 21:4-9

Meredith Budge

From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. The people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food." Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD to take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. And the LORD said to Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." So

Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

For these words of witness and for Christ the Word,
Thanks be to God.

With the Children

Dave, Michael

Close look at the snake skins – Michael shares his knowledge of snakes and shedding their skins. Anyone seen a snake? Reactions? Stories. Both fearful and beautiful. Snakes in the Bible – life and death, death and life, Easter.

Song: *Hambi Nathi* - MV45

Hamba nathi mkhululi wethu (x4)

Mkhululi mkhululi mkhululi wethu (x4)

You are holy, you show us the way (4x)

You show us, you show us, you show us the way (x4)

Hamba nathi mkhululi wethu (x4)

Mkhululi mkhululi mkhululi wethu (x4)

Come walk with us, the journey is long (4x)

The journey, the journey, the journey is long (x4)

SONG: *Hamba Nathi*, from More Voices, United Church of Canada, Woodlake Publishing Inc.
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Gospel Reading – John 3:14-21

Meredith

And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

For these words of witness and for Christ the Word,
Thanks be to God.

Reflection

Ian

Today our two bible readings ask, what does it mean to trust God’s covenant promise of love when there is no obvious ground for that trust, when it might even seem that our trust has been betrayed?

Let us pray...

Recently I saw a Tiger Snake by the Merri Creek – it crossed the bike path in front of me and disappeared into the long grass. It was just a baby one, quite small, but I guess its parents must have been around somewhere. How do you feel about snakes? As you probably know, Tiger Snakes are in the top ten most venomous snakes in the world, and they live among us in

our city. Friends, I have mixed feelings about this. On the one hand, I find snakes to be fascinatingly beautiful creatures, I am awed by them – the extraordinary shape of them, the amazing way they move – I wish I could move like that. I do love seeing them, but, on the other hand, I am not immune to the primal horror that snakes evoke in most humans – I regularly have nightmares about them – they are imbedded in my unconscious mind as things to be feared. Yes, mixed feelings, fascination and fear, and our two bible readings play with this paradox today.

The book of Numbers, which tells the continuing saga of the Exodus, gives us a story straight out of my nightmares. It brings us to a place writhing with poisonous snakes. Everywhere we step the ground is alive with fear and death. It's horrifying.

If you've ever read through the book of Numbers (and I'd be impressed to hear that you had because it's not exactly a riveting read), you would have noticed this constant refrain: the people complained – even before the snakes appear on the scene, the people complained about their misfortunes; the people complained against Moses; the people complained against GOD; the people rebelled; the people quarrelled; the people became impatient; the people grumbled. They're a bunch of whingers, and today their cry of complaint is: "Why have you brought us out here to die in the wilderness?"

It's a reasonable complaint, because even without snakes this wilderness is a place of mortal risk. There's nothing to eat, no water, the days are long and hot, the nights cold and dangerous, and they are afraid, they feel powerless and exposed. In fact, it's so bad that they look back longingly to their days of slavery in Egypt.

Our situation is somewhat different to that of the Israelites in the Exodus, but there is still plenty to grumble about. It was 12 months ago this week that the World Health Organisation labelled the coronavirus outbreak a pandemic and think what we've been through since then. God did not bring us to this challenging place as God did the Israelites, but what can we learn about trusting God if we put our experience alongside that of the wandering Israelites?

"Why have you brought us out here to die in the wilderness?" they ask complainingly. And what answer do they get? Snakes – as if things weren't bad enough already God sends snakes. And suddenly the death facing the Israelites isn't just hunger and thirst, the enemy peoples, the parching sun. Suddenly death isn't just a threat or a possibility or an atmosphere. No, now the desert is biting them with poisonous fangs death in a pandemic of snakes.

The answer to the Israelites' question of suffering and death is death itself. Thanks God, message received. Now we just have to decode it, because otherwise it makes absolutely no sense at all, it just reads like a betrayal of the covenant.

This is not a happy story, but it is also one that I have found deeply encouraging over the years. The horror of it repels me, and also the theology of a God who brings the people into this place of threat, and then punishes their complaining with poisonous death. I do not like this ancient picture of a death dealing God. But those who painted it are about to use it to make a powerful point – one that has often encouraged me in my deathly desert places – those times when I look in vain for the presence of the God of love and life, comfort and compassion, transformation and renewal – a God who sometimes can be very hard to find.

Perhaps a detour to the New Testament is in order? – leave this miserable OT God behind? – there "God so loved the world that God gave the only Son", not a pit of snakes. And why did God give the Son? – "so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" – not death but love and life – that's more like it!

