

Whitehorse Uniting Church
Written Worship
Sunday 11th June 2023
Pentecost 2



Abraham – Rembrandt von Rijn

This week we hear stories of call, firstly of Abram – the father of faith, as Paul calls him – and we hear the call of the tax collector Matthew. A key pattern of our being watchful for the life of God is the witness of scripture that God calls and sends. We anticipate the purposefulness of God for us and our life journeys. This call is to go bearing the promises of God knowing that the divine life might be seen in our human being. We give focus to these stories of call today and what this calling may mean for us.

CALL TO WORSHIP

O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you;
Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you.
So I will bless you as long as I live; I will lift up my hands and call on your name.

Psalm 63

HYMN: TIS 125 The God of Abraham Praise

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RmHZq-rowX4>

1 The God of Abraham praise
who reigns enthroned above,
ancient of everlasting days,
and God of love:
the Lord, the great I AM
by earth and heaven confessed!
We bow and bless the sacred name
for ever blessed.

2 The God of Abraham praise,
whose all-sufficient grace
shall guide us all our happy days
in all our ways.
He calls us each a friend,
he calls himself our God;
and he shall save us to the end
through Jesus' blood.

3 He by himself has sworn,
we on his oath depend:
we shall, on eagles' wings upborne,
to heaven ascend:
we shall behold his face,
we shall his power adore,
and sing the wonders of his grace
for evermore.

4 The God who reigns on high
the great archangels sing,
and Holy, holy, holy,' cry,
almighty King!
who was and is the same
and evermore shall be,
the Lord, our Father, great I AM
eternally.

5 Before the Saviour's face
the ransomed nations bow,
all praising his almighty grace,
for ever new.
He shows his wounds of love,
they kindle to a flame
and sound through all the worlds above
the slaughtered Lamb.

6 The whole triumphant host
gives thanks to God on high:
Hail, Father, Son and Spirit blest!
they ever cry.
Hail, Abraham's God and ours!
with heaven our songs we raise:
all might and majesty are yours,
and endless praise.

Thomas Olivers 1725-99 alt.

*based on the Jewish Yigdal c. 13th Cent. and Revelation
4 & 5*

PRAYERS OF GATHERING IN GOD'S PRESENCE

We confess you to be the God who calls,
Who wills,
Who summons,
Who has concrete intentions for your creation,
And addresses human agents who do your will.

We imagine ourselves called by you ...
Yet a strange lot:
Called but cowardly,
Obedient but self indulgent,
Devoted to you, but otherwise preoccupied.

In our strange mix an answering and refusing,
We give thanks for your call.

We pray this day,
For ourselves, fresh vision;
For all people of good will, great courage,
For the faithful in more dangerous places than ours, deep freedom.

As we seek to answer your call, may we be haunted
By your large purposes,
We pray in the name of the utterly called Jesus. Amen

Walter Brueggemann, *Awed to Heaven, Rooted in Earth*, alt. p 31.

SERVICE OF THE WORD

Hebrew Scriptures: Genesis 12. 1-9

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.’



“The Caravan of Abraham” by James Tissot, ca. 1900.

So, Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot, and all the possessions that they had gathered, and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran; and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan. When they had come to the land of Canaan, Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak* of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. Then the Lord appeared to Abram, and said, 'To your offspring I will give this land.' So he built there an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him. From there he moved on to the hill country on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; and there he built an altar to the Lord and invoked the name of the Lord. And Abram journeyed on by stages towards the Negeb.

