

Our call to worship is from Psalm 106:

Praise the LORD. Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; His love endures forever.

Hymn of Praise: **Singing the Faith no. 499 Great God your love has called us here**
(Hymns and Psalms no.500 Lord God your love has called us here)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OKTKBA_yxaM

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| 1 Great God, your love has called us here
as we, by love for love were made.
Your living likeness still we bear,
though marred, dishonoured,
disobeyed ;
we come, with all our heart and mind,
your call to hear, your love to find. | 4 Then take the towel, and break the bread,
and humble us, and call us friends ;
suffer and serve till all are fed,
and show how grandly love intends
to work till all creation sings,
to fill all worlds, to crown all things. |
| 2 We come with self-inflicted pains
of broken trust and chosen wrong,
half-free, half-bound by inner chains,
by social forces swept along,
by powers and systems close confined,
yet seeking hope for humankind. | 5 Great God, in Christ you set us free
your life to live, your joy to share ;
give us your Spirit's liberty
to turn from guilt and dull despair
and offer all that faith can do,
while love is making all things new. |
- ~(Lord God, your love has called us here)
- Brian Wren (*b.* 1936)
- 3 Great God, in Christ you call our name,
and then receive us as your own,
not through some merit, right or claim,
but by your gracious love alone ;
we strain to glimpse your mercy-seat
and find you kneeling at our feet.

Prayer of adoration from day 11 of the Methodist Prayer Handbook

O Lord of majestic mountain and roaring sea,
O Lord of astonishing beauty and outlandish loveliness,
O Lord of the minuscule, the overlooked and the never seen,
O Lord of the extraordinary and the everyday,
Open our eyes to see your presence,
Our ears to hear the whisper of your voice
And, realising you in every place and every moment of our existence,
May we live with justice, peace, care and hope. Amen

Exodus chapter 32 verses 1 - 14

God called them a stiff-necked people! Are we stiff necked? Are we stubborn, self centred, superior?
Let us pray.

Prayer of confession

Dear God:

Please untie the knots that are in my mind, my heart and my life.

Remove the have nots, the can nots and the do nots that I have in my mind.
Erase the will nots, may nots, might nots that may find a home in my heart.

Release me from the could nots, would nots and should nots that obstruct my life.
And most of all, Dear God, I ask that you remove from my mind,
my heart and my life all of the 'am nots' that I have allowed to hold me back,
especially the thought that I am not good enough. Amen

Singing the Faith 440 Amazing Grace 6 verses
(Hymns and Psalms 215 only has 4 verses)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cIYvT745alg>

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| 1 | Amazing grace — how sweet the sound —
that saved a wretch like me !
I once was lost, but now am found,
was blind, but now I see. | 4 | The Lord has promised good to me,
his word my hope secures ;
he will my shield and portion be
as long as life endures. |
| 2 | God's grace has taught my heart to fear,
his grace my fears relieved ;
how precious did that grace appear
the hour I first believed ! | 5 | And, when this heart and flesh shall fail
and mortal life shall cease,
I shall possess within the veil
a life of joy and peace. |
| 3 | Through many dangers, toils and snares
I have already come ;
God's grace has brought me safe thus far,
and grace will lead me home. | 6 | When we've been there ten thousand years
bright shining as the sun,
we've no less days to sing God's praise
than when we first begun. |

John Newton (1725–1807) *(alt.)*

Matthew chapter 22 verses 1 – 14

Philippians chapter 4 verses 4 – 9

Sermon – Revd Lesley Martin

We were recently sent a video of our 2 year old granddaughter trying to sing a song she had just learnt. It went something like this: “Our God is a great big God, Our God is a great big God, Our God is a great big God, hmmm, hmmm, Our God is a great big God, (*waves hand in the air*) Our God is a great big God....”

