

1. Transformed Lives

Both readings depict transformation, heralding a new way of living.

In Genesis, God is establishing a new covenant *“with you and with your descendants after you and with every living creature...the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals... every living creature on earth.”* Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, God will see it and remember this everlasting covenant he has made.

In the Mark passage, Jesus’ baptism foretells of his death, transformational resurrection, and emergence into new life as God affirms his love and pleasure with the Son, sent to earth so that we too, may live transformed lives. *“You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”* Immediately after this declaration of Sonship, we might expect good things to follow, but what occurs is 40 long days and nights in the wilderness, being tempted, followed swiftly by the incarceration and death sentence of his cousin, John! This is hardly what one might expect after such declarations of love.

Yet both passages are testament to the fact that being in covenant with God is not all plain sailing. Rather, it means both acknowledging and accepting that the difficult “wilderness” or “storm cloud” days lie within both the pain and joy of transformation. Both are testament to transformed lives.

Creative Prayer Response:

Imagine...

Perhaps we can use the picture of the covenant rainbow appearing in *“the clouds”*, poignant to so many in 2020, as a symbol of hope amidst despair; a symbol of how we might look up- to join in with Gods’ transformational work, beginning with our own lives...

How might we each be a “rainbow” in the clouds, hope in the wilderness, echoing the transformation of our own lives through the practical display of a lived love to others..?

Rainbows, caused by sunlight always appear in the section of sky directly opposite the sun... in other words, in the darkest place. So, how might we each transform the darkest places we tread?

“A rainbow is a meteorological phenomenon, that is caused by reflection, refraction, and dispersion of light in water droplets resulting in a spectrum of light appearing in the sky, taking the form of a multicoloured circular arc.”

To act as a rainbow, bringing colour into the lives of others, perhaps we each need the following properties:

- **Reflection** (the throwing back by a body or surface of light, heat, or sound without absorbing it; production of an image as if by a mirror; serious thought or consideration)
 - Are we able to take time to reflect on the way we live our lives?
 - Do we live our lives as a reflection of the Light of the World?
- **Refraction** (the bending of light as it passes from one transparent surface into another)
 - Alden Solory (www.tobendlight.com) sees the act of blessing as an attempt to summon The Light and bend it towards Holy purposes
 - Consider, how we each use this powerful act of blessing in our own lives & the lives of others?
- **Dispersion** (separation of light into colours; distributing something over a wide area)
 - How might we each practically disperse the transformational love of God into the world? Perhaps identify one new way that we could respond to an immediate need we see.

Perhaps, this week you could draw or hang a simple rainbow in your prayer space as you pray:

Lord, may we, through your strength, each bring colourful transformation to dark places, in grateful response to the wonder of transformation you have brought to our own lives through the sacrifice of your Son. *Amen*

2. Growing Church

Each of these readings tells of an unexpected change of direction, and the human response to God's way which seems impossible or counter-intuitive.

In Genesis, God creates a covenant with Abram. God promises to establish an everlasting covenant to be "*your God*" if Abram will walk before God "*faithfully and blamelessly*". To affirm the new covenant, Abram and Sarai are given new names to reflect their new assignments. Abram (exalted Father) is replaced with Abraham (father of a multitude) and Sarai (princess) is given the new name of Sarah (noblewoman). Their response to this God-given unexpected directive, later in the passage is one of initial disbelief.

In Mark, the disciples have recognized Jesus as Messiah and must have begun to think that he had come to conquer the ruling physical powers. Instead, Jesus begins to talk of his rejection, suffering, death, and resurrection. Peter rebukes Jesus. Surely this is madness- denial, sacrifice, carrying the cross, losing their lives- it cannot be the way! It is only with the privilege of knowing what is to come that we may see a different perspective.

Creative Prayer Response:

Recall...

Recall a time in your own life, of disbelief in an unexpected change of plan or something that was expected of you that seemed too much; humanly impossible...

- How did you react initially?
- Who did you turn to?
- With the benefit of hindsight, is there anything you would have done differently?

Often, in work or home life, results are dependant on our own reactions and responses. To move on, grow, move forward it is often best, not to be too set in our ways lest we lose the opportunity to live a better way.

If we think of a plant that is pot bound, its roots tangled and struggling to find nourishment in old soil, we recognise the need for it to be re-potted so that it may grow better, finding new nourishment and able to grow, flower and fruit in season. We are each remarkably like that plant.

To grow, we each need to be open to what God is saying, not dismissive nor disbelieving of any unexpected changes of direction. We are not to hold tightly to the old but be prepared for the new, for this is the way of the cross and the way of growth.

Yes, through grace, God covenants with us and Jesus walks the way of the cross for us, but in response we are each invited to join in, holding lightly the familiar ways- so that we are ready to exchange it for any new way God chooses.

Find a holding cross or create a small paper cross. Hold it *lightly* at its intersection.