Epistle: Romans 4. 13-25

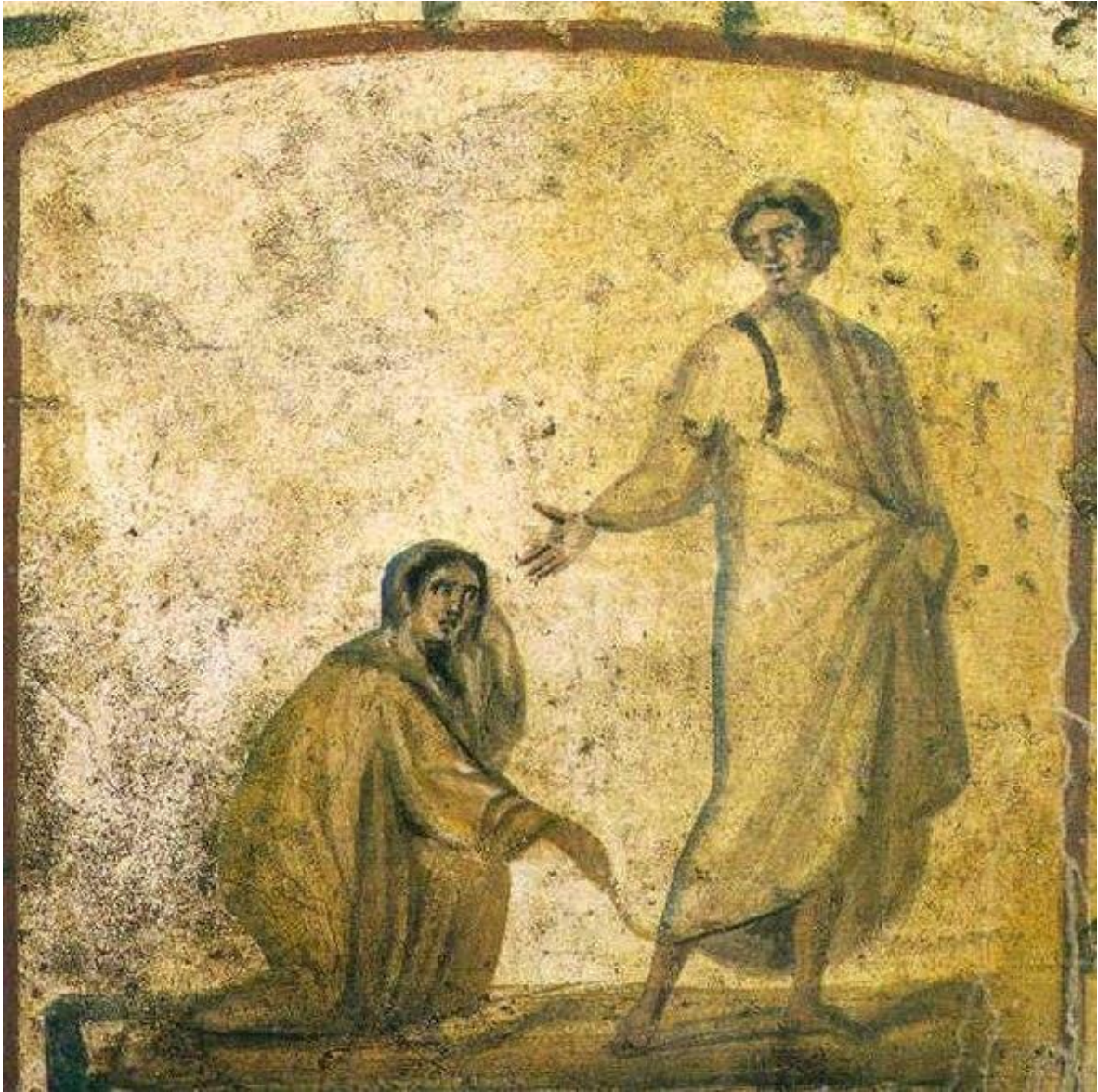
For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation. For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, as it is written, 'I have made you the father of many nations')—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become 'the father of many nations', according to what was said, 'So numerous shall your descendants be.' He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. Therefore his faith 'was reckoned to him as righteousness.' Now the words, 'it was reckoned to him', were written not for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.

Gospel: Matthew 9. 9-13, 18-26

As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, 'Follow me.' And he got up and followed him.

And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax-collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, 'Why does your teacher eat with tax-collectors and sinners?' But when he heard this, he said, 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.'

While he was saying these things to them, suddenly a leader of the synagogue came in and knelt before him, saying, 'My daughter has just died; but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live.' And Jesus got up and followed him, with his disciples. Then suddenly a woman who had been suffering from haemorrhages for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak, for she said to herself, 'If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well.' Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, 'Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well.' And instantly the woman was made well. When Jesus came to the leader's house and saw the flute-players and the crowd making a commotion, he said, 'Go away; for the girl is not dead but sleeping.' And they laughed at him. But when the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took her by the hand, and the girl got up. And the report of this spread throughout that district. New Revised Standard Version, Updated Edition. Copyright © 2021 National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.