Her mother stopped recording her at that point because it was getting monotonous as she was just repeating the chorus, giving it lip service. No joy in it. Now, I can't sing very well but I don't mind looking a fool for God. So I am going to illustrate for you how she was singing it 2 weeks later.

Our God is a great big God, (*opens hands wider and wider*) [*repeat twice*]

And He holds us in His hands (*place one hand into the other*)

He's taller than a sky scraper (*arms stretched high as far as they will go*)

And He's deeper than a submarine (*hold nose and sink slowly down*)

He's wider than the universe (*stretch arms out wide*)

And beyond my wildest dreams (*rotate fingers around side of head*)

And He's known me and He's loved me (*arms folded across self*)

Since before the world began (*circle arms wide as possible*)

How wonderful to be a part of God's amazing plan (*jump up and down for joy*)

She was singing it as it should be sung, full on, with joy. The theme of this sermon is Joy. It's a precious commodity. If people are asked what they want most out of life many would answer – not money or security – but happiness. Joy. In today's epistle Paul writing in chains probably from Ephesus to Philippi, tells us to rejoice: "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice" Paul has to repeat that, he thinks it is important. Rejoice. Out of interest there are 242 instances of the word joy in the Old and New Testaments.

I appreciate that there will be those amongst us this morning who feel they have very little to rejoice about at this time in their life: daily pain, grief, loneliness, anxiety, worry, fear. Those emotions can sit very heavily on us and affect how we feel, so much so that joy can often feel very far away or elusive.

I'm going to suggest that there are two ways of achieving the joy that is spoken of so often in the bible. The first way is by taking Paul's words - "Rejoice, I say again Rejoice" - and putting them into action. How do we do that? By being thankful. By practising being positive....always look on the bright side of life! (*Sung Monty Python style*)

But being thankful, counting our blessings as we would say in the church, does actually work. Meister Eckehart once said: "If the only prayer you ever say in your life is thank you it would be sufficient" The practise of offering God thankful prayer even for the littlest things does actually lift the spirits, for you realise and feel how much God gives and God loves you. I expect I am preaching to the converted here, that many of you know this and have experienced it. But let's keep on practising this art of thankfulness.

The second way to experience joy is to connect by prayer even more deeply to God. There is a spark of divine nature, a divine light within every soul...for we are made in God's image. Finding that spark within you often requires a prayer of relinquishment – letting go. We all like to put ourselves first. However, learn to put God first. Through prayer relinquish your self concern, self interest, self will. A phrase often used is "Let go and let God". In John's gospel Jesus offers us: "Life in all its fullness". Let go of your ego, let God fill you more with the Holy Spirit. Let your old ways of being in charge be given into God's hand.

Change happens throughout our lives and as human beings we learn to reorientate ourselves and move forward on a different track; but change can also make people close down, not able to deal with it, and slowly turn bitter. Don't get bitter, get better. Let go and let God through prayer show us the better way that will enable us to endure the confusing shadowy space we find ourselves in particularly at this time of pandemic.

There is joy in this. Empty yourself. Jesus did. I quote from the hymn; In Amazing Grace we sing: "... (he) emptied himself of all but love". That applies to us aswell. We too are called to empty ourselves to make room for God's Spirit of love, joy and peace. Jesus encourages his disciples, then and now, to do what he did, saying: "My yoke is easy, my burden is light" ..that's as opposed to trying to do it all in your own strength... that gets too heavy and worrisome. Don't try to push the river. For God can move the molehills and mountains in our lives. (Isaiah 55 v 12)

I do feel for the person that we heard about in our gospel reading who did it his own way. He had been invited to a banquet to celebrate the marriage of a King's son to be held in a palace. In the New Testament, and particularly in Jesus's teaching, banquets are the most common image to indicate what God is offering us in the Kingdom of God. God is offering companionship with himself. The Kingdom of God is not a reward or a prize for later but a joyous celebration of life with God now. And the Kingdom of God, like the banquet, has everything to do with invitation and acceptance, not a command performance. The wedding guest in our gospel reading today who was threatened with weeping and gnashing of teeth had been unwilling to let go of his self centredness, continuing to call the shots for his own life, to do what he wanted and not wear the clothes that had been put out for him. Once the wedding guest realised that he had missed his chance Jesus tells us he was speechless.