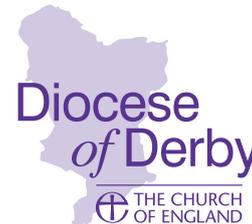
- Look at the vertical piece and recall the cost of the cross: God with us, born as man, dying on the cross and resurrected to life eternal so that we could be restored to God and grow in faith. Look up and give thanks.
- Now, consider the horizontal outstretched part, where Jesus' arms stretched wide in suffering for love of the world, for love of each one of us. How might we each stretch outwards to love our neighbour as ourselves?
- The intersection of the pieces of the cross is the axis upon which the Gospel rests; the heart of God's sacrifice.

Perhaps, this week, you might buy a small spring plant from the supermarket or garden centre and transplant it from its pot bound growth to new ground outside, giving it chance to grow and expand. As you replant it, you could pray: Lord, we humbly ask that we each might be willing to be replanted wherever we are needed, so that both we and your Church may grow too. *Amen*

Lent Spiritual Resources 2021: Creative Prayer Responses around 6 Themes

Written by: Karen Herrick, Harlequin Arts

www.harlequinarts.co.uk



3. Building community

Both readings tell of what it means individually, and as a community of God's people, to follow God's way and be in relationship with him through the way we live out our lives "in spirit and in truth."

The Exodus passage provides us with a set of laws that are not meant to restrict but give us freedom in the Christian life. They are words to live by, giving us guidelines for worship, fellowship, relationships, and discipleship (*Rick Warren, A Purpose Driven Life*). In following them we are following God's purpose for our lives which in turn, builds a God focussed community.

In the John passage, Jesus overturns the tables in the temple, and in doing so, recognizes that the temple "*fulfilled its function but had forgotten its purpose*" (*W. Hulitt Gloer, "Homiletical Perspective: John 2:13-22," Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 2, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008)*). Jesus acts out of a commitment to live out God's purposes, calling out the wrong attitudes and corrupt practices he sees in God's house through practical action.

Creative Prayer Response:

Act...

We have all, at various times in our lives, turned away from following God's purposes for our lives. We have all fallen short and broken God's commandments.

Consider using this time to repent and ask God's forgiveness.

1. Kneel (or sit, with head bowed, if unable to kneel). Pray in your own words, recalling things you would like to confess and ask for forgiveness.
2. Now slowly stand, with arms outstretched above in praise, knowing that we are each fully forgiven, washed clean and are given a new start by the God who brings new life. Give thanks.
3. Stretch out both arms horizontally, reaching out, as you recall the community of believers, he has given you. Ask God to help you build up his people & to build community in the way you reach out and in the way you live your life.
4. Next, draw your arms and hands inwards in a heart shape, towards your own heart. Ask bravely, that you may be willing to allow Jesus to turn the tables in your own life and be willing for him to call out anything that might mar the purpose he has for our lives. Ask Jesus for anything that you might need for the strength to do this. Tell him how you feel, including any fears you may have.
5. Finally, fling both hands outwards, asking prayerfully for courage to stand up to any wrongs that you see in the world, through practical words and actions that will help to turn the tables of injustice, poverty, prejudice and evil to build a better community.

Lord, fill us with your spirit so that we may live lives of courage, working together with all your people to turn the tables on wrongdoing and help to build a better world for all. *Amen*.

4. Generous Faith

Each passage here, tells of a faith that surrenders to God, giving back to him all that he has given to us.

The Old Testament reading shares the story of Hannah, bereft from being barren and the pain of provocation from her rival. She brings the state of her heart to God, in honest prayer, asking for what she desires and yet, in faith, offering it back to God if it is given. When Samuel (meaning “heard by God”) is born, Hannah waits until he is weaned and then, sacrificially to fulfil her vow, gifts the gift back to God.

In the Gospel of Luke, we meet Mary and Joseph before Simeon & Anna in the temple. The parents of Jesus marvel at what is said of him. Mary has already surrendered to God, through agreeing to host the Christ child, yet here she is told of both the joy and the pain that this will ultimately bring her.

Creative Prayer Response:

Taste...

The experience of both Hannah and Mary is bittersweet. The generosity of their faith and their obedience to the call of God brings them both the joy of motherhood and the intense pain of letting go, as they relinquish their dreams for the future into the hands of God.

Perhaps we can imagine some of the pain that each woman experienced in surrendering their dreams to the Almighty, trusting that good would come from the generosity of their faith? Can we also, I wonder, each bring ourselves to surrender our own dreams to God, allowing him the freedom to resurrect or redirect them?

Talk to God honestly, of how this makes you feel and ask for whatever you need.

