

Fourth Sunday in Lent – Year A

Fourth Sunday in Lent – 19 March 2023

The Faith Nurture Forum would like to thank the Faith Action Programme's Resourcing Worship Team for their thoughts on the Fourth Sunday in Lent.

This material was written through conversation within the team, aiming to creatively incorporate the language of the Lectionary readings into the prayers, suggesting inclusive and participative ways of using this material in worship.

Weekly Worship, based on the Revised Common Lectionary, is for everyone – in any capacity – who is involved in creating and leading worship.

It provides liturgical material that can be used for worship in all settings. Our writers are asked to share their approaches to creating and delivering this material to equip leaders with a greater confidence and ability to reflect on their own worship practice and experience and encourage them to consider how this material might be adapted for their own context.

We would encourage continual reflection on the changing patterns of worship and spiritual practice that are emerging from disruption and how this might help identify pathways towards development and worship renewal.

An archive of resources for daily worship can be found on the Sanctuary First website:
<https://www.sanctuaryfirst.org.uk/daily-worship>

We may not all be gathered in the same building, but at this time, when we need each other so much, we are invited to worship together, from where we are – knowing that God can hear us all and can blend even distant voices into one song of worship.

Introduction.....	3
1 Samuel 16:1-13.....	3
Psalm 23	4
Ephesians 5:8-14	4
John 9:1-41	5
Sermon ideas	5
Prayers	7
Alternative Material.....	9
Musical suggestions	10
Reflecting on our worship practice	11
Useful links	13

Introduction

This week's passages encourage us to look deeper into each story.

Samuel challenges us to consider what leadership qualities we value. Psalm 23 has a lot to say to us. How might we use this in our worship beyond singing the familiar and comfortable? Jesus challenges the thinking of the time that sin and disability were linked and uses the giving of sight to a blind man to help us understand more deeply who Jesus is. In Ephesians we are invited to challenge a dualistic understanding of light and dark, as we continue to journey through Lent and to learn what is pleasing to the Lord.

[1 Samuel 16:1-13](#)

Samuel may have been upset about Saul, but is still willing to listen to God and has enough faith and humility to accept God's choices. There is a lot of unlearning to be done from the previous experience of anointing a king and Samuel needs to mourn the old way/king for a time, but God encourages him to move on to what God is calling him into now.

Even though Samuel obeys God, he still falls into the trap of assigning worldly values to the choice of the nation's ruler. However, God keeps pushing him on until there are apparently no other choices. Samuel knows that God has sent him there for a reason and keeps asking until they find David, who does not match the expected attributes of greatness and leadership. Samuel recognises God's will when he sees it and immediately acts, knowing that David is the one, chosen by God.

Some interesting questions arise from this passage about how we view leadership and what we believe a leader to be. The previous norms are challenged by God, who rules out all of the candidates that Samuel's instincts point him to. God chooses the youngest brother, who is out tending the sheep and had not been invited to be part of the sacrifice, yet this young outsider is the one who is chosen and anointed. What might we have to learn from this as we continue to shape new cultures within our worshipping communities and church structures? How are we making room for those who are younger or marginalised to step into roles that God has equipped them for? What signs are we looking for in our leaders and what attributes are we naturally drawn to that God may be challenging? Where are we seeing signs of the Spirit moving and working already?

Psalm 23

This is another psalm about movement. Like Abram in one of the earlier Lenten stories, we do not know where we are going, but we know that we are not alone, that God will be with us. God anticipates and tends to our every need, and not only gives us a sense of safety and protection, but restores our souls. There are familiar symbols of strength and authority from previous weeks' readings – rod and staff – which also comfort us and can lead us to a deeper faith in the midst of trying times.

Not only are we accompanied, cared for and protected, but we are recognised by God as precious – right in the midst of our enemies, given the greatest affirmation, anointed and blessed with abundance.

We are given further hope as we read how we are extravagantly loved and held by God. We are seen as God's own, dwellers in the house of the Lord – for our entire lives.

Ephesians 5:8-14

This passage encourages us to actively seek to know how we should live, not just as individuals, but as community (children). It gives us an ethical foundation on which to build ourselves; not only ways to conduct ourselves individually, but a way of being together as a community of faith trying to “find out what is pleasing to the Lord”.

