

6th September 2026 – Morning Service

Abie Dutton

Call to Worship: Psalm 103: 8-12 (NIV)

The LORD is compassionate and gracious,
slow to anger, abounding in love.
He will not always accuse,
nor will he harbour his anger for ever;
he does not treat us as our sins deserve
or repay us according to our iniquities.
For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so great is his love for those who fear him;
as far as the east is from the west,
so far has he removed our transgressions from us.

Welcome

Happy New Year! Happy New Methodist Connexional Year, but also happy new academic year if you are in education. For me, this time of year is more important than January. This is when I will reflect on how last year went, where I am now, and what I hope this new year will look like. I would guess there are others of you here who will also be reflecting at this time of year on what has passed and where you want to be heading.

Whatever this past twelve months have been like and whatever your plans are for the next twelve months the most important thing to remember is we have the same faithful God with us always.

This morning I want to look at new beginnings, second chances, and the compassion and grace of our God. As Psalm 103 says our LORD is compassionate, gracious, slow to anger and abounding in love. Let us start this morning with a prayer of adoration and thanksgiving to God.

Prayer of Adoration and Thanksgiving

Creator God, we praise you for the turning of the seasons and for the rhythm it brings. You are the God of beginnings and endings, and in every change, we find you.

We adore you, Lord, for the beauty of the earth that reflects your glory: for crisp autumn days, for rainbow scattered skies, for the gift of food from the fields, warm homes, and the fellowship of friends.

We pause to say thank you. Thank you for the colours of the seasons, for the fruits of the harvest and for the small joys of everyday life. We remember that you are the Giver of all. We remember to thank you for all that we have.

We thank you for the seasons of our own lives: for times of growth, of rest, and of change. As we start this new Methodist year, we give thanks for the year that has gone before, for lessons learned and lives changed. And as this new year opens before us, we place our trust in you, the One who makes all things new.

We know you are a compassionate God, who is slow to anger and offers us grace in abundance. So speak to us Lord, renew our minds, plant your truth within our hearts, and shape us to be Christ-like with your love and your Word.

With grateful hearts we praise you. **Amen.**

StF 161 – Speak O Lord

- 1) Speak, O Lord, as we come to you
to receive the food of your holy word.
Take your truth, plant it deep in us;
shape and fashion us in your likeness,
that the light of Christ might be seen today
in our acts of love and our deeds of faith.
Speak, O Lord, and fulfil in us
all your purposes, for your glory.
- 2) Teach us, Lord, full obedience,
holy reverence, true humility.
Test our thoughts and our attitudes
in the radiance of your purity.
Cause our faith to rise, cause our eyes to see
your majestic love and authority.
Words of power that can never fail;
let their truth prevail over unbelief.
- 3) Speak, O Lord, and renew our minds;
help us grasp the heights of your plans for us.
Truths unchanged from the dawn of time
that will echo down through eternity.
And by grace we'll stand on your promises,
and by faith we'll walk as you walk with us.
Speak, O Lord, till your Church is built
and the earth is filled with your glory.

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Prayer of Confession

Merciful God, we look back over the last year, and we bring before you the things we regret. Father God, we place into your hands the words we wish we had not spoken, the things we have done, and the good we have left undone.

Lord, forgive us and help us to learn and grow.

Father, we place into your hands our disappointments, our hurts, our anger, and our regrets. Help us to release the things we cannot change and place them into your hands.

Lord, help us to let go and trust in your grace.

Loving God, we thank you that our mistakes do not define us. Your mercy is greater than our failures, and your love gives us the opportunity to begin again.

Forgive us, renew us and restore us. Help us to leave the past in your hands and walk with you into a new day. **Amen.**

StF 519 – Father I place into your hands

- 1) Father, I place into your hands
the things I cannot do.
Father, I place into your hands
the times that I've been through.
Father, I place into your hands
the way that I should go,
for I know I always can trust you.
- 2) Father, I place into your hands
my friends and family.
Father, I place into your hands
the things that trouble me.
Father, I place into your hands
the person I would be,
for I know I always can trust you.
- 3) Father, we love to see your face,
we love to hear your voice.
Father, we love to sing your praise
and in your name rejoice.
Father, we love to walk with you
and in your presence rest,
for we know we always can trust you.
- 4) Father, I want to be with you
and do the things you do.
Father, I want to speak the words
that you are speaking too.
Father, I want to love the ones
that you will draw to you,
for I know that I am one with you.

Reading: Jonah 1: 1-16 (NIV)

The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai: 'Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.'

But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the Lord.

Then the Lord sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up. All the sailors were afraid and each cried out to his own god. And they threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship.

But Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep. The captain went to him and said, 'How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us so that we will not perish.'

Then the sailors said to each other, 'Come, let us cast lots to find out who is responsible for this calamity.' They cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah. So they asked him, 'Tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble for us? What kind of work do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?'

He answered, 'I am a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.'

This terrified them and they asked, 'What have you done?' (They knew he was running away from the Lord, because he had already told them so.)

The sea was getting rougher and rougher. So they asked him, 'What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?'

'Pick me up and throw me into the sea,' he replied, 'and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you.'

Instead, the men did their best to row back to land. But they could not, for the sea grew even wilder than before. Then they cried out to the Lord, 'Please, Lord, do not let us die for taking this man's life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, Lord, have done as you pleased.' Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm. At this the men greatly feared the Lord, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows to him.

Reading: Jonah 3: 1-6 & 10 (NIV)

Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: 'Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.'

Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it. Jonah began by going a day's journey into the city, proclaiming, 'Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.' The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

When Jonah's warning reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust.

When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.

Reflection

We all know this book of the Bible, right? It is so familiar to us all but sometimes I think our familiarity leads us to miss the point.

God calls Jonah and gives him a clear instruction: “Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it.” But Jonah runs in the opposite direction. Why? Bit of a dramatic response isn’t it? God called Jonah to go to Ninevah, the capital of the Assyrian Empire, which was trying to destroy the kingdom of Israel. Basically, Jonah was sent to the enemy nation, and I think with that context him running away makes far more sense.

So off Jonah runs in the opposite direction. He boards a ship, hoping to escape God and the task he has been given. Yet God does not give up on Jonah, instead Jonah turning away from God is used to reveal “the Lord, the God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land” to the sailors. The sailors who all have their own God suddenly witness our Lord’s power in that storm, they begin to fear the one true God, and they make vows to our God. In this story of Jonah, we see that God can use us even when we turn away from him.

Then, using the fish, God brings Jonah back to where he needs to be. Jonah does not get replaced with a different more reliable follower; instead he gets a second chance to follow his call. This is something we need to hear at the beginning of a new Methodist year. We can look back and see the times when we ran away from God, made the wrong choice, missed an opportunity, spoke the wrong words, or simply failed to be the people we hoped to be. But in this story, we are reminded that failure is not the end of the story. God’s grace gives us another opportunity, and it is never too late to realign ourselves with God’s plan.

But it is not only Jonah who receives a second chance, the people of Nineveh do too. Jonah delivers God’s message and the people respond. They turn from their evil ways and God shows them mercy. Jonah struggles with this. After our reading ends, Jonah gets angry and has a bit of a tantrum. He is angry that God has shown compassion to Nineveh (the enemy as far as Jonah is concerned). He wanted punishment but God showed love. Sometimes we can also feel like this.

We are grateful for God’s grace when we need a second chance but, at times, less comfortable when somebody else receives a second chance. We believe that our mistakes deserve grace whilst somebody else’s deserve consequences. The grace of God is bigger than that. God gives second chances not because we have earned them, but because God is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, and abounding in love. His grace is given even to the most undeserving of people.

We need to remember, in every new year, it is still the same faithful God beside us. We should not step into this new year trying to prove ourselves to God. He already knows our failures, our regrets, and our weaknesses, but he still calls us. Perhaps there is a calling we ignored, a relationship we neglected, or an opportunity we missed. Like Jonah, God give us another opportunity to say yes, and he will make use of us even in our attempt to run in the other direction.

Ultimately, we cannot change the past, but through the grace of God, yesterday does not determine tomorrow. The God who called Jonah a second time is still the God who calls us. So, as we begin this new Christian year, let us listen to God, follow our call, offer ourselves in every way we can, and remember that his grace is sufficient for all before we make judgement on others.

Let us pray. Lord, we praise you that you are so gracious that even in Jonah’s failing you made use of him. We praise you, for you were abounding in love and offered him and Ninevah a second chance. We thank you that you offer us that same grace and love even when we are undeserving. We thank you that you are compassionate and patient enough to offer us grace for every mistake we make. In this moment, if we are heading in the wrong direction gently offer us a reminder of the path you called us to walk and use us for your glory. **Amen.**