Healing the bleeding woman: the Catacombs of Rome

HYMN: TIS 76 I To the Hills Will Lift Mine Eyes

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PJsDa-6l9oQ>

1 I to the hills will lift my eyes:
where shall I find my help?
My help comes only from the Lord
who made the earth and heaven.

2 Your foot he'll not let slide, nor will
your guardian ever sleep:
the one who guards his people still,
he slumbers not, nor sleeps.

3 The Lord will be a shield and shade:
with him at your right hand
no harm will come from sun by day
nor from the moon by night.

4 The Lord will keep you from all harm:
will guard your very life,
preserve your going out and in
now and for evermore.

Psalm 121
Scottish Psalter 1650
rev. Granton Douglas Hay 1943-

SERMON

Earlier in the year I read a book entitled “*Nomads: the wanderers who shaped our world*”. It is an account of the many nomadic peoples of the world and the book endeavours to give an account of how nomadic cultures have existed over millennia. The book especially focusses on that part of Europe and Asia that stretched from Turkiye, across to China and Mongolia. An area that became known as the silk road. For centuries it was passage across the roof of the world for trade, for seasonal movement of herd animals and for marauding warriors seeking to subdue others. There is little documentary evidence of these peoples that they recorded themselves. They didn’t keep written records themselves. In the main the records we have of them are records from city-dwellers; more settled peoples.

What comes through in the book is a centuries-long tension between city-dwellers and nomads. Nomads lived in nature and the rhythm of their lives was ordered by the seasons and the needs of their animals. They were tough, resilient, disciplined people. In contrast, the city-dwellers were regarded as soft, too often corrupt, living in places which were overcrowded and disease-ridden.

As I read, I recognised that this tension between nomad and city-dweller is at play in the early chapters of Genesis. The story of the building of the tower of Babel is in a sense an anti-city story – peoples are scattered from this place of power and corruption. And so also Abram is called to leave the city of Haran, to leave his country, his kindred and his father’s house to seek a place that God would show him. Abram and his descendants become nomads. Later in the book of Exodus, after Moses has fled the stifling atmosphere of Egypt, he joins a group of nomads, the priest of Midian, Jethro and his tribe, and at the foot of Mt Sinai it is that he has the great epiphany – God’s call to set my people free.

Our reading tells us the Lord appeared to Abram once he had reached the land of Canaan, and says to Abram, ‘*To your offspring I will give this land.*’ So, he built there an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him. This place where Abram builds the altar is what the Celts would call a thin place; a place where there is an experience of the divine. During the history of Israel, as it’s recorded through the Hebrew scriptures, there is an ongoing tension between the worship of God centred on the temple in Jerusalem and those who continue to worship in what are called the high places – usually on mountains; Israel’s thin places. These worshippers at the high places are beyond the control of the priestly class; and they are disdained and held in contempt in the priestly literature. Again, it is a tension between the city and those who live closer to nature. And we still hear this tension in the conversation between Jesus and the woman at the well: *Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.*’

We are leaving the decadence of Christendom. We have left Christendom – partly without our knowledge. And partly we have left Christendom against our wills. We didn’t know this was happening to us until it has felt like it is too late; these have been circumstances beyond the church’s control. We haven’t gone willingly. We have wanted to go back to the comfort and familiarity of Christendom, where the church was respected, listened to, where we had the ear of the leaders in our society, where the pews were full and the Sunday schools brimming over. Into the wilderness we go; it’s not a place we are familiar with, and we are not sure how to be. Like the woman pressing on Jesus in the crowd it feels like we have been haemorrhaging for decades, hoping for a cure and a release from our dismay and sense of shame. What has become of us? What has become of our children, is the plaintive cry.



Abraham leaves Haran for the promised land – Italian school – 18th century

In what is the latter years of your lives for many of you, you have chosen to leave what is familiar; churches that many of you have been part of for decades and to forge out for something new. My understanding is that you haven't merged simply in order to be able to keep going a bit longer but to be able to do something new; find a new way of being. You are leaving behind legacies in the form of Forest Hill, Nunawading and Mountview and are seeking to make something new. But many of you are at that stage of life where you probably don't have a lot of energy for starting something new. But you can make space for new things. But to start something new you must stop some existing thing and make space for the new thing; new relationships, new imagination; new opportunities. And you can make space for others to do new things; make space for new people; for yourselves being permission givers.

