

## Call to worship

Welcome to worship, whoever you are, wherever you are, and whenever you are worshipping. God invites us *all* to worship, and every one of us brings something unique to this worship, actively celebrating and share God's unconditional love.

This Sunday is the start of "ordinary time" and surely we all wish we *did* live in ordinary times. But however challenging we find the world, we can take comfort in the extraordinary gift from God of Jesus, fulfilment of God's promise to us from before the world began, and with us forever. Our call to worship comes from last week's Circuit service, with Mary's celebration of God's eternal promise.

Tell out, my soul, the glories of his word!  
Firm is his promise, and his mercy sure.  
Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord  
to children's children and for evermore!

In our first hymn, we bring this time of worship before God. We offer ourselves for transformation, that God may bring out everything we can be, to model our lives ever more closely on the example of Jesus.

### Hymn: Take this moment, sign and space (STF 513)

By John Bell and Graham Maule. (CCLI 1430623)

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ymXD\\_4R292Q](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ymXD_4R292Q)

1. Take this moment, sign and space;  
take my friends around;  
here among us make the place  
where your love is found.
2. Take the time to call my name,  
take the time to mend  
who I am and what I've been,  
all I've failed to tend.
3. Take the tiredness of my days,  
take my past regret,  
letting your forgiveness touch  
all I can't forget.
4. Take the little child in me,  
scared of growing old;  
help me here to find my worth  
made in Christ's own mould.
5. Take my talents, take my skills,  
take what's yet to be;  
let my life be yours, and yet,  
let it still be me.

Alternative: H&P 653, "God is here! As we his people meet to offer praise and prayer"  
By Fred Pratt Green (CCLI 2566496)

## Prayer

God of creation, we bow before you.

God of the prophets, we honour you.

God of the stable, we worship you.

God of the cross, we thank you.

God of our lives, we serve you.

God of heaven, we praise you.

We bring this worship to you in love, knowing that you first loved us. Everything we have, we offer to you, O Lord. At all times and in all places, we join with the natural world you have created in proclaiming your glory. As we look out to the stars, we see how small our place in the universe might be – and yet you treasure each of us, pouring out your love on us, just as we are.

Lord, we're sorry for the times we do not value others or ourselves in the way that you do. We're sorry for our selfishness, for our lack of compassion, for the times we have turned our eyes away from injustices we find uncomfortable to look at. We cling to the promise you have made, that we can turn back to you and find forgiveness through Christ's love. We ask for that forgiveness now, and for your Spirit to help us reflect your love more fully in our world.

Amen.

## All-age address

*Video: ... in Tilehurst Methodist Church pulpit*

Hello everyone, and welcome to my place of worship. This is Tilehurst Methodist Church.

Actually, it's not – this is the *building* of Tilehurst Methodist Church, and that's not the same thing. Right now, I'm the only person in this building. But I'm not alone – God's with me.

Here, I worship God.

*Video: ... in the car*

Welcome to my place of worship. When I used to drive from Tilehurst to Beech Hill every day for work, I often spent some of that time in prayer.

Top tip: when you're driving and praying at the same time, it's really important to keep your eyes open.

God's with me in the car now, and sometimes I can feel God's presence more closely when I'm in the car than when I'm in a church building. I have more space and more time to reflect.

Here, I worship God.

*Video: ... in the woods*

Welcome to my place of worship. I think someone's forgotten to turn the heating on today – it's a bit cold! But God's here, and I'm here, so I can still worship.

I can catch glimpses of God here that I wouldn't see in the church building, or in my car. I can hear God in the rustle of leaves on trees, or the burbling of a stream, or the songs of birds.

Here, I worship God.

*Video: ... in the shed*

Welcome to my place of worship. This is my shed, and my home office, and my drum practice space, and my audio mixing desk... and it's where I worship God. Since last March, I've been in here most Sunday mornings, as part of Tilehurst Methodist Church. There's no pulpit here, and no lectern – but God's here with me.

Here, I worship God.

Have a look around you. This is your place of worship. You may think there's nothing special about it – but you're there, and God's there, so it's perfect for worship. And that's pretty special.

When we celebrated Christmas a couple of weeks ago, we were celebrating God coming to earth in Jesus. We sometimes call Jesus "Immanuel" which means "God is with us". We've taken down the Christmas decorations now – but God is still with us, and always will be, wherever we are, and however we're feeling. I think that's amazing.

