

“From Fear to Hope”
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Dear Friends,

The theme for this service “From Fear to Hope” was suggested by the discussions that many churches are having to hold about how, in changing circumstances, we can provide worship opportunities for our congregations, as well as reflecting on the experiences of Christ’s disciples from Holy Week through to Pentecost.

Please feel free to ‘customize’ your service to your own congregation... e.g. ... The hymns are only suggestions - if your congregation knows others that fit in with the theme, especially any newer ones, you could use those. On page 3 there is a section in the services for sharing our dreams for the future. Those suggested could be printed and each given to a different person in the congregation to read aloud from their seat, or people could write their own beforehand to bring and share. You may also wish to mention current concerns in appropriate places in the prayers. This is *your congregation’s* service of worship to God.

Chris Odell (Sheasby)

“From Fear to Hope”

Call to Worship: Leader 1

Wherever our father Abraham travelled he built an altar to worship God.
We, too, are travelling on a journey into an unknown future.
Let us, like Abraham, offer the sacrifice of praise to the God who travels with us.

HYMN – The God of Abraham praise....*StF 91; H&P 452; MP 645.*

Introduction to the theme of the service: Leader 1

For Abraham, as he set out on the journey God had called him to make and had to leave behind all that was familiar in his home in Ur of the Chaldeans, the unknown future must have been daunting prospect. But the journey he took was one from fear to hope, for he knew that God was with him and he worshipped wherever he could on the journey.

And for the disciples too, whose lives had known such tremendous changes, there came a time when the future must have seemed unknown and frightening. They had left everything to follow Jesus, walked the way of fear and grief and doubt at his Crucifixion, been turned around by joy at the Resurrection; and then, the parting at the Ascension brought even more change. Afraid of the unknown future, they must have wondered, ‘What next? What do we do now?’

For Christian congregations in our society today, a society which often sees faith as irrelevant and where church attendance is dwindling and leaders in short supply, there is also fear and uncertainty about the unknown future. ‘What next, for us?’ ‘Can fear be turned to hope?’ That last question is the theme of this service - ‘From fear to hope’.

We remember the promises of God in our opening prayer...

Prayer of Adoration: Leader 2

Loving God, we praise and thank you for your many promises to us,
Promises that offer us hope in times of fear:

The promise of the rainbow that life would continue on earth;
The promise to Abraham that you will care for those who trust in you;
The promise of the Resurrection that evil and death are overcome;
The promise of the risen Christ to his followers that he will be with us forever.

Loving God, we praise and thank you for your many promises to us;

Promises that offer us hope in times of fear and uncertainty:

Light for the darkest of days;
Courage when faced with suffering or pain;
Joy in the midst of sorrow;
Support for when we feel weak or alone.

Loving God, we praise and thank you for your many promises to us;

Promises that offer us hope in times of fear:

In the name of Jesus Christ, our Risen Lord and Saviour, **Amen.**

Reading: Reader 1 Genesis 12: 1-9

Reflection: Reader 2 - A letter from Sarah

Dear Sister, it's now so many years now since I saw you face to face, but I often think of our happy childhood together and I still miss you. I don't know when you will get this letter, but please send my greetings to all those of our family and friends in Ur who still remember me.

Who would have thought, when I married Abraham, that my life would have taken me so far away from you all and shown me so many different places and sights? What an adventure it has been!

And all because I committed myself to be Abraham's life companion. He only found the courage to leave the life we knew in Ur because he heard a call from his God, Yahweh, the great 'I AM'. We not only changed our lives, completely, but found a new faith. 'I AM' is so different from the Moon god you and I worshipped in Ur. We don't just experience him on clear nights some days of the month. He is a God who is with us every moment of our lives, every step we take. Abraham sets up an altar to worship him wherever we set up our tents. It is he who gives us the courage to live and journey as we do. It is he who gives us hope that we will find our own country in the end. And, guess what, dear sister. I've had a baby! We've called him Isaac. I expect that by now you're a grandmother several times over – but I'd given up hope of ever being a mother. However, Yahweh had promised Abraham that he would be the father of a great nation. And although I had laughed at this, it seems he keeps his promises. All my fears about the future as we set off from Ur have proved groundless – faith has turned them into hopes. Love, Sarah.