“...*Freely you have received: freely give*” (Matthew 10:8)

“*Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.*” (Luke 6:38)

Take a small chunk of bittersweet, dark chocolate. Place it on your tongue and taste the bittersweet flavour as it melts. Pray that we, like Hannah and Mary, may have the faith to give so freely even when the experience of doing so may be bittersweet. As the chocolate gradually becomes less, ask the Lord to show us if there is anything that we need to surrender to him, and for the courage to willingly say “Yes, Lord!” in faith.

Lord, thank you for the faithful lives of Hannah & Mary and all of your people who have said “yes” to your call. Give us courage through their witness, to be a witness ourselves in testimony to your generosity to us. *Amen*

Perhaps choose a historical or living person of faith who has inspired your own journey and read more of their lives.

5. Courageous Hope

Each passage tells of a new covenant arising out of an old one.

In Jeremiah, God tells Israel of the new covenant that he is making with his people, where the law will no longer be on physical stone tablets. Instead, all will know God “from the least to the greatest”. God will “put his law in their minds and write it on their hearts.” He “will be their God, and they will be my people.” Some say that this passage is the closest thing in the Old Testament to the New Testament way. It all seems a positive way forward.

In John, Jesus reminds us that “*unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds...*”. He then goes on to foretell his death, explaining how he will draw all people to himself once he is “lifted up from the earth”. The passage links the two scenarios to tell of how the old covenant way paves the way to the rebirth of the new covenant through the death & resurrection of Jesus. This sounds positive, but also painful.

Creative Prayer Response:

Sow...

It takes courage to begin something completely new; to have faith that the time for the old ways has passed, and wisdom to know that the future beckons for a new approach. However, it is hope for something better that spurs us on to commit to the new.

When seeds are sown into the ground, we trust and hope that they will grow, flourish and bear fruit- but first the seeds must be given up to the earth, buried in the dark where they die then sprout silently in the darkness. It is through attentive watering and nurturing that they reach maturity to produce many more seeds. This is the way of courageous hope, entrusting our lives into the hands of God as we follow the way of the cross, allowing ourselves to be sown into the dark places, that we might grow seeds of the Kingdom of God.

Sow some simple seeds in a windowsill pot or garden.

- As you release the seeds into the ground, ask God to release courage and hope into your heart.
- As you cover the seeds with earth, pray that you may be earthed in the love of God, and deeply rooted in Him, willing to give to God anything that needs to be surrendered to him, whether that is time, money, old habits, worries, unhealthy relationships or something else. Are you able to name those things before God?
- As you water and tend the seeds, watch for signs of new growth sprouting from the soil, and consider what nourishment your own spiritual growth might need, too?
- Trust and hope, courageously that when we surrender our all to God, he will honour our willingness and commitment to grow in us something wonderful.

Lord, give us courage to surrender to you daily the old ways in our lives that no longer work. Help us to trust you, that you will work in us some new thing as we commit to walking with Jesus the way of the cross. *Amen.*

6. Life-Giving Love

Both passages tell of parts of the ways that were sacrificially walked by Jesus on the way to the cross.

The Isaiah passage is the third of four “Servant Songs” from the Old Testament, clarifying the vocation of God’s servant. Here, the Servant recognises his duties and actions as a teacher and tells of his confidence in the Sovereign God who will prevail over those who wrongly accuse him, as he surrenders himself to the cruel actions of those who ill- treat him. Possibly, it foretells of Jesus as teacher and scapegoat and the painful way to the cross.

John tells of the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, when all who greet Jesus hail him as king. Yet, despite their cries of “Hosanna!” (which means “save, rescue, Saviour”), Jesus forgoes arriving on a horse befitting a conquering king, in favour of the humility of a donkey. Yes, he is the Saviour of his people. Yes, he is the conquering king, not evidenced through a physical battle- but through the way of ultimate sacrificial love, of death on a cross that gives life and hope to all.

Creative Prayer Response:

Watch...

We are privileged to know the story of the way of the cross; to see the pattern of God’s life- giving love to his people from Genesis to Gospel to the future glory of Revelation.

We recognise the sacrifice that God made in sending the gift of himself in the form of Jesus.

We are gifted with forgiveness, new starts, a personal relationship with God, the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives and a glimpse of the future in the new heaven and earth that is declared in Revelation.

I wonder if we can ever possibly take in the enormity of this life- giving sacrificial gift of love for each one of us?

Perhaps you could get up early one morning, to watch the sun rise, or close your eyes to imagine the spectacle emerging? As you do, consider how small we are in comparison to the sun; how great is our God who made all things, and yet, who made himself small enough to enter the womb of a woman who bore the Son of God.

Imagine that all this, and more is because of a Father’s life-giving love for his child... and that child is you.

What is your response? What is our response?

Give thanks, in humble prayer or sing to the Lord a song that reflects your response.

Lord God, we thank you and praise you for your life- giving gift of love and all that this means. May our lives be lived in an attitude of wonder and praise that never ceases to give you all the glory. *Amen.*