Let's pray.

God of everyone and everywhere, we pray that we will feel that you near us.

Thank you for being with us, to strengthen us when we're tired.

Thank you for being with us, to cry with us when we're sad.

Thank you for being with us, to laugh with us when we're happy.

Amen.

*(End of video)*

Our next song reminds us that God is always with us, everywhere we go.

## **Song: God is with me**

**By Nick & Becky Drake** (CCLI 7122275)

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nZBhKp5\\_HwE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nZBhKp5_HwE)

1. With me, God is with me  
Yes He's with me every step.  
With me, God is with me  
Yes He's with me every step.  
And I know God is with me every step I go.  
I know God is with me every step.

2. With you, God is with you  
Yes He's with you every step  
With you, God is with you,  
Yes He's with you every step.  
I know God is with you every step you go.  
I know God is with you every step.

***Chorus:** And oh the love of God  
Is with me every day;  
Every step I take.  
He will lead me on  
Into His perfect plan,  
Walking hand in hand.*

Alternatives:

- Teach me to dance to the beat of your heart (STF 477, CCLI 1042097)
- One more step along the world I go (H&P 746, CCLI 1932090)

## **Readings**

We now hear God speaking to us through scripture. Listen out for God's presence throughout history, God's promises for all time, and what it means to be God's people.

- [Genesis 1:1-5](#)
- [Matthew 28:16-20](#)
- [Jeremiah 31:1-6, 31-34](#)

3. With us, God is with us  
Yes He's with us every step.  
With us, God is with us  
Yes He's with us every step.  
I know God is with us every step we go.  
I know God is with us every step.

*Chorus*

With me, God is with me  
Yes He's with me every step.

*Chorus*

Every step... every step... every step.

I chose our next hymn because of its emphasis on Jesus as eternal in past, present and future, particularly in the lines “Who from the beginning was the mighty Word” and “For this same Lord Jesus shall return again.” It was only when doing a bit more research that I found out how many variations there are of this hymn, including the following verse which echoes the Genesis passage we’ve just heard:

At his voice creation sprang at once to sight:  
all the angel faces, all the hosts of light,  
thrones and dominations, stars upon their way,  
all the heavenly orders in their great array.

**Hymn: At the name of Jesus (STF 316, H&P 74)**

**By Caroline Noel (CCLI 2371258)**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r4d4UXSJXig>

1. At the name of Jesus  
every knee shall bow,  
every tongue confess him  
King of Glory now.  
'Tis the Father's pleasure  
we should call him Lord,  
who from the beginning  
was the mighty Word.
2. Mighty and mysterious  
in the highest height,  
God from everlasting,  
very light of light.  
In the Father's bosom  
With the Spirit blest,  
love, in love eternal  
rest, in perfect rest.
3. Humbled for a season,  
to receive a name  
from the lips of sinners  
unto whom he came.  
Faithfully he bore it,  
spotless to the last,  
brought it back victorious  
when from death he passed.
4. Bore it up triumphant  
with its human light,  
through all ranks of creatures  
to the central height.  
To the throne of Godhead,  
to the Father's breast;  
filled it with the glory  
of that perfect rest.
5. In your hearts enthrone him;  
there let him subdue  
all that is not holy,  
all that is not true.  
Crown him as your captain  
on temptation's hour:  
let his will enfold you  
in its light and power.
6. Brothers, this Lord Jesus  
shall return again  
with his Father's glory,  
with his angel-train.  
For all wreaths of empire  
meet upon his brow,  
And our hearts confess him  
King of Glory now.

## Sermon

Thank you for inviting me into your place of worship. It's a privilege to be sharing in this *time* of worship with you.

Time is a topic that has interested me for a while, and it's something I speak about quite a lot, mostly in the context of computer programming. But beyond computing, it's something I think about a fair amount, including in my musing around faith. In today's act of worship I want to think about what it means for God – and God's promises – to be eternal, stretching back to creation and forward forever.

### God's promises from the beginning

In our Genesis reading, we heard about God creating “the heavens and the earth”, and the Spirit of God hovering over the waters. At the start of John's Gospel we have the familiar lines of “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

You don't have to read very far through Genesis to see God's promises to humankind. We often think particularly of Noah, and of the rainbow as a sign of God's promise after the flood. Beyond Noah, the rainbow has been used as a symbol of hope and cohesion for a long time – in the peace movement on marches, in the LGBTQI+ community as a symbol of inclusion and pride, and most recently supporting the NHS through Covid-19. Perhaps the physics of hope-filled sunlight interacting with dismal rain to make something so beautiful has a naturally powerful symbolic meaning. But for Christians, at least part of that meaning will always be God's promise.

