

WAITAKI PRESBYTERIAN PARISH

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September 3rd with Bethne Dodd

'TREASURES OF DARKNESS'

CALL TO WORSHIP: Genesis 1:1-5 (*The Living Bible*)

When God began creating the heavens and the earth
the earth was a shapeless, chaotic mass,
with the Spirit of God brooding over the dark vapours.

Then God said, "Let there be light."

And light appeared.

And God was pleased with it
and divided the light from the darkness.

He called the light "daytime"
and the darkness "night-time."

Together they formed the first day.

SONG: GOD OF WONDERS (*Third Day*)

Lord of all creation,
Of water, earth and sky
The heavens are Your tabernacle,
Glory to the Lord on high

God of wonders beyond our galaxy
You are holy, holy
The universe declares Your majesty
You are holy, holy
Lord of heaven and earth
Lord of heaven and earth

Early in the morning I will celebrate the light
As I stumble in the darkness I will call Your name by night

Hallelujah! To the Lord of heaven and earth x3

THE PEACE OF CHRIST

WELCOME & NOTICES

PRAYERS OF ADORATION & CONFESSION

*God help us find our confession;
The truth within us which is hidden from our mind,
the beauty or ugliness we see elsewhere but never in ourselves;
The stowaway which has been smuggled into the dark side of the heart,
Lead us into the darkness that we may find what lies concealed;
That we may confess it towards the light.*

We pause to do so now in a space of silence...

Leader: *We are nourished. We are changed. We are blessed. We rise up.*

All: *For this we give thanks.*

*God bless our contradictions,
Those parts of us which seem out of character.
Let us be boldly and gladly out of character.
Let us be creatures of paradox and variety:
creatures of contrast;
of light and shade;
creatures of faith.
God be our constant.
Let us step out of character into the unknown,
to struggle and love and do what we will.*

Leader: *We are nourished. We are changed. We are blessed. We rise up.*

All: *For this we give thanks. Amen.*¹

CONGREGATIONAL INVITATION:

During next song bring treasured items and place on altar to form our Visual Focus

SONG: O COME TO THE ALTAR (*Elevation Worship*)

Are you hurting and broken within?
Overwhelmed by the weight of your sin?
Jesus is calling
Have you come to the end of yourself
Do you thirst for a drink from the well
Jesus is calling

*O come to the altar
The Father's arms are open wide
Forgiveness was bought with
The precious blood of Jesus Christ*

Leave behind your regrets and mistakes
Come today, there's no reason to wait
Jesus is calling
Bring your sorrows and trade them for joy
From the ashes, a new life is born
Jesus is calling
O come to the altar...

Oh, what a Saviour
Isn't He wonderful?
Sing Hallelujah, Christ is risen
Bow down before Him
For He is Lord of all

¹ *Michael Leunig – Short notes from The Long History of Happiness*

Sing Hallelujah, Christ is risen
O come to the altar...

Bear your cross as you wait for the crown
Tell the world of the treasure you found

1ST READING: ISAIAH 45:1-7 NRSV - CYRUS, GOD'S INSTRUMENT

Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus,
whose right hand I have grasped
to subdue nations before him
and strip kings of their robes,
to open doors before him -
and the gates shall not be closed:
I will go before you
and level the mountains,
I will break in pieces the doors of bronze
and cut through the bars of iron,
I will give you the treasures of darkness
and riches hidden in secret places,
so that you may know that it is I, the Lord,
the God of Israel, who call you by your name.
For the sake of my servant Jacob,
and Israel my chosen,
I call you by your name,
I surname you, though you do not know me.
I am the Lord, and there is no other;
besides me there is no god.
I arm you, though you do not know me,
so that they may know, from the rising of the sun
and from the west, that there is no other besides me;
I am the Lord, and there is no other.
I form light and create darkness,
I make weal and create woe;
I the Lord do all these things.

MESSAGE PART 1: TREASURES OF DARKNESS

Anyone afraid of the dark as a child?

As a very young child I was afraid of the dark. The night-time's early hours was when I became prone to suffering from recurring breathing difficulties. My earliest memory is of 'two-year-old self' sitting up in bed gasping for breath during a severe bout of croup, my mother alongside me. In my black and white child-like way I grew to associate darkness with that frightening negative experience. Understandably, I took time to settle at night, slept lightly, woke easily, insisted the bedroom door be ajar, and sought reassurance from the softened glow of a small round night-light nestled in a nearby electrical socket. Thankfully I outgrew it all – both croup and fear of the dark. So much so, I now look forward to bedtime and sleeping well, I like closed doors, black-out curtains and prefer lights off. How things change. As has my perspective on darkness.