Paul sees Abraham as the model of faith – bold, audacious, even reckless, throwing caution to the wind and forging out across the desert, not knowing where he was heading; but faithful; full of faith. The journey of Abraham toward the land of promise is in some senses a journeying from thin place to thin place, where God is encountered and reassures his people of his presence and that he will continue to go with them. So, as you forge out unsure of what the future may hold may you be gifted with boldness, with courage, attentive to each other as you go, and may you be drawn together into God's future, trusting in his grace and power to bring new life.

HYMN: TIS 691 Faith will not Grow from Words Alone

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1SvNT2eDluc&t=46s>

Faith will not grow from words alone,
from proofs provided, scripture known;
our faith must feel its way about,
and live with question-marks and doubt.

The pattern Jesus showed, we share:
life comes through death, hope through despair.
God is made known in brokenness,
and faith feeds on God's emptiness.

The church still tells how Jesus came through death to glorious life again - the strangest story! Yet, maybe, our faith will thrive on mystery.

Faith takes the little that we know, and calls for hope, and tells us: Go! Love and take courage, come what may; Christ will be with us on the way.

Elizabeth J. Smith - 1956-

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE Michael Plumridge

Loving God, listening God; God our guide and nurturer. We ask you to hear our prayers this morning.

In today's World Prayer Cycle, we pray for the countries of Botswana and Zimbabwe, two landlocked countries in the centre of southern Africa. Lord, we give you thanks and praise for the iconic landscapes of these countries, also for the unique animal populations that live there. We praise you for the beauty and majesty of the Zambezi and Limpopo Rivers: among the longest in the world. Lord, we give you thanks for all those who stand up to protect the natural environment and its animals from exploitation.

We give you thanks for the presence of your Church in these countries and for the enthusiasm of their protests against injustice and for the way they hold governments accountable. Grant them strength we pray. God of justice we pray for the establishment of stable governments and for an end to corruption and human rights abuses. We pray too for economic justice, enabling all to live well and in peace.

We also thank you for the advancements in the treatments for those with HIV and AIDS.

In other prayers for the world, we pray for Ukraine. Lord, we ask that this dreadful conflict ends soon. We pray for all those who are now suffering with the destruction of the Kakhovka Dam. Lord, have mercy.

Locally, we pray for Crossway Baptist, Burwood East. We ask you to bless their programs and activities, pastoral staff and all who worship there. We also pray today for our Uniting Church members at Manningham UCA. We thank you for their work and witness and for the example they provide to us as a merged entity.

We hold before you the ministers of the Yarra Yarra Presbytery. We ask that you bless them as they serve you. We pray too for ourselves here at Whitehorse Uniting. Be with us as we forge a new identity and find new ways to be a Church. Help us to know what to leave behind and what to take forward.

We pray for the community around and about us. We pray for all those who are struggling financially with rising rents, interest rates and the cost of goods and services. We pray for charities, as more people in need turn to them.

We pray for those facing mental health issues; for those who feel lonely or disconnected. Be with those who are hurting, Lord.

Lord, help us to be there for those who need us; help us to trust in your life-changing presence; help us to use the gifts you have given us.

We pray this and all our prayers in the name of Jesus who taught us to pray:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,
Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and forever. Amen.

HYMN: TIS 665 Jesus Christ is Waiting

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bRATR6qep5U>

Jesus Christ is waiting,
waiting in the streets;
no-one is his neighbour,
all alone he eats.
Listen, Lord Jesus,
I am lonely too.
Make me, friend or stranger,
fit to wait on you.

Jesus Christ is raging,
raging in the streets,
where injustice spirals
and real hope retreats.
Listen, Lord Jesus,
I am angry too.
In the Kingdom's causes
let me rage with you.

Jesus Christ is healing,
healing in the streets;
curing those who suffer,
touching those he greets.
Listen, Lord Jesus,
I have pity too.
Let my care be active,
healing just like you.

Jesus Christ is dancing,
dancing in the streets,
where each sign of hatred
he, with love, defeats.
Listen, Lord Jesus,
I should triumph too.
Where good conquers evil
let me dance with you.

Jesus Christ is calling,
calling in the streets,
'Who will join my journey?
I will guide their feet.'
Listen, Lord Jesus,
let my fears be few.
Walk one step before me;
I will follow you.

John L. Bell
1949-

BLESSING

The one who calls is faithful.
The Lord is your keeper;
the Lord is your shade at your right hand.

The Lord will keep
your going out and your coming in
from this time on and for evermore.

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