Sounds better, but I'm wary of this detour. I'm wary of an approach to scripture that says, "judgement and death in the OT, grace and love in the New" – I don't buy it. And I'm also wary of a spiritual approach that says, "avoid all unpleasantness, difficulty and suffering" – I'm not sure that we can. If we are truly to trust the lover who comes to lead us into life, then I think we need to stay a little longer in the desert. Yes, it is a very unpleasant place containing creatures

of horror and an archaic image of the divine, but we endured 4 months of hard lockdown, 5 more minutes of metaphoric serpents shouldn't be beyond us!

So, let's pause awhile here in the snake infested desert of faith and pray: God, open our eyes, the eyes of our faith. Show us how to see this deathly place differently. Show us how to trust you when all we see is the horror of suffering.

So Moses prayed for the people. And God said to Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent of bronze, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." And so it happened ... they would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

There are snakes on the ground – snakes of death. And there is a snake raised up on a pole – a snake of life. The same thing that is on the ground bringing death, is raised up to bring life. Death on the ground and life raised up, and they look the same – they look the same.

This is a profound and mysterious insight of faith ... one to consider deeply in the lead up to Good Friday and Easter. In this violently symbolic story, we are told the difficult truth that the way to fullness of life can look just like the path through the valley of the shadow of death.

We don't have to like or feel comfortable with this story. But here in the OT desert of death, can we see the difficult truth that informs the Gospel of Jesus Christ?

For just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, writes John in his Gospel, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that God gave the only Son...

You see it's the same story: for Israel life and love, healing salvation is found along a hard, deathly road through the wilderness; for the people of Christ that same life and love is found along the way of the cross. For just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up ...

Now when we read the story of Christ's death, we read it from the perspective of Easter – we read it knowing that Christ's is a death that leads to life and as a result it's easy to miss the horror that is hanging there. But the truth is, if we lift our eyes to Jesus raised up when we are in the barren desert place of human experience, it just looks like suffering, like failure, like torturous pain leading to death. In that moment, how can we trust that God is still loving us and leading us to life, when everything looks like death, even like the death of God?

Now I hope and pray that your experience is not all deserts and snakes, parched souls, hungry hearts and poisonous dealings. But we all go there at times. Today scripture teaches that the seed of our loving salvation, our healing and wholeness, our new life, is found in that place.

If, God forbid, you are bitten by a real snake, apply pressure and immobilisation, call for help, and your chances of survival are extremely high. Only one unfortunate person died from snakebite in Australia in the past 12 months, and he only died because he thought the snake had only scratched him, so he went to a birthday party instead of a hospital. That one tragic death last year compares pretty favourably to the 900 or so who died of coronavirus, and the thousand or so who died in car accidents. Real snakes are much less dangerous than those writhing biblical metaphors which kill you every time. And that's because we have anti-venom. You'll be pleased to hear that Australian anti-venoms are the purest and most effective in the world – sure it may be because we have the most poisonous animals in the world, but HALLELUJAH!

Anti-venom is made from the venom, from the poison that kills. The source of death, the venom, is also the source of life and healing, the anti-venom. And of course, it's the same story with the Coronavirus vaccines that we are hanging out for – they are derived from the virus itself – there also the source of death is the source of life and healing.

This scientific fact is echoed in Scripture as a spiritual metaphor for us, a mystery of faith: divine healing life is found in the very place it seems most absent. God dies in the desert of our suffering to bring life

This spiritual truth is not obvious – in fact many people deny faith or lose their faith in the desert of suffering, just like the Israelites. The mystery of life through death can't be explained with trite theological formulas – we have to live it. And while I firmly believe that God does not cause suffering, Jesus Christ shows us that God will meet us in the deathly desert places of human experience with transforming love. In fact, it turns out, that's who God IS – One who suffers with us – Compassion is the word that means “to suffer with” – that's who God is, pure compassionate love, God-With-Us not just for companionable, pat-on-the-back reassurance – “I can see what you're going through” – not just to provide an easy way out – “you'll be right”. No, but to take suffering and death into Godself, to raise it up the divine heart, transforming death to life with love. That's who God is, one who loves the world with suffering compassion.

There is death on the ground, and there is life raised up. And they look the same. May God grant to us the eyes of faith in the desert of suffering, that we may look up and live.