While we should be alert to things that arrive under the cover of darkness - the unknown shadows where fears lurk and which nightmares, both real and imagined, are made of - we should also hold in balance the thought of darkness being the very place within which the greatest treasure can be found. Treasure, after all, is hidden. Something to be deliberately sought after, intentionally searched for... *like a prospector panning for gold, like an adventurer on a treasure hunt.*² I'm no outdoor adventure seeker but when it comes to things of the Spirit it's a different story. Today, I share a little of my latest personal adventure. I invite you to join me...

A few months back a phrase arrived. Unfamiliar. Intriguing. It settled in. Set up camp. Made itself at home. As such, I began to wonder where it was from. A poem long since read? An obscure quotation? I wasn't at all sure. Finally, I gave up wondering and consulted Dr Google, discovering the phrase '**treasures of darkness**' was embedded within Chapter 45 of the Prophet Isaiah. Who knew? Certainly not me.

Isaiah 45 verse 3, as read earlier, states...

**I will give you the treasures of darkness
and riches hidden in secret places,
so that you may know that it is I, the Lord,
the God of Israel, who call you by your name.**

This phrase and verse in its entirety - now a little more familiar but no less intriguing - sparked the beginnings of today's message.

Here we're introduced to a guy with the catchy name Cyrus.³ A Persian King rather than the only other Cyrus I had a nodding acquaintance with... Billy Ray Cyrus. Country singer of the unlikely 1992 hit 'Achy breaky heart' and father of songstress Miley Cyrus. I digress.

Back to Isaiah. He addresses the not-yet-born King Cyrus the Great. A man labelled God's *anointed* servant - the only time a Gentile, a non-Jew (or Other) was described in such terms. This individual seems to have been singled out by God, hit up by name, as a chosen instrument to be used in bringing about the downfall of the Babylonian Empire and ushering in redemption and peace for captive Israel. Quite the role and responsibility, given Cyrus wasn't personally acquainted with the God of Israel. Nevertheless, God knew him. A reminder that God was - and is - quite capable of going above and beyond expected norms, the boundaries of his chosen people Israel, our worldviews and us alike, by selecting another (Other) individual who didn't even recognise or know his rule to accomplish his greater purposes.

The actual treasures mentioned were gold and silver vessels taken from the Temple during the fall of Jerusalem.⁴ These hidden-in-secret items were taken out of storage and presented to King Cyrus 'The Liberator' who graciously returned them to the people of Israel. Unsurprisingly, he was seen by the Jews as a kind of rescuer, a saviour figure, for restoring their pillaged treasure and granting them freedom from their life of captivity to return to their homeland to rebuild their Temple.⁵

² *Proverbs 2:4 The Message Bible*

³ *Isaiah 45:1 NRSV*

⁴ *See Daniel 5 – King Nebuchadnezzar & son King Belshazzar's demise*

⁵ *Ezra Chapter 1 details Cyrus' edict to the Jewish people to return to their homeland and rebuild their Temple*

Note: Cyrus will go down in history for his political philosophy of tolerance, his religious respect of Non-Persians (his Other) and his demonstration of mercy shown to his defeated foes. His cuneiform engraved edict – dubbed The Cyrus Cylinder - is sometimes referred to as the first written declaration of human rights as it decrees freedom for those he'd liberated to reinstate their own gods and religious practices. Its first four provisions mirror the first four articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights - a replica is displayed at United Nations headquarters in New York.

The adventure continues...

Some time later a second phrase arrived '**I form light and create darkness.**' My suspicions were raised. I bypassed Dr Google, picked up a Bible, turned to Isaiah 45... and laughed. What do you know. There it was. Verse 7.

**I form light and create darkness,
I make weal and create woe;
I the Lord do all these things.**

Weal and *woe*? Pardon? For clarity I consulted other translations. Here's the gist.

I form light and make dark. I cause light to shine. I also create darkness.

I make peace and harmonies. Bring success, prosperity, blessing.

I create doom and discords. Cause calamity, misery, injury.

I bring happiness and sorrow, good times and bad times.

Most interesting of all I discovered the King James Version, which reads...

I form the light, and create *darkness*:

I make peace, and create *evil*:

I the Lord do all these things.

Pardon? I create *darkness* and *evil*? Light and peace - awesome. Darkness and evil - not so much. How unsettling yet thought provoking.

In Hebrew the word for *evil* is *ra* – meaning physical evil, rather than moral evil.

Ra can mean disaster, adversity, affliction, distress, grief, harm, hurt, mischief, misfortune, trouble, unrest. We're more familiar with the positive Hebrew word for *peace*, *shalom* – meaning wholeness and wellbeing in every sense of the word.