If we are aware of bad things (v11 unfruitful works), we should not only reject them but actively expose them so that they can be seen. How do you do this well as a community in ways that are compassionate, caring and peaceful, and not combative or divisive?

This passage also alludes to prophecy; we are to speak out or tell truths, to challenge behaviour or systems that we recognise to be oppressive and dehumanising. The fruit of the light will be found not only in truth – that which is good, or true – but also in that which is right. This is about justice (righteousness) and is something that we are called to deal with in stark terms (expose them!). We need to be careful in our pursuit of justice that we do not dehumanise or ‘other’ but, in ways that are good and just, effectively name the problems and work together to make things good and right.

The final verse encourages us to not only wake up to what is going on, but to rise from the dead. This means raising our awareness of the issues facing people and communities, fully living out the fruit of the light and embedding the resulting values in our practice, our ways of being and our community life.

[John 9:1-41](#)

This can be an awkward passage to relate to, given the rather unsophisticated connection made between sickness and sin. The world view of the time, highlighted by the disciples' lack of nuance in their question around the connection is somewhat reductive. Jesus firmly counters the idea that physical disability is the result of anyone's sin (v3). He does not discuss it any further but focuses on the need to fulfil the work that He needs to do while there is still time. Telling people outright who He is – "I am the light of the world" (v5), "I am the Son of Man" (v37) – is important, but also the work of God in healing is front and centre.

Jesus gives instructions and send the man away to be given sight, but does not wait for him to come back – unlike His encounter with the woman at the well last week. The unfolding drama shows that when many people ask the wrong questions and are utterly disconnected from each other, everyone misses the point.

Unlike the Samaritan woman's experience of being taken at her word (last week's passage), the Pharisees are unwilling and unable to see beyond their own strict rules, despite all the evidence and the man's insistence that Jesus' power is from God. The Pharisees go to great lengths to get to the bottom of the story, but their pride means they are unable to listen to reason. Compare their questioning of the man to Jesus' own approach – Jesus does not ask for qualifications or past record, He simply asks the man if he believes.

Sermon ideas

There are lots of physical aspects to this week's passages, especially in the vivid landscapes of the psalm and the tactile nature of the healing in John's gospel. Might this inspire you to move your gathering outdoors and allow nature to shape your liturgy?

Each of the passages raise a few different questions that we can ask ourselves as we prepare a sermon, or that can be used as conversation starters in our gatherings.

Samuel:

- Whose voice is more important when making decisions in your community? Do our instincts naturally draw us to listen to the 'typical' leaders, or are we open to the 'Davids'? Do we even look for the 'Davids'?
- How do we look at things – from an earthly point of view or through the eyes of God?
- How long do we grieve over our 'Sauls' rather than doing what God has asked of us?

Psalm 23:

This may well be a very familiar passage. Sometimes we can forget how powerful it is and how much the imagery can evoke for us. I was at an event where the story of the psalm was laid out before us. The person leading the session marked out areas of lush green pasture and vibrant blue water. There were stark valleys and then a table that was set. We were asked what we liked and didn't like about the story, and then to consider where we were in the story and what questions it evoked for us. One person commented that the prospect of a table in the presence of their enemies was deeply uncomfortable. It struck me that for a psalm associated with comfort, having this particular line it raises an interesting point.

- What other ways can we use this psalm to help the story come alive again for people?
- Where are we noticing that God is leading?
- Where are you finding things that restore your soul? Where are the green pastures and the still waters in your life/community/rhythms?
- The rod and staff appear in this text as visible signs of God's faithfulness: where are you seeing this in your life?

Ephesians:

- What does it mean to be children of light?
- What do we need to recognise as good, and what do we need to challenge that is not? Where do we see and hear truth, and where do we need to challenge?
- Where do we see righteousness and where do we need to work for justice?
- What will it take to awaken us, and what might we do to arise and live into this?