HYMN: Through all the changing scenes of life... *StF 638; H&P 73; MP 702.*

Comment: *Leader 1 – Fear & Doubt - Thomas*

I think that we, of the 21st century, with our need to know and our need of proof, can identify with Thomas. He's often known as 'Doubting Thomas' – but perhaps a better name would be 'Questioning Thomas'. He was a man who *needed to know* - where Jesus was going, and, later, how *he could be sure* that he was really raised from the dead, which seemed so unlikely. Like us, Thomas questioned what he heard, needing to understand. He was fearful of the unknown.

Gospel Reading: *Reader 3 - John 20:24-29*

Prayer of Confession: *Leader 2*

Lord, we want to bring to you the times
When clouds of doubt have darkened our lives
And we have failed to see your love shining through them.
We confess that we can be afraid of putting our trust
In anything or anyone we cannot fully understand, including you.
We confess that we can be afraid of surrendering our lives to you.
Draw near to us, Lord Jesus, as you drew near to Thomas,
With forgiveness, reassurance and love, **Amen.**

Epistle Reading: *Reader 4* – In this reading from Romans, Paul explains how faith brings hope into our lives ... Romans 5:1-5

Prayer of Thanksgiving: *Leader 2* Response: Spirit of God: **We thank you.**

For the faith that brings peace and purpose into our lives
And fills them with hope;
Spirit of God: **We thank you.**
For the hope that brings courage and joy into our lives
And fills them with love;
Spirit of God: **We thank you.**
For the love that brings confidence and compassion into our lives
And fills them with Jesus Christ;
Spirit of God: **We thank you. Amen.**

HYMN: Jesus lives,... *H&P 198; MP 373 OR* Now the green blade rises.... *StF 306; H&P 204.*

Comment: *Leader 1 – Fear – of the Unknown Future*

In our next Bible reading, we hear the frightened voice of 'Questioning Thomas' again. He is afraid – Jesus is talking about going away, and he doesn't know what that means. Jesus reassures him, but perhaps leaves him with more questions than the answer he was seeking...

New Testament Reading: Reader 1 - John 14:1-6

Prayer: Leader 2 (the quotation in the prayer is from Corrie Ten Boom)

Lord, we bring to you our fears and anxieties about the unknown future -

For ourselves, our loved ones, our world and our church.

We confess our own confusion about decisions we need to make -

The way we should go, the things we should do or say.

Forgive us and give us the help of your Holy Spirit, that we may,

“never be afraid to trust an unknown future to a known God”. **Amen.**

Comment: Leader 1 – Hope - Dreams for the future

After the Ascension, the disciples, bereft of Jesus once more and afraid of the authorities, hid away. They did not know what to do next. Then God sent the Holy Spirit to them, and as William Barclay says in his commentary on Acts, they turned from rabbits into ferrets! They stopped hiding away, but went out hunting new followers for the Way. No longer paralysed by fear, but emboldened by hope they forgot their nightmares and began to dream dreams of a wonderful future under God’s love...

New Testament Reading: Reader 2 - Acts 2:1-6; 12-17

Reading out of dreams: Members of the congregation

- *I dream of a world where everyone is treated with respect, where everyone matters.*
- *I dream of a church that shares God’s love and joy and hope with those whose lives are hard or empty.*
- *I dream of a world ruled by God’s rules of justice, compassion and peace.*
- *I dream of a time when people will recognise their hunger for God.*
- *I dream of a future where all have the necessities for life .*
- *I dream of a time when the love of God will revitalise the church and draw others to him..... etc.*

Offering and Prayer: Leader 2

Loving God, we have shared our dreams for the future,

And now we share our gifts with you.

