

Fourth Sunday of Lent

Fourth Sunday of Lent – 22 March 2020

The Faith Nurture Forum would like to thank Rev Jock Stein, retired Minister, formerly of Tulliallan and Kincardine, for his thoughts on the fourth Sunday of Lent.

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

At least three out of the four passages set for this Sunday are extremely well known, and perhaps you want to preach on them all ... yet the two OT passages are not at first sight related to the two NT passages, and the Gospel reading is the whole of a long chapter. Choices have to be made, and many people will take the option of finding one of the many settings of Psalm 23 to sing, whether or not you decide also to preach upon that passage.

If you also decide that with a long Gospel reading the epistle can be omitted, an easy conclusion is to base an all-age talk on the story of Samuel's choice of David, and the sermon on the reading from John's Gospel. The notes on the four passages that follow may help either to confirm that choice, or set you in a different direction. The sermon notes are based on the Gospel reading, but they do connect the OT and NT passages.

1 Samuel 16:1-13

Samuel is one of the heroes of the OT, but also a human figure who suffers the humiliation of seeing his own sons take bribes and fail to follow their father's example, and then the further disappointment of being let down by the first king he has found for Israel. Samuel is presented as both faithful and fierce; remembering that he has "hewed Agag in pieces before the Lord" (15:33) it is not surprising that the elders of Bethlehem (we would describe it as a town, not a city) come to meet him in fear and trembling, and ask, "Do you come peaceably?" (or perhaps, "Is anything wrong?")!

The Bible tells the story very clearly, but retelling it with a modern example may be worthwhile. The story raises the questions, why does God choose a leader this way, and behind that, how should leaders be chosen?

Points arising from this story include:

- 1 Why such a 'charade'? Was it to test Samuel's faith? To make sure David was publicly accepted? To overturn the assumption of the day that older means wiser?
- 2 Why are there such different accounts of the choice of David as the new king – first this passage; then 16:14-23, when David becomes Saul's armour-bearer and personal musician; and later 17, when David kills Goliath but apparently is unknown to Saul (17:55-56)?

- 3 If 16:13 is a kind of ordination, and the Spirit comes in power on David from that moment forward, what kind of leaders should be ordained? What are our expectations of the Holy Spirit?
- 4 How do leaders emerge? How might we encourage/enable children and teenagers to be leaders?

Psalm 23

The OT has no separate word for 'soul' as we do in English, so that verse 3 "he restores my soul" is well translated as "he restores my life". But by the same token, the Hebrew 'life' means inner life and outer life together, just as the greeting 'Shalom' wishes a person peace in family, community, work and in spirit. So "the darkest valley" in verse 4 includes death but is not only about that; and the "rod and staff" (think of Moses and Aaron) are both literal supports and symbols of help.

Until the 19th century it was assumed that David wrote the psalms attributed to him. We now know that the headings were added later on, when the psalms were combined into what we would call a 'hymn book', and in any case the Hebrew heading can mean "for David" or "thinking of David" as well as "by David" – which is why some modern versions just put "David's". But whether or not he actually wrote the psalm, it makes very good sense to think of David – he was a shepherd boy, he had enemies, he was often in danger of death, and he loved to be close to the Lord his God. The headings were added for a reason, so we should not hesitate to make connections.

John Goldingay translates verse 6 as "Good and commitment will certainly chase me all the days of my life" – worth pondering when we are urging (pestering?) people to be good and be committed.

"I shall dwell in the house of the Lord" is much more than a desire to 'go to church', just as Psalm 27:4 is not just about being in church and asking the minister questions. For one thing, the 'house' or 'temple of the Lord' is also in the heavens (Psalm 78:69). When Solomon built the temple (2 Chronicles 3:5), the word translated as 'nave' is literally 'the big room,' which was the expression ancient peoples used for 'God's heavenly palace'. So it's about living in God's presence, which is everywhere in the universe.

This poem is more suitable for a printed order than for reading in a service, but it might give you some ideas:

Psalm 23 – Shepherd Sonnet

Contradictions, with a sudden dark
to overtake our cosiness, our rosy
hopes. The unexpected snakes devour
these flimsy ladders that we pick and park
for quick ascents to happiness. Who knows,
we might today be falling, calling out
for God to hear us, hold us, help us, fold us
in those arms that felt the hammer blows
to nails through ankles, wrists – such love to meet
the cost of shepherding the likes of us;
or finding courage in the cold of night,
the daytime heat, the struggles of the street.
You fill my cup with hope again: indeed
I find, with you, I've everything I need.