John:

- The imagery in the ritual/performance is very engaging – preparing the mud, sending the man to bathe in a specific pool before he was given sight may lend itself to an imaginative contemplation based on this story.
- Lots of senses are in play in this passage: sight, touch, sound; physical movement and interaction, as well as emotions, etc. There is great scope for creativity in how we read, present and respond to this passage. How might you explore this with your community?
- The Pharisees' blindness is spiritual, because of their pride, inability to bend the rules, and hypocrisy. In previous weeks we saw Nicodemus journeying through the dark as

Jesus led him towards belief and faith. What has your journey through the Lenten darkness revealed to you?

Prayers

Gathering prayer / Call to worship

We gather together, heeding the call of our God and shepherd, to come and dwell together.

God of love,

May we know Your goodness and mercy

We gather together, seeking green pastures and still waters, seeking comfort on difficult journeys through dark valleys.

God of love,

Restore our souls

We gather together, seeking truth, goodness and righteousness. Teach us what is pleasing to You, O Lord.

God of justice,

Shine Your light upon us

Prayer of confession / repentance

Loving God,

help us to find out what is pleasing to You, and lead us toward that which is good and right and true.

When we are unfruitful,

when we are secretive,

when we fail to see, or actively close our eyes to injustice,

forgive us, Lord.

Help us to awaken and live fully in Your light and Your truth.

Amen

Prayer of thanksgiving / gratitude

We are grateful God,

For Your leading and guiding.

You are willing to get Your hands dirty for us

to give us a glimpse of Your vision of the world.
You do not hide who You are
but You let us ask questions and come to the wrong conclusions.

You don't leave us where we are, but You invite us to
speak out truth
strive for peace
fight for justice
work for healing
make disciples.

Thank You for trusting us
to be Your co-workers in realising the dream of God.

Prayer for others / intercession

Shepherding God,
help us to be more aware of Your presence with us.
As we move through life, may we live and move in You.
Help us at each stage of our journey to recognise Your rod and staff comforting us.

We pray for all who seek green pastures
We pray for all who seek still waters
We pray for all who seek restoring of their soul
We pray for all who seek right paths before them
We pray for all who find themselves in dark valleys
We pray for all who sit with their enemies around them

We pray that Your goodness and mercy will go before us,
will follow us, will uphold us and comfort us,
all the days of our lives.
Amen

Blessing / closing prayer

God of goodness
send us out to tell truth
to do good, and to work for righteousness.
Empower us to live as children of light in Your world.
Amen

Alternative Material

Examen – finding a rhythm through Lent for you, your community and the world

As we journey through Lent you are invited to consider what rhythm of prayer and reflective living may be helpful to you. Will you choose to fast from something, or choose to begin some form of practice? How will your journey through Lent allow you to consider the bigger picture of faith, and how will it play out in your relationships, within the context of community and how will your Lenten journey imprint upon Creation?

At the beginning of the day you may find it helpful to pray to God to raise your awareness of God's presence with you throughout the day.

This prayer by St. Anselm of Canterbury may be helpful:

O my God, teach my heart where and how to seek You,
where and how to find You.
You are my God and You are my all and I have never seen You.
You have made me and remade me,
You have bestowed on me all the good things I possess,
still I do not know You.
I have not yet done that for which I was made.
Teach me to seek You.
I cannot seek You unless You teach me
or find You unless You show Yourself to me.
Let me seek You in my desire,
let me desire You in my seeking.
Let me find You by loving You,
let me love You when I find You.
Amen

At the end of your day, you might use the practice of the daily examen to consider where you were aware of God's presence, and how you lived.

Take a moment to settle into the space that you have chosen, or find yourself in.

As you sit, take time to notice your breathing.

As you breathe, notice the noises and movement around you, how you are feeling within and without.

Let these things fade so they are not at the front of your mind.

Invite the Holy Spirit to be with you as you open up your heart and mind to hear God and to be attentive (use whatever words feel right for you).

Look back

Think back over the most recent part of your Lenten journey – perhaps the past day, or the past week.

Notice moments of presence and absence. Give thanks to God for these moments, and try to see how God was present in that time with you.

Now take a few moments to reflect on these questions.

- How did I meet God today?
- How did someone else meet God through me today?
- How did I experience God's love today?
- How did I express God's love today?
- What might God be saying to me now?