Offering

Ian

As we sing together now you are invited to make an offering of faith to God. This is a time to reaffirm our commitment to living as God's people in response to Christ's call upon our lives. It is an offering we all make in our hearts, a sacrifice of thanksgiving. You may also choose, if you can afford it, to make a financial offering towards the ministry of our church in its worship and care for the poor and marginalised, a physical sign of our heartfelt response to God. During the song, please take your offering to the bowls beside the baptism font. You may like to dip your hand in the water there as a reminder of Christ's blessing of new life that we are called share. Many of us give by electronic direct debit and if you would like to do so also you will find our Bank Account details by following the “direct giving” link on our website homepage.

Song - *I will set my bow in the clouds* (verses 1, 2, 3 & 4)

Ian

*I will set my bow in the clouds
as a sign of my love for you;
as a sign of my promise to all the earth,
visible where gray sky meets blue.*

*I will place my child in your womb
as a sign of my love for you;
when you laugh at the wonder, remember this:
Abraham and Sarah did, too.*

*I will give to Moses my law
as a sign of my love for you;
be part of my justice in all the earth;
covenant to do what is true.*

*I will offer pardon to all
as a sign of my love for you;
when the vow has been broken and trust destroyed,
I will offer pardon to you.*

SONG: [I will set my bow in the clouds](#), Words & Music: Daniel Charles Damon,
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Prayers of the People

What a swirling tumult it has been this past year!
 The past week
 The past day

We have been caught up in a storm
 Tossed around by changes, and challenges,
 Wandering and bewildered.

Today we seek to sit with you on solid ground
 To feel the earth beneath our feet
 To shed the burdens and wrappings of the last year
 To emerge anew, unwrapped
 To feel your presence on our skin.

For leaders we pray clear sight
 Open hearts
 For them to let go of the past
 To lead with wisdom and compassion.

For the church we pray open hands
 Letting go of the sorrows we have carried over the past year
 Rejuvenated and ready to take on
 The challenges before us.

For our community we pray
 Our distresses eased
 Our turmoil calmed
 Time to stop, and breathe, and wonder.

In Jesus' name we pray
 Amen

Offering Dedication

Ilan

Welcomers bring offering bowls forward.

Please join in the response at the end of this dedication.

We long for the time
 when the meek shall inherit the earth
 and all who hunger and thirst after justice
 shall be satisfied,
 and we believe that, despite the persistence of evil,
 now is always the time
 when more good can be done
 and we can make a difference.

***May it be so, through the offering of these gifts
 and the offering of our lives. Amen.***

[Source: Prayer for Justice and Peace, Iona]

Notices

Kirsty

Ian:

- Discuss service themes – meet me after the service and we'll take a table in the hall.
- Baptism and Confirmation group being formed soon.
- Tea and Coffee in the hall after the service (building up to food).

- Yoo Mi's Ordination

Sending Song: O Spirit God/In the Shape of a cross – Tune In

Ian

*O Spirit God to you we pray
For the healing of the nations
Within this space extend your grace
For the healing of our neighbours.*

- 1. Love enter our shattered world of tears
Soothing the pain of all our loss
Breaking the locks on all our fears
Forging the truth inside our years
In the shape of a cross.*
 - 2. Love enter our marvellous refrain
Silently saving what was lost
Lighting the spark of hope and faith
Bring your forgiveness to our day
In the shape of a cross.*
 - 3. Love enter our lives at darkest hour
Be with us as we count the cost
Wanting to follow where you lead
Painting the picture of your power
In the shape of a cross.
In the shape of a cross.
In the shape of a cross.*
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SONG: [The shape of the Cross](#), © David Brown, 4/2004,
from [Tune In](#), Brunswick Uniting Church Songbook, Used with permission

Blessing and Sending

Ian

God so loved the world...

Go now in the knowledge and with the blessing of that love

Breathe a breath of blessing
from the Source of all love
Breathe a breath of blessing
in the Son of all love
Breathe a living breath of blessing
by the Spirit of all love

Go in peace, to love and to serve.
In the name of Christ. Amen

Thank You

Recorded Music: *The Promise* by Elaine

Liturgist:

Kirsty Bennett

Children's time

Michael Cameron

Dave Hall

(CYA Pastor)

Bible readings:

Meredith Budge

Reflection:

Ian Ferguson

(Minister of the Word)

Prayers of the People:

Simone Aleisch

Musicians:

Natalie Sims (Coordinator)

Hannah Denison

Catherine Leslie

Maggie Somerville

Melvin Tan

Shawn Whelan

The Promise (recording)

Elaine Potter

Julia Potter

Welcoming:

Chris Emmanuel

Sheila Calwell

Michael Rigby

Flowers:

Valmai Brunlow

Production:

Ray Cameron

Saide Cameron

Ian Ferguson

Ben Hon

Oliver Sun

And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up
(John 3:14)