God's promise to God's people is repeated many times through the Old Testament, including in the Jeremiah passage we read earlier. The second half of our reading today is one of my favourite parts of the Old Testament, but the first half is also lovely, especially “I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unfailing kindness.” So what is the promise, the covenant, in this passage? “I will be their God, and they will be my people.” If that's not specific enough, Jeremiah continues to declare the Lord's word: “they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.” To know God is to know love. God's promise is to make God's love known to us, and felt by us.

### Living as God's people

What about the other half? How are we God's people? How have we *been* God's people, and how can we be God's people more faithfully in the future? In our third reading, from Matthew's Gospel, Jesus gives another promise and some instructions. We also hear a little bit of consolation if we're feeling like we're not living up to our part.

Let's start with the promise: the very last verse of Matthew's Gospel is: “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” Again, the *presence* of Jesus with us is the

most important that Jesus can promise. As we have been reminded over the last year, “Best of all is God is with us.” Not “on top of all the other nice things”, but “*best of all.*”

Before that, Jesus gives instructions: “go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” What had Jesus commanded? Earlier in Matthew’s Gospel: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” So we have instructions of evangelism, praise, and compassion. Or as Fred Pratt Green wrote in the hymn “The Church of Christ in every age”:

We have no mission but to serve  
In full obedience to our Lord:  
To care for all, without reserve,  
And spread his liberating Word.

Finally, where’s the consolation I mentioned? It’s a verse I don’t remember hearing before, perhaps because it’s the Great Commission that gets most of the attention. “When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.” *Some doubted.* Even with all the evidence they had, even with the resurrected Christ in front of them, the disciples were imperfect. Sometimes I have doubts, and I’m sure I’m not the only one. So that mention of the disciples doubting lets me put myself in the picture, being told by Jesus that he will be with *me* always, to the very end of the age. I find comfort in that.

There is, of course, a lot of other scripture explaining how we can be God’s people. I’m fond of the following verse, originally spoken by the prophet Micah, and more recently explained (in reverse order) by the prophet David Shaw:

“And what does the Lord require of you?  
To do justice  
to love kindness  
to walk humbly with your God.”

I won’t recap David’s sermon here, but I’d urge you to go back and re-read it or listen to it again. It was from November 15th.

### **God’s promises today**

I’ve quoted more scripture in this sermon than I usually do, but it’s all relevant to this day, to this moment in time. We should *expect* it to be relevant to the world today, because God’s promise is forever. That’s not just the past and the future, but the present too. *Right now* is a hard time. January is always a difficult month for many people, and this year may be the hardest in living memory for most. So now is when we have to hold on to God’s promises.

You may have seen headlines a few weeks ago that Christmas was cancelled. It wasn't. Some of our plans for Christmas may have been cancelled, but God coming to earth in human form certainly wasn't. Nor is the meaning of Christmas over just because we've put the tinsel away. The Lord is still our God; we are still God's people. We always will be. Nothing in all creation – not even a pandemic – can ever separate us from the love of God, and neither can anything separate us from that call to be God's people.

How we weave that call into every day of our lives is certainly different right now, but it's no less important today than it was a year ago. Perhaps the call has changed to "do justice, love kindness and *stay at home* with our God", but we've been discovering ways of doing that. God is unchanging, but the way in which the Spirit demonstrates God's love through our lives can and does change. We should expect and embrace that. We should pray and act as the Spirit leads us, responding to the needs of all people. We have to repeatedly reflect on what it means for us right now to be God's people, and seek to discern the will of God in our lives. Not because we'll never be good enough to "earn" God's love – but because God's love is so all-embracing, so unconditional, so full of grace that we always have more to learn about how it's shown to us and how we can show it to others.

## **Conclusion**

I've been reflecting on the word "atonement" over the last few months, and how we tend to talk about it in terms of making amends for doing something wrong. But I like to break it up as "at-one-ment" – the emphasis being on reconciliation and unity. That's at the heart of both sides of the covenant. God is with us, and we are called to be at one with God. As God's love leads, so our footsteps follow.

