



Western Fells Methodist Circuit

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Lent 3
A sorrowful journey

by
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All of us are currently walking a sorrowful journey as the world wrestles with Coronavirus. Even those of us who accept or even enjoy lockdown, or for whom it makes little difference cannot fail to be aware of the struggles in the communities around us. As Christians we see these struggles, link them to our own and join with our family members, friends, colleagues and neighbours sharing in their sorrow and walking alongside them.

Take time to read hymn number 236, Forty days and forty nights or reflect on these verses thinking of Christ's suffering in the wilderness and our own wilderness experiences. Music [here](#)

Burning heat throughout the day,
bitter cold when light had fled;
prowling beasts around your way,
stones your pillow, earth your bed.

Watching, praying, struggling thus,
victory shall be ours too;
angels minister to us,
as they ministered to you.

Shall not we your trials share,
learn your discipline of will;
and with you by fast and prayer
wrestle with the powers of hell?

Saviour, may we hear your voice;
keep us constant at your side;
and with you we shall rejoice
at the eternal Eastertide.

George Hunt Smyttan (1822–1870).

We turn to God in prayer, first in the words of this gathering prayer: God, you rejoice with those who rejoice; you mourn with those who mourn, and you call us to do the same. Help us to come to you today with honesty and openness, sharing our sorrows and knowing your comfort. Amen. In the silence confess to God those things for which you need His forgiveness and then open yourself to receive that forgiveness. Take time to accept it and to feel its healing effect on your life, know the release and peace that it can bring. Respond by saying the Lord's Prayer.

This service draws on the sorrow depicted in two readings, Moses at the burning bush described in Exodus and from John's gospel, Jesus comforting Martha and Mary after the death of Lazarus.

Moses and the Burning Bush: Exodus 3:1-10

Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. So Moses thought, "I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up."

When the Lord saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, "Moses! Moses!" And Moses said, "Here I am."

"Do not come any closer," God said. "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground." Then he said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God.

The Lord said, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey—the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them. So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt."

Jesus comforts the sisters after the death of Lazarus: John 11:20-29

When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.

"Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."

Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

"Yes, Lord," she replied, "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world."

After she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside. "The Teacher is here," she said, "and is asking for you." When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him.

And John 11:32-36

When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. "Where have you laid him?" he asked.

"Come and see, Lord," they replied.

Jesus wept.

Then the Jews said, "See how he loved him!"

Some Thoughts on The Sorrowful Journey:

The dangerous desert:

The desert in Jesus' day was a dangerous place. There was no food or water available and, it was inhabited by wild animals and criminals. To spend time in such a place was dangerous and not to be undertaken lightly. The book on which this series of services is based tells us "(the wilderness) represented the unknown, danger, failure and mortality."

As we journey through this pandemic, we constantly face the unknown. Many face danger too simply by going to work as the risk of catching Covid-19 is all around us. Hospital staff put themselves at risk daily, as do the police, the shop workers, firefighters, teachers, and numerous other key workers. Then there are those facing failure. Businesses are having to close some never to reopen, people have lost their jobs or have been furloughed and are failing to provide for their families as they would wish. Parents feel they are failing to properly educate their children and students feel they are failing to achieve

grades and qualifications previously within their reach. Sadly, we are also in a place of mortality as we hear the daily death toll announced each afternoon and many of us know of people connected to us who have now died. More than ever, we have to face our own mortality and the mortality of those we love.

We are in a wilderness where nothing is as it was twelve months ago, we cannot even go to church to share with, and comfort, each other. We can still turn to God though, we can tell Him how we really feel, we can express our fears and struggles and ask Him to help us journey through this wilderness time.

Learning to lament:

Looking at wilderness experiences in the Bible reassures us that God does hear us when we turn to Him and that He cares. In Exodus 3, Moses is hiding in the desert when he hears God say:

“I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering.” (Exodus 3:7)

God sees our struggles and hears our cries and wants us to be honest with Him about them. He does not consider it a lack of faith, an insult, or a sin when we are open with him and tell Him how we really feel rather than hiding behind the British stiff upper lip. We can be open with Him, expressing our doubts, our fears, and concerns about the state of the world generally, and the pandemic specifically. We do not have to pretend. He wants His people to cry out to him in honesty and desperation just as David, Jesus and Paul did. He wants our prayers of lament. Culturally, and with the best of motives, we pretend to be strong and coping for the benefit of others. We hide our pain and despair because we do not want to cause distress to those we love or to burden others with our fears. This becomes a habit, and we forget that God sees beyond such a façade and longs for us to come to him just as we are. He longs for us to offer him our brokenness and utter despondency that he might reach out to us at our point of need.