It may be helpful to finish your time by saying the Lord's prayer.

Further material can be found on the Sanctuary First website for the journey through Lent and for worship gatherings: https://www.sanctuaryfirst.org.uk/themes/article_new/the-third-day-lent-march-23

Musical suggestions

Our [online music resource](#) is on the Church of Scotland website; you can listen to samples of every song in the Church Hymnary 4th edition (CH4) and download a selection of recordings for use in worship. You will also find playlists for this week and liturgical seasons and themes on the *Weekly Worship* and *Inspire Me* tabs.

- A suggested playlist of [songs for the Season of Lent](#) can be found online
- You can find further musical suggestions for this week in a range of styles on the [Songs for Sunday blog](#) from Trinity College Glasgow.

- CH4 14, 15 or 16 – “The Lord’s my Shepherd” – Psalm 23, set for this Sunday
- 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
- CH4 462 – “The King of love my shepherd is” – another metrical version of Psalm 23.
- CH4 748 – “As stars adorn the night-veiled sky” – new words, but this gives 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
- Sing Glory 206, Worship Today 406 – “The Lord’s my Shepherd” – the well-known Stuart Townend version
- Junior Praise 433 – “Now Saul was Rejected” – tells the OT story with a simple tune, easy for keyboard or guitar; great last verse
- CMP 545 – “Open our eyes Lord, we want to see Jesus” – picking up the theme, before the sermon, or at the start of worship
- CMP 664 – “The Spirit lives to set us free” – an obvious choice with the chorus, ‘Walk in the Light’
- “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/>

Reflecting on our worship practice

Since the start of the pandemic in 2020, the way we worship has changed and we need to reflect on the changing or newly established patterns that emerged and continue to emerge as a result of the disruption.

We can facilitate worship for all by exploring imaginative approaches to inclusion, participation and our use of technologies in ways that suit our contexts. This is not an exhaustive list, but some things we could consider are:

- Framing various parts of the worship service in accessible language to help worshippers understand the character and purpose of each part. This is essential for creating worship for all (intergenerational worship) that reflects your community of faith.
- Holding spaces for reflection and encouraging prayer to be articulated in verbal and non-verbal ways, individually and in online breakout rooms.
- In online formats the effective use of the chat function and microphone settings encourages active participation in prayer, e.g. saying the Lord's Prayer together unmuted, in a moment of 'holy chaos'.
- While singing in our congregations is still restricted, we can worship corporately by using antiphonal psalm readings, creeds and participative prayers.
- Using music and the arts as part of the worship encourages the use of imagination in place of sung or spoken words.
- Use of silence, sensory and kinaesthetic practices allow for experience and expression beyond regular audio and visual mediums.

The following questions might help you develop a habit of reflecting on how we create and deliver content and its effectiveness and impact, and then applying what we learn to develop our practice.

- How inclusive was the worship?
Could the worship delivery and content be described as worship for all/
intergenerational? Was it sensitive to different "Spiritual Styles"?
- How was the balance between passive and active participation?
- How were people empowered to connect with or encounter God?
What helped this? What hindered this?
- How cohesive was the worship?
Did it function well as a whole?
How effective was each of the individual elements in fulfilling its purpose?
- How balanced was the worship?
What themes/topics/doctrines/areas of Christian life were included?
- How did the worship connect with your context/contemporary issues?

Was it relevant in the everyday lives of those attending and in the wider parish/
community?

How well did the worship connect with local and national issues?

How well did the worship connect with world events/issues?

- What have I learned that can help me next time I plan and deliver worship?

Useful links

Up to date information for churches around Covid-19 can be found [here](#)

You can listen to samples of every song in the Church Hymnary 4th edition (CH4) and
download a selection of recordings for use in worship [here](#)

You can find an introduction to spiritual styles online [here](#)

You are free to download, project, print and circulate multiple copies of any of this material for use in worship services, bible studies, parish magazines, etc., but reproduction for commercial purposes is not permitted.

Please note that the views expressed in these materials are those of the individual writer and not necessarily the official view of the Church of Scotland, which can be laid down only by the General Assembly.