We offer this money, and our very selves,

To help make the dreams of your kingdom come true. In Jesus’ Name, **Amen.**

HYMN: Lord, thy church on earth is seeking... *StF 410; H&P 774. OR*
In the streets of every city... *MP 866.*

Comment: Leader 1 – Fear – of change – longing for the past

In church magazines, you’ll often find articles or poems comparing the ways of today unfavourably with the ways of yesteryear – you’ll know the sort of thing I mean! Closer inspection, without the rose-tinted spectacles, makes us realise that things are not that simple. Yes, society and the way we live has changed a great deal – but not only for the worse. Nostalgia for the past, while enjoyable, may be dangerous if it stops us living in the present or moving with hope into the future. That’s shown clearly in our next Bible reading, about the exodus of God’s people from Egypt. How much are we like them?

Old Testament Reading: Reader 3 Numbers 11:4-6

Reflection: Reader 4 - on what the past can teach the present – ‘The Old Plan’

In the vestry in one of our churches is a framed copy of a Wesleyan Circuit Plan for May to July 1861 – 157 years ago! It makes fascinating reading, even if the print is very small!

It tells us that there were 35 chapels in that particular circuit, though no services at one of them. (Had there been a falling out, perhaps?) There were only 4 ordained ministers, but 54 preachers, if you include those on trial, visiting preachers and worship leaders called 'Exhorters'. We may believe in a 'golden past' of the Methodist Church, perhaps thinking back to our childhoods, when churches were always full, Sunday Schools bursting at the seams, and most of life revolved around the Chapel. But looking at this particular preaching plan, you can see that things were complicated, even then. Morning, afternoon and evening services are recorded, but only two churches had morning and evening every week. The other churches do a lot of alternating between the three different times, sometimes on a fortnightly basis, sometimes over a month. We may wonder how they knew when the services were! – especially if they were unwilling to splash out a penny halfpenny for a copy of the plan! Holy Communion is only celebrated every quarter. Weeknight services and meetings are, however, very important in 25 of the chapels. How flexible our great- or even great-great grandparents had to be! Perhaps this plan has something to teach us as we make decisions, as we shall need to do, about how to fill preaching appointments on our 21st century plans...

Comment: Leader 1 – Hope – God is with us

When the time came for the Risen Christ to leave his disciples and return to his Father, he tasked them with sharing the Good News of God's forgiveness and love with all the world. Any fear they might have had about this commission was turned into hope when they received that reassurance from Jesus, 'I will be with you always, to the end of the age'. Any fear we have about our unknown future can be turned into hope, when we remember that promise...

New Testament Reading: Reader 1 Matt 28:16-20

Prayers of Intercession: Leader 2

Response: Loving God, hear our prayers: **In you we put our hope.** Let us pray –

Loving God, we pray for those who live in fear and who long for better times:

For countries where there is war or conflict, who long for peace, *for.....*

For the hungry, desperately waiting for the arrival of aid, *for*;

For the victims of persecution or oppression, praying for a shift in power, *for*

Loving God, hear our prayers: **In you we put our hope.**

Loving God, we pray for those who live in fear of a dark and dismal future:

For those who long only for times that are past;

For those who are lonely or depressed;

For those who feel that their lives are stories of failure;

For those struggling with chronic or terminal illness in themselves or those they love. *SILENCE*

Loving God, hear our prayers: **In you we put our hope.**

Loving God, we pray for the church in our fears for its future,

That you might help us to be a hopeful, forward looking people:

Ready to respond to each new vision that you give us;

Ready to hear your word for us today;

Ready to be renewed by your Holy Spirit;

Ready to go boldly into the future with Jesus Christ.

Loving God, hear our prayers: **In you we put our hope.**

In the name of the Way, the Truth and the Life, Jesus Christ our Saviour, **Amen.**

The Lord's Prayer:

HYMN: All my hope on God is founded ... *StF 455 ; H&P 63 ; OR*

Lord, for the years... *StF 470; MP 428.*

Blessing: Leader 1

May the God of hope fill us with all joy and peace as we trust in him, so that we may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**