StF 156 – From the breaking of the dawn

- 1) From the breaking of the dawn
to the setting of the sun,
I will stand on every promise of your word.
Words of power, strong to save,
that will never pass away;
I will stand on every promise of your word.
For your covenant is sure,
and on this I am secure:
I can stand on every promise of your word.
- 2) When I stumble and I sin,
condemnation pressing in,
I will stand on every promise of your word.
You are faithful to forgive,
that in freedom I might live,
so I stand on every promise of your word.
Guilt to innocence restored;
you remember sins no more.
So I'll stand on every promise of your word.
- 3) When I'm faced with anguished choice
I will listen for your voice,
and I'll stand on every promise of your word.
Through this dark and troubled land,
you will guide me with your hand
as I stand on every promise of your word.
And you've promised to complete
every work begun in me,
so I'll stand on every promise of your word.
- 4) Hope that lifts me from despair;
love that casts out every fear
as I stand on every promise of your word.
Not forsaken, not alone,
for the Comforter has come,
and I stand on every promise of your word.
Grace sufficient, grace for me,
grace for all who will believe.
We will stand on every promise of your word.

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Reading: Acts 9: 1-23 (NIV)

Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?'

'Who are you, Lord?' Saul asked.

'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,' he replied. 'Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.'

The men travelling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, 'Ananias!'

'Yes, Lord,' he answered.

The Lord told him, 'Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight.'

'Lord,' Ananias answered, 'I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name.'

But the Lord said to Ananias, 'Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.'

Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, 'Brother Saul, the Lord – Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here – has sent me so that you may see again

and be filled with the Holy Spirit.' Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptised, and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. All those who heard him were astonished and asked, 'Isn't he the man who caused havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?' Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah.

After many days had gone by, there was a conspiracy among the Jews to kill him.

Reflection

Saul's conversion to Paul the apostle is spoken about three times in the book of Acts. This is the first of those. Acts 9 begins with introducing us to Saul who is still breathing murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. I always feel like this is the introduction given to the villain in a story and yet this man actually becomes the author of around 13 books in our Bible (the number is a little up for debate).

Saul begins this story absolutely convinced that he is doing the right thing. He is travelling to Damascus with authority to arrest followers of Jesus who have fled Jerusalem. As far as Saul is concerned, he is on the right path.

Then Jesus speaks to him and everything changes. A sudden light and a voice is heard asking "Why do you persecute me?" and Saul asks for the identity of this heavenly figure. The reply "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. Now get up and go into the city and you will be told what you must do". Saul was not just persecuting believers but in doing so was persecuting Jesus and by extension God himself. In Acts 9 we are post-resurrection, post-ascension and post-pentecost. The Holy Spirit is within every believer; God is intimately with each and every person who Saul has persecuted. Saul is the villain, yet Jesus is not angry with him instead he gives a new command to Saul and offers him a new beginning.

In this moment Saul is blinded and entirely dependent on those with him. His plans are stopped in their tracks; his entire life is interrupted.

After three days, a disciple is sent to his aid. A disciple who is rightfully wary of helping Saul, for he knows Saul's reputation but the Lord says "this man is my chosen instrument". The Lord can see something Ananias cannot, and trusting in the Lord, Ananias goes and lays his hands on Saul. Saul's sight is returned, he receives the Holy Spirit, and is baptised. A fresh start for Saul and he does not wait. He goes to Synagogues to share the good news. This man who had a reputation of wreaking havoc and taking anyone who called on Jesus as a prisoner is now stood proclaiming Jesus is the Son of God.

This wasn't Saul deciding to become a better person. This was God's transforming power and grace giving his life a new direction. The persecutor becomes the preacher. The hostile enemy became the faithful servant. This is proof that no one is beyond the reach of God's love.

Whilst few of us will have such a dramatic calling to follow Jesus, that same grace that transformed Saul is the grace that changes all who go to Jesus. Also, that God of grace who called us the first time is the God of grace who continues to call us and transform us.

No matter how far from God we walk, there is always a route back, there is always a new beginning or a fresh start waiting for us in the arms of Jesus Christ. Perhaps as we begin this new year, God is asking us to stop, to listen, or maybe take a completely new direction. Perhaps, like Ananias, God is asking us to see somebody differently, not according to their past but according to what God might be doing in their life.

A new beginning is not about becoming someone completely different through our own determination, it is about allowing God's grace to make us new.

Let's pray. Lord, you are the God full of grace. Your grace was sufficient for Saul and is also sufficient for me. Lord, we offer you all our loudest praise for you offer grace and mercy that never ceases. You sent your son

Jesus Christ to this land to pay the price for our new beginnings. The Perfect Lamb's blood was spilt so that we may be your children and be within your fold. Lord, we are prone to wander, prone to falter, and we are so blessed that your grace is always enough to bring us home to you. In this week and year ahead, be with us and show us the path you wish for us to walk. **Amen.**

StF 440 – Amazing grace

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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 relived;
how precious did that grace appear
the hour I first believed! | 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. |
| 3) Through many dangers, toils and snares
I have already come;
God's grace has brought me safe thus far,
and he will lead me home. | |

John Newton

Prayers of Intercession

Gracious God,
you are a God of mercy, compassion and new beginnings.
You see the whole of your creation, and you hold every person in your love.
God of grace, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for places where people live with war, violence and fear. For those caught in conflict, who are frightened for what tomorrow may bring.