God has been with us from the very beginning. God's promise to be with us forever was shown in Christ, is true today, and will be true when we gather in God's glory in heaven. Our response is to draw ever closer to that love, and show it to others – for all our lives.

Amen.

*(End of sermon video)*



Our next hymn highlights some challenges we face as individuals, as God's church, and in the wider world – but contrasts them with the steadfast love we find in God's eternal presence.

**Hymn: Within God's hands (tune: Finlandia; STF 419)**

Available under the Creative Commons Licence

1. Dark clouds may come and block out all our sunlight.  
We feel alone; neglected or unheard.  
Within God's hands, we find a place of safety;  
where we are known, and loved for who we are.  
Within God's hands, we take our rest and comfort;  
regain our strength, ready to serve afresh.
  
2. We have our doubts, we shout our disagreements,  
our heartfelt views can threaten common bonds.  
But as God's Church, we work for what unites us:  
the love of Christ; the grace that reaches all.  
And as God's Church, we join our hands together,  
walking with God, in humble, joyful steps.
  
3. Beyond our doors, the world feels ever bleaker.  
The ravaged earth, the wars, disease, and hate.  
And yet that voice, which speaks to us in stillness,  
calls us to hope, to trust in God above.  
That Holy voice, the Spirit deep within us,  
awaking prayer and action in God's name.
  
4. For God is Lord, the universe-creator,  
the Holy one, inspiring awe and praise.  
God's love will reign, that Love that came among us,  
Immanuel, God's love in human form.  
God's love will reign, and we will see God's glory;  
at one, in wholeness for eternity.

Alternatives:

- Lord, for the Years (STF 470, CCLI 3274952)
- For the healing of the nations (H&P 402, CCLI 3200067)

## **Prayers of intercession**

We offer our prayers for ourselves and others.

God who in the beginning created the heavens and the earth, we pray for your world. We pray for your wisdom, guiding leaders to encourage us to treat nature with more respect. We pray for your inspiration in scientists and engineers working to find ways of helping us to change. We pray for those already suffering the consequences of climate change, and for compassion that we may help them.

God of human history, we pray for those who face injustice. We ask for courage and strength for those who are considered “less” because of differences in race, gender, nationality or wealth. Help us to heal divisions of the past and work for a more just and equal world.

God of our lives today, we pray for those facing hardship today. We ask your comfort for those facing challenges in their physical or mental health, whether related to Covid-19 or not. We think of those whose lives are disrupted economically, socially, and spiritually by the pandemic, and ask for your presence to be felt and your love to be demonstrated by communities caring for each other. We pray for your strength for those in the NHS; for teachers; for those working in shops and delivery services.

God of our future, we pray that we may be your hands at work in the world; your voice calling for justice; your smile for those who need to feel your love. We ask your blessing on your church, that we may be united in responding to your call.

God of eternal rest, we remember those who have died, and those who grieve for them. May memories of our loved ones brighten our days, and may we trust in your grace for those who are now with you.

All of these prayers we offer in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray together:

### **The Lord's Prayer**

Amen.

In our final hymn, we sing of that great commission, responding to God's eternal promise and showing God's transforming love in the world.

**Hymn: Lord, your church on earth is seeking (STF 410, H&P 774)**

**By Hugh Sherlock (CCLI 2452933)**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e77x9gVYW2A>

1. Lord, your Church on earth is seeking  
your renewal from above;  
teach us all the art of speaking  
with the accent of your love.  
We would heed your great commission:  
sending us to every place —  
preach, baptise, fulfil my mission,  
serve with love and share my grace.
2. Freedom give to those in bondage,  
lift the burdens caused by sin.  
Give new hope, new strength and courage,  
grant release from fears within:  
light for darkness; joy for sorrow;  
love for hatred; peace for strife.  
These and countless blessings follow  
as the Spirit gives new life.
3. In the streets of every city  
where the bruised and lonely dwell,  
let us show the Saviour's pity,  
let us of his mercy tell.  
In all lands and with all races  
let us serve, and seek to bring  
all the world to render praises,  
Christ, to you, Redeemer, King.

**Blessing**

May the God who shakes heaven and earth,  
whose Spirit blows through the valleys and the hills;  
whom death could not contain and who lives to bring us life;  
bless us with the power to endure,  
to hope and to love.

Amen.

*(By Elizabeth Raine)*