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[Ephesians 5:8-24](#)

People with a definite experience of conversion, or 'first generation Christians', identify more easily with verse 8, but the need to understand the difference between good and evil, light and darkness, and where necessary to name them, remains the same.

Stewart Henderson has a wonderful poem which begins "Everything in heaven comes apart" which dramatically illustrates the light and darkness Paul talks about – worth getting for the other poems too (*Limited Edition*, ISBN 0-9530234-0-0).

This is a great passage about identity. The modern world often seeks identity in achievement, status, sexuality, social media friends . . . but the Bible presents the two things that matter – we are made in God's image, and we are made new by the Lord Jesus. This passage says who we were, and who we now are – children of light. Ephesians builds up a picture of who we are in Christ – special ("saints", 1:1), chosen (1:4), alive ("raised up with Christ", 2:5), family (2:19). Now, "in the Lord you are light" (5:8).

There are better and worse ways of trying to expose "the unfruitful works of darkness" (Burns' 'Holy Willie's Prayer' cleverly turns the tables and exposes the exposers), but we do need to 'name the powers'. Paul was never bland, nor should we be.

Whereas for the Greeks, wisdom was about knowing things in the mind, for Hebrews wisdom was about doing the truth – so to be wise in verse 15 means “be careful then how you live” – while that is already going beyond our (short) reading, the verses following illustrate how we can live in the light, and how song (together and in our hearts) can help us in that.

[John 9:1-41](#)

If you have the opportunity, a long passage is often best dealt with by a dramatic reading, and it is usually possible to abbreviate the narrative part, which can then be expanded in the sermon to make the points that the Gospel writer makes – though if well scripted, the other parts can often bring out narrative points in the tone.

John’s gospel is polysemous – here are five possible layers:

1. This is one of a number of healing miracles. They happen in different ways, at the Sheep Gate pool Jesus simply told a paralysed man to stand up; here he puts a layer of mud on a blind man’s eyes, and tells him to go and wash in the pool of Siloam. In each case the man had to act on Jesus’ word in order to experience healing. (Even dead Lazarus was told, “Come out!”)
2. The man was blind from birth – significant in three ways:
 - It makes the miracle more striking
 - It raises a topical question, as illness was linked to past sin in Jewish thought (v.2), which Jesus answers out of his own mission consciousness (v.3)
 - A healthy eye is the symbol of a healthy body (Luke 11:34) – so the healing of sight is the sign of wider healing
3. How do people respond to a discovery of Jesus? (John 20:31) Here the response of the blind man himself comes in stages, leading up finally to v38. Different people are required to ‘give testimony’ in this chapter. There is the man, there are his parents, there are the Pharisees who have to give an answer to the priests about Jesus.
4. This healing is part of a series of demonstrations that Jesus is Messiah – all public, yet still left as signs; Mark’s Gospel deals with this in such an interesting way that the phrase ‘messianic secret’ was coined; in John’s Gospel it is a gradual revelation (in John 2:4,

Jesus tells His mother that His hour has not yet come). The Pharisees are the detectives, supposed to 'find the evidence' to test the claims of Jesus, but they keep going down false trails (like expecting Messiah to observe their Sabbath rules).

5. John's Gospel has seven 'I am' sayings – seven being the full number, like the seven days of creation in Genesis 1:5-2:3. So v5, "I am the light of the world", which comes with a hint that day and night are still with us; night here is not 'the darkness of God' (Psalm 139:12) but the darkness of the cross, and perhaps also of unbelief (Matthew 13:58).

Sermon ideas

Here are ideas for a beginning, some points to explore, and an ending, using the Gospel reading.

Introduction

Mention the work of 'flying doctors', or MAF, or people who remove cataracts, and the sheer joy of being able to see; OR think about how we can use the words, "I see!" in very different ways (not forgetting the smug way of v40); OR ask people why they typically pray with their eyes shut; OR How do you react when someone (in your family?) claims to have had a life-changing experience – delight, suspicion, or what?

Some points, either in sequence or to build a sermon on one of them:

1. Lifestyle (John 9 v1) Jesus was just walking along, but slowly enough to notice what was going on. And ready to respond equally to a question (from the disciples), and to a person in need. Are we going at a slow enough pace to listen to people and to respond to their needs? What sort of groups do we engage with?
2. Question (John 9 v2) A closed question which Jesus opened with a third option. The question surfaces today. When someone is ill or in trouble, is there someone to blame? We know that some illnesses do have linked causes, maybe individual, like anger, or social, like poor diet, so the disciples' question is not stupid. On a wider scale, the idea of 'bad karma' lingers, and not only in Eastern religions. "What goes around, comes around", like many proverbs, is based on a slice of human experience, and Jesus used such proverbs (Matthew 24:28).
3. Answer (John 9 vs3-5). As a snapshot, the only answer to the disciple's question leads to atheism – if there is no one to blame, it's just bad luck – chance is all there is. But Jesus answers (v3) – 'I'm doing to do something about it'. Probably the best Christian

answer to the age-old question of suffering; we can't give a snap explanation, but we can offer an answer: God's rule is coming, and we are going to be part of that!