Jesus meets us . . . and sends us:

Lament is different for each one of us. Some come to God whispering a prayer, others shout and rage. Some sing a sad song, others work out their pain artistically. Some shake their fists, others ask questions constantly trying to understand, some simply offer their tears.

We see those different kinds of responses in the Gospel passage. When Martha's brother dies, she goes to Jesus with a theological question. Jesus meets her in that place, He listens, and He responds with a deep truth that she can place her hope in.

Mary is completely different. She also has a question, but she mostly weeps. Jesus is moved deeply in His spirit and He weeps with her. He must surely know what he is about to do, yet He is profoundly sorrowful for Lazarus, and is not afraid to show it.

“When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. ‘Where have you laid him?’ he asked. ‘Come and see, Lord,’ they replied. Jesus wept.” (John 11:33-35)

The account of Moses demonstrates another of God's reactions to a person walking with sorrow. Moses is upset by the mistreatment of his people under the Egyptians. He is also consumed with self-doubt at the mistake he has already made in trying to sort this situation on his own. God tells Moses that He cares, He heals, and that He is calling Moses to do something about it. God is there for Moses.

For each of us our wilderness worship this Lent is a place for us to be honest with God. To tell Him how we feel, and if like Martha we need to ask Him questions then to ask, to call out “how long, O Lord?”

Wilderness worship is also a place to weep, just as Mary did. God accepts this too.

Thirdly, wilderness worship may be a place where God shows us His heart for a situation, as he did with Moses. We may find ourselves feeling His sorrow for something before He sends us to go and do something about it, not in our own strength but in His power.

As we travel through today's wilderness God travels with us and sends Jesus to walk by our side. He hears our questions, holds us as we cry and equips us for the task to which He calls us. As we walk through the days of this pandemic with all its sorrow, questions and challenges, let us be open with God and receptive to His leading, that we might walk in His strength, sustained by the comfort of His love. Amen.

Our prayers of intercession are based on Psalm 13:

How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

We pray for those who feel forgotten and unseen, may they know that they are remembered and seen by you God.

Help us to partner with you to remember the forgotten.

Search our hearts to reveal those we hide our faces from, the outcast, the stranger or the homeless.

Change our hearts, that we may turn our faces towards these people and see them as your beloved children.

How long must I wrestle with my thoughts

and day after day have sorrow in my heart?

How long will my enemy triumph over me?

We pray for those we know who struggle with mental illness, anxiety and depression. We pray that there will be resources released to help, enough staff employed and finances given towards mental health services nationally.

Help us to be a friend and listening ear to those who struggle. Fill us with compassion and wisdom.

Ultimately, we pray for those who wrestle with sorrow, that they may know your victory over those dark thoughts which currently seem to triumph.

Look on me and answer, Lord my God.

Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death,
and my enemy will say, "I have overcome him,"
and my foes will rejoice when I fall.

We pray for those who might be considered fallen by those around them: may they know your restoration and grace. Help us to not judge or exclude your beloved children, but instead lift them up in prayer, and embrace them in the grace we know in Christ.

Thank you, Loving father, for hearing our prayer.
But I trust in your unfailing love;
 my heart rejoices in your salvation.
I will sing the Lord's praise,
 for he has been good to me.

Draw your time of worship to a close by considering the words of hymn
number StF 518.

Music [here](#)

Father, hear the prayer we offer:
not for ease that prayer shall be,
but for strength that we may ever
live our lives courageously.

Not for ever by still waters
would we idly rest and stay;
but would strike the living
fountains
from the rocks along our way.

Not for ever in green pastures
do we ask our way to be;
but the steep and rugged pathway
may we tread rejoicingly.

Be our strength in hours of
weakness,
in our wanderings be our guide;
through endeavour, failure, danger,
Father, be there at our side.

Love Maria Willis (1824–1908)

Thank you, gracious Father, for the space to be honest with you today. To you
all hearts are open, from you no secrets are hidden, so may we continue to
talk openly with you as we go from this place. Make us a people who listen to
others, sharing their sorrows, and spreading your comfort. In the power of
your Spirit, Amen.