We pray for places devastated by natural disasters such as the wildfires which have raged through this Earth throughout August. For those who have lost their homes, their livelihoods, and their loved ones.

We pray for those who have the power to make decisions.

Give wisdom to world leaders to change the path our world is on, courage to seek peace, and compassion for those whose lives are affected by their choices.

God of grace, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for our nation,

We pray for those without safe or secure homes, for those who feel forgotten or excluded, and for those who are struggling to make ends meet.

Help us to be a nation that recognises the dignity of every person and is willing to offer second chances.

May your grace shape the way we speak, the choices we make, and the way we treat one another.

God of grace, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for churches, schools, workplaces and neighbourhoods.

For those who feel that they belong and for those who feel that they are on the outside.

We pray for those who are lonely, those who are struggling, and those who need someone to notice them.

Show us where we can be your hands and feet.

Give us eyes to see where your grace is needed and courage to respond.

May our communities become places where people are welcomed, forgiven and given the opportunity to begin again.

God of grace, **hear our prayer.**

Loving God,
we bring before you now the people who are close to our hearts.
We pray for our families, our friends and those who have supported us through the past year.
We remember those who are celebrating new beginnings, and those facing difficult changes.
We pray especially for anyone known to us who needs your healing, peace, forgiveness or hope.

Silence

We place them into your loving hands.
God of grace, **hear our prayer.**

Finally, gracious God, we bring ourselves before you.
You know our past, our mistakes, our hopes and our fears.
Help us to become people who offer to others the same grace, mercy and second chances that you have offered to us.
God of grace, **hear our prayer.**

Receive all these prayers, those we have spoken aloud and those we hold quietly in our hearts.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory for ever and ever. **Amen.**

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and for ever. **Amen.**

StF 494 – Come thou fount of every blessing

- 1) Come, thou fount of every blessing,
tune my heart to sing thy grace;
streams of mercy never ceasing
call for songs of loudest praise.
Teach me some melodious measure
sung by flaming tongues above;
O the vast, the boundless treasure
of my Lord's unchanging love!
- 2) Here I find my greatest treasure:
'Hither by thy help I've come,'
and I hope, by thy good pleasure,
safely to arrive at home.
Jesus sought me when a stranger,
wandering from the fold of God;
he, to rescue me from danger,
interposed his precious blood.
- 3) O to grace how great a debtor
daily I'm constrained to be!
Let that grace, Lord, like a fetter,
bind my wandering heart to thee.
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
prone to leave the God I love;
take my heart, O take and seal it,
seal it from thy courts above!

Robert Robinson

Final thoughts

Jonah reminds us that God is a God of second chances, whilst the conversion of Saul reminds us that God is a God of new beginnings. Whether we are looking back with regret, with gratitude, or simply wondering

what comes next, our past does not have to define our future. God's grace meets us where we are, forgives what needs forgiving, and invites us to begin again. As we enter this new Methodist year, may we be willing to leave behind what needs to be released, receive God's grace for today, and step forward with open hearts, trusting that God is still writing our story.

StF 88 – Praise to the Lord the Almighty

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| 1) Praise to the Lord, the Almighty,
the King of creation!
O my soul, praise him, for he is thy
health and salvation!
All ye who hear, brothers and sisters, draw near,
praise him in glad adoration. | 4) Praise to the Lord, who, when darkness
of sin is abounding,
who, when the godless do triumph,
all virtue confounding,
sheddeth his light, chaseth the horrors of night,
saints with his mercy surrounding. |
| 2) Praise to the Lord, who doth prosper thy work
and defend thee;
surely his goodness and mercy here
daily attend thee:
ponder anew what the Almighty can do,
who with his love doth befriend thee. | 5) Praise to the Lord! O let all that
is in me adore him!
All that hath life and breath, come now
with praises before him!
Let the amen sound from his people again:
gladly for aye we adore him. |
| 3) Praise to the Lord, who doth nourish thy life
and restore thee,
fitting thee well for the tasks that are
ever before thee,
then to thy need he like a mother doth speed,
spreading the wings of grace o'er thee. | |

Joachim Neander translated by Cathering Winkworth & Rupert E Davies

The Grace

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all, now and evermore. **Amen.**