At some point it may be worth picking up on the realism of verses 4-5.

4. Healing (John 9 vs6-7). Jesus was very physical in this healing. If you were doing something other than delivering a sermon, you could do an Ignatian meditation, inviting people to see Jesus spit on the ground and make a mud paste, feel Him touch your eyelids with the paste, thinking about Jesus' touching you, then the man having to decide whether to do what Jesus told him, the experience of seeing enough to go to the pool (perhaps with help), then being able to see, and how he felt about that, etc.
5. Testimony (John 9 vs8-17). First simple (vs8-12), then harder (vs13-17). The man is being drawn into this serious and threatening process of the Pharisees' testing whether Jesus is Messiah, or an impostor. He will have to take sides later (vs24-34), with hard consequences. When and where is it that Christians have to 'take sides' today?
6. Family (John 9 vs18-23). As older people, the man's parents knew how risky it is to be asked questions by the 'thought police' (as in some countries today). They manage to stay uninvolved. How does the healed man feel about this, I wonder? Were his parents still carrying the hurt of being blamed for his blindness? Where do we notice tensions between different generations?
7. Church Leadership (John 9 vs24-34). We quickly criticise the Pharisees. Are there parallel situations today, where you could pick up the first reading, and how the parents assumed that the youngest son (David) was ineligible for leadership – and think about the leadership children and teenagers might give in worship and evangelism and other areas?
8. Faith (John 9 vs35-41). The man comes to faith after he has known a blessing in his life – grace is unconditional. But grace also judges unbelief (vs39-41).

Conclusion

How do you 'give testimony' to Jesus? Has your discovery of Him come in stages? What is the next stage going to be?

Prayers

The following prayers owe something to the readings for the day – and the intercessions assume a congregation which is prepared to contribute (I find that useful when I am a bit of a stranger and don't know the needs of the congregation, but it can work well in many situations – provided you walk up and down the church and get near enough for people to speak to you without having to shout; and your own hearing needs to be reasonably good).

Approach to God

Dear God, Saviour and Shepherd of Your people,
we are gathered to praise You,
to encourage one another,
and to seek Your will for our lives,
for our church, and for our world.

Open our eyes to the traffic between heaven and earth,
and to the wonder of Your call to live in the light,
through Him who is the light of the world,
even Jesus Christ,
Amen

Thanksgiving

[This prayer might need to be adjusted if there are blind people present]

God, we thank You for the wonder of sight.
For the beauty of the world we see each day,
for the ordered loveliness of worlds we see in nature,
through video and good report,
for the majesty of the heavens
and the marvels within the tiniest object,
we give You thanks.

For people who have lit up our lives by their goodness and service,
for people who have led Your church in wise and even wonderful ways,
for people of courage and vision
and loving perseverance,
we praise Your name.

We thank You above all for Jesus,
our Brother who walked in the light

and gave light to others,
our Saviour who has shown us Your light
and let it illuminate our lives,
our Friend who has brought heaven and earth together,
the One who prays for us continually,
who listens to our concerns,
who shares our hopes and our fears.

We thank You for every good person,
for every bit of service that makes our journey cleaner and easier and happier,
and for everything that bring light and joy into our lives.
Blessing and honour be to the God
who is above all things
yet present in the world as it changes from day to day;
to the God who is shrouded in mystery
yet wonderfully brought into view by Jesus;
to the God whose Spirit brings light and love to our daily lives.

Glory to the Father,
and to the Son
and to the Holy Spirit;
as in the beginning,
so now, and for all time,
Amen

Confession

If we say that we have fellowship with God while we are walking in darkness,
we lie and do not do what is true;
but if we walk in the light as God is in the light,
we have fellowship with one another,
and the blood of Jesus God's son makes us clean from all sin.