From the Exodus passage we are told that God sometimes called his people "stiff-necked". Did Jesus say "Thou shalt be in charge". Are you stiff-necked? How is that working for you? Do you want to be in full control and feel you are right when you may actually be wrong? Or do you want to know God's joy, peace and love. Our opening hymn finished with the words: "Christ you set us free. Your life to live, your joy to share" That is what **we** sang. Frank Sinatra sang "I did it my way". Fine. But there's a choice, to do it God's way. Let go and let God guide you into fullness of life, into joy and peace.

I finish with this thought from Psalm 16 v 11: "You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore." In God's presence is fullness of joy. Where are you living?

Prayer Let us pray: Almighty God, fill us with more of your Spirit that we may be able to experience the joy of being loved by you. Enable us to be led in your paths and to praise you day by day. AMEN

You are invited now to sing Our God is a Great Big God, using as many of the actions as you can remember, maybe feeling a bit foolish for Christ, but full of joy.

Singing The Faith 61 Our God is a great big God <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eaXPXWBcE3I>

*Our God is a great big God,
our God is a great big God,
our God is a great big God,
and he holds us in his hands.*

He's higher than a skyscraper,
and he's deeper than a submarine.
He's wider than the universe,
and beyond my wildest dreams.
And he's known me and he's loved me
since before the world began.
How wonderful to be a part
of God's amazing plan!

*Our God is a great big God,
our God is a great big God,
our God is a great big God,
and he holds us in his hands.*

Jo Hemming and Nigel Hemming

Prayers of Intercession

Great God of Love, we know that you care deeply for all your people and want us to know and trust you. For all of the bad things which are happening in our world, we know that you share our concern. We pray for families who have been ripped apart by violence and oppression. We pray for soldiers following orders and for the leaders who give them.

Help us to accept with faith your desire for us to act in your name to champion the cause of the lost, to share our blessings with the forlorn, and to shine a light on those who are stumbling in the dark. We lift to you the ongoing pandemic situation throughout your world; inspire humanity with compassion, wisdom and energy to care.

We remember those we know who are grieving. Comfort those who have been bereaved and grant them your peace. We think of those who are suffering from illness, depression, loneliness and hopelessness. We remember those who are going through life-changing situations, and those that feel separated from your unconditional love.

May **our** paths be directed where you need us most, and may we know and share the joy given to us through Jesus Christ. God of Love, hear these prayers we offer, through Christ Jesus, the one you sent to save us all, the one who is still rolling away the stone from our hearts and lives, the one who taught us to say together

OUR FATHER, WHO ART IN HEAVEN..... AMEN

Singing the Faith 487 “You shall go out with Joy..... and the mountains and the (mole)hills shall break forth before you <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OH0XbpNY2g8>

You shall go out with joy and be led forth with peace,
and the mountains and the hills shall break forth before you.
There'll be shouts of joy and the trees of the field
shall clap, shall clap their hands,
and the trees of the field shall clap their hands,
and the trees of the field shall clap their hands,
and the trees of the field shall clap their hands,
and you'll go out with joy.

Stuart Dauermann (b. 1944) and Steffi Geiser Rubin

Ending prayer:

Jesus says “Love” and I say “who?”

Jesus says “Give” and I say “what?”

Jesus says: “Follow” and I say “where?”

Jesus says “whoever, whatever, wherever”

Blessing

Go out into the created world holding fast to the promise that God is with you.

Go continuing on your life's journey knowing that God is with you each step of the way.

And may the God of Joy and peace bring you every blessing to enable you to serve and make God's will known. Amen