Lord God, we do not come before You without sin –
against You,
against others,
against the image You have placed within us –
but we come in the name of Jesus,
bringing ourselves into His light and love,
asking, claiming,

finding the mercy promised to every penitent sinner,
humbly rejoicing in the way He took us on in Mary's womb,
to straighten out our lives
and offer them as perfect in His life and death and resurrection.
May Your Spirit make this wonderfully clear to our minds and hearts,
through Jesus Christ
Amen

Intercession

You might want to give people notice at the start of the service that you will be doing this ... and explain that you are going to walk up and down [the aisles] with pen and paper in your hand, and invite people to call out first names of people they would like prayed for, then any situations in community or world they would like prayed for. [It makes sense to do this in two or even three stages, but if people get muddled and put them together, just accept it.] I like to end the intercessions with the Lord's Prayer, but if there are children who go out during the service, you may want to have the Lord's Prayer early on.

Blessing

I generally give a short 'prophetic word' e.g. with this theme, "Walk in the light", then a blessing.

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 – [Psalm 23](#)

Soulfood

I can't help wondering who he is, the one we conveniently call the psalmist or the author. For exegetes and commentaries the verdict might have to be: we don't know. There is not one answer. We have to rely on our imagination.

Is he a king of Israel, anointed by God and

trusting God to come to his aid in the face of danger and enemies? Does he hold God responsible, speaking to God personally and casually, one shepherd to another?

Is he a priest, concerned with the spiritual welfare of a nation, repeating and intoning the words over and over again, so that God's promises are not forgotten?

Or is he simply someone who got into trouble, and out of it (possibly in the context of Israel's legal system, where someone acquitted sits down with his former accusers, his "enemies")? Is he someone who has got reason to be thankful to God, because he was acquitted, he got away?

Does he connect to us? Or is he a remote figure of the past? Maybe wondering is a good starting point.

Whoever he is, the psalmist is a wonderer and soul searcher himself. His life is not lived in a hurry. In the face of his enemies he sets a different pace, he takes his time, sits down at the table that God has laid for him:

He finds still waters instead of running streams, green pastures instead of the wandering, searching life of a Bedouin. These are not our images maybe, they are distant to our ken, but they give us food for thought, indeed food for our soul. What are our alternatives to flickering TV screens, to apps and mobiles, to a life on the go?

Could calmness and peace find its due place instead of the pressure and anxiety of modern life? Could trust be found instead of fear, rest instead of fatigue and frustration?

The psalmist can also let go. He sets a good example for us.

He shows us an alternative to our constant chase after success and approval, an alternative to our meritocracy: pastures and water, safety and rest.

The office will call again tomorrow, of that there is little doubt, the stress and hectic rush of a Monday morning, the school run, the train that won't wait, the ceaseless, merciless telephone, the incoming email ping, the overflowing in-tray.

But today is Sunday, the day of rest. The Day that is holy to the Lord.

He is an intriguing figure, the psalmist, full of contradictions, full of hope and trust. You have dark valleys on the one side, God's comforting staff on the other. Enemies on the one side, a meal in God's presence on the other.

The psalmist takes time to sort this out and to think through his relationship to God: his inward journey takes him from pastures and quiet waters to threat, death and enemies, but it always takes him back to his personal, intimate, trusting relationship with God.

This is what gives this most famous of all psalms its tranquility and positivity: we do not need to rely on ourselves, chase our happiness, our luck, for God provides, God restores our souls.

It is a great privilege for us that the psalmist shares this journey with us, that he proclaims his trust and his faith, so we can get a bit closer to who he is and how he connects to us: The Wonderer, the Soul-Finder.

Retelling the story for young people

Retelling for Young People

"Mum!" Jenny was excited as she jumped out of the car. "Mum, wait till I tell you what a brilliant day I had!"

Mum and Jenny went into the kitchen and Mum put juice and biscuits on the table.

"So you had a nice day with Gran?"

"Mum, it was the BEST day!" Jenny was too happy to even notice the juice and biscuits. She didn't even wait for Mum to ask what she'd been up to. She just started telling the story of her lovely day.

"Well, this morning we took Bruno for a big long walk. I know he's still a puppy, but his legs are getting so long already! We went to the park and I threw his ball a million times and he chased it and ran around for ages, with me running around playing with him. I ended up so thirsty and hungry, but Gran had secretly put my favourite juice and crisps and fruit in my rucksack, she's the best! And there was a peanut butter and jam sandwich too, and you know Gran doesn't like peanut butter, but she got some for me.

"Then I went on the swing and Gran pushed me really high! I could see the tops of the trees by the pond, I felt like a bird flying up there! Bruno was so funny, he ran around the swing in

circles, then when I got off, he was so tired he flopped on the grass and let me lie down and put my head on him like a pillow!

“We went up into the woods after that, and it got a bit dull and rainy for a bit. I didn’t like how dark it felt under the trees, but Gran held my hand and sang a silly song and made me laugh, so I stopped being scared.

“On the way back to the car we bumped into Tina and her Mum, and you know how she was so horrible to me at school last week? Well, she came up and said ‘Sorry, Jen!’ and gave me some of her M&Ms. She said I was so lucky to go for walks with Bruno, and to have such a funny Gran. But I know Gran is more than funny, she cares a lot too, because in the car she was asking me what I’ve been doing and she just loves listening, and you know what she’s like, she always tells me that she prays and asks God to keep me safe and happy and well.

“And guess what, back at her place, she had a banana loaf ready to go in the oven, so we played Snakes and Ladders while it was baking. I was sliding down every snake there was, and Gran said, ‘Let’s make it a reverse game, I’ll race you back to square one!’ Then we had hot chocolate and hot banana loaf. Yum! So you see, Mum, it’s just been the best day ever!”

Jenny looked at Mum and tilted her head, thinking. Then she said, “Mum, do you think God cares about me as much as Gran does? As much as you do?”

Mum smiled. “I know that God loves and cares for you even more than Gran does, even more than I do!”

Jenny eyes widened. “Awesome!”

Activities

Gathering Activity

Invite people to anoint each other with oil, passing a small bowl of suitable oil from person to person. They can dip a thumb in the oil and place their thumb against the forehead or back of the hand of the person they are anointing. Suitable oils include almond oil, olive oil or even vegetable oil. Almond oil can be scented with another essential oil, for example with lavender or rose. A good pharmacist will be able to do this for you. You need to be aware of nut allergies if using almond oil.

Shepherd's Crook Hunt

You will need: card shepherds crooks.

Make small shepherds crooks out of card and hide these around your meeting place before the children arrive. Show one of the shepherd's crooks to the children and then have a 'Shepherd's crook hunt'. Use this to introduce the psalm and the idea of God being like a shepherd who looks after his sheep.

Prayers

Call to worship

Leader: Led by God to green pastures

All: **we come to worship Him.**

Leader: By the still waters

All: **we find our souls revived.**

Leader: In the dark valley

All: **we have no fear.**

Leader: Anointed by His love,

All: **we dwell in the Lord's house,
surrounded by his love and mercy.**

Reflection

Still waters are a novelty for my soul
I like the rage of the rapids
or the thunder of the mighty falls,
the rainbows reflected in the spray,
the thrill of the chase.

Still waters challenge me
to stop and breathe gently,
to be nurtured,
to experience grace,
to see clouds reflected
and beautified in the stillness.

And I fear that I am diminished
as my soul is stilled
for I am accustomed
to turbulence.
I thrive on the agitation

and founder in the stillness.

The Lord, who is my shepherd,
leads me by still waters
not to diminish
but to strengthen my soul.

Sending

God as we go out, stay beside us:
along the deep valleys of the world,
through the dark hillsides of the world,
beside the still waters
walk with us,
lead us,
show us
and be our companion
for we are ever your people,
this day and always.

Prayer of sending

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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 14, 15 or 16 – “The Lord’s my Shepherd” – Psalm 23, set for this Sunday
- Sing Glory 206, Worship Today 406 – “The Lord’s my Shepherd” – the well-known Stuart Townend version
- CH4 462 – “The king of love my Shepherd is” – Another metrical version of Psalm 23.

- Junior Praise 433 – “Now Saul was Rejected” – Tells the OT story with a simple tune, easy for keyboard or guitar; great last verse
- “Man looks on the Outside” – Great Big God Lyric Video, Vineyard UK Kids Worship – Lively and well known, picks up moral of OT reading, <https://www.vineyardchurches.org.uk/songs/man-looks-on-the-outside/>
- CH4 125 – “Lord of all being” – On the theme of light. (If you are in Galloway, you could mention that this was James Clerk Maxwell’s favourite hymn)
- CH4 135 – “O laughing light” – A modern version of a Patristic hymn, the words may be words unfamiliar but are easy to understand. If the tune is unfamiliar this could be said line about – leader, one side, other side, all
- CMP 545 – “Open our eyes Lord, we want to see Jesus” – Picking up the theme, before the sermon, or at the start of worship
- CH4 748 – “Through saints we glimpse the light of Christ” – New words, but gives you the chance to sing about the communion of saints to a well-known tune – though ask the organist to lower it a tone or two, or if necessary sing it unaccompanied
- CMP 664 – “The Spirit lives to set us free” – An obvious choice with the chorus, ‘Walk in the Light’

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