But, ultimately, God creates *both*. As noted in our opening Call to Worship:

He called the light "daytime" and the darkness "night-time."

Together they formed the first day.⁶

Back in Cyrus' day, the Magian religion which prevailed in Persia (Zoroastrianism) upheld the existence of two supreme co-eternal principles – always struggling with one another, always in opposition to one another. One, the author of good – Light (Oromasden). The other, the cause of all evil – Darkness (Ahrimanen). When Light was in the ascendancy, naturally goodness and happiness prevailed. When Darkness had the upper hand... you guessed it... evil and misery abounded. A very black and white (binary) worldview.

Above and beyond this, however, we again hear Isaiah's take on the God of Israel's all-encompassing perspective...

I form the light, and create darkness:

I make peace, and create evil:

I the Lord do all these things.

⁶ *Genesis 1:5*

God, it seems, exists above and beyond any simplistic black and white (binary) worldview, including our own.

Speaking of black and white, good and evil. If we are indeed created in God's own image as related in Genesis... *Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness...'*⁷ this includes the creation of freewill. In this sense God does create evil. For we've been gifted a world in which evil is permitted to exist. A sphere within which it is possible for us to choose to create, and perpetuate, a whole range of evil for others and ourselves. This place is called the real world, and is a far from black and white clear-cut place to live - as I suspect your own experience suggests.

We pause in our adventures to sing together 'Blessed be Your name' in the land that is plentiful *and* the desert place, in sunshine *and* suffering – in other words, in the real world.

SONG: BLESSED BE YOUR NAME (*Matt Redman*)

Blessed be Your name
In the land that is plentiful
Where Your streams of abundance flow
Blessed be Your name

Blessed be Your name
When I'm found in the desert place
Though I walk through the wilderness
Blessed be Your name

*Every blessing You pour out, I'll turn back to praise
When the darkness closes in, Lord still I will say
Blessed be the name of the Lord, Blessed be Your name
Blessed be the name of the Lord, Blessed be Your glorious name*

Blessed be Your name
When the sun's shining down on me
When the world's 'all as it should be'
Blessed be Your name

Blessed be Your name
On the road marked with suffering
Though there's pain in the offering
Blessed be Your name

Every blessing...

You give and take away, You give and take away
My heart will choose to say Lord blessed be Your name
Blessed be the name of the Lord, Blessed be Your name
Blessed be the name of the Lord, Blessed be Your glorious name

⁷ *Genesis 1:26*

2ND READING: GENESIS 32:22-31 NRSV – GOD WRESTLES WITH JACOB

The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok.

He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.

When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him.

Then he said, 'Let me go, for the day is breaking.'

But Jacob said, 'I will not let you go, unless you bless me.'

So he said to him, 'What is your name?'

And he said, 'Jacob.'

Then the man said, 'You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.'

Then Jacob asked him, 'Please tell me your name.'

But he said, 'Why is it that you ask my name?' And there he blessed him.

So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, 'For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.'

The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.

MESSAGE PART 2: TREASURES OF DARKNESS

Jacob, whose life is characterised by seemingly never-ending struggle, has been on our collective radar of late thanks to Andrew. We've highlighted God's continuity '*and the Lord stood beside him*'⁸ Then how Jacob's own prevailing attitude helped him receive a blessing not only for himself but for others – a blessing which, in God's economy, then continued above and beyond what he could have ever imagined.⁹

I'm going to revisit God's struggle with Jacob by focussing on verse 24 of Genesis 32 ***Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.***¹⁰

I encourage you to close your eyes as I share a reflective narrative portraying Jacob's encounter...

It is night.

Dark.

You are alone.

A stranger confronts you.

Sets upon you.

A struggle ensues.

You gather your strength.

You fight.

You strive.

You do not gain ground.

Neither do you surrender.

You prove tenacious.

Determined.

You persevere.

⁸ Genesis 28:13 NRSV (July 23rd Eveline 'Creating is continuity' Service)

⁹ Genesis 32:22-31 (August 6th 2023 Eveline 'Creating prevails' Service)

¹⁰ Genesis 32:4

*You do not let go.
You are injured.
Wounded.
Disjointed.
Angry.
Confused.
You demand a blessing.
Your name is demanded in return.
You offer it up.
In exchange you are renamed.
You are told you have prevailed.
This hardly feels like a win.
You remain in pain.
You hang on.
You ask the stranger's name.
Left none the wiser, you are blessed.
You limp away.
Day breaks.
Dismantled
Divinely defeated.
You bear the scars.
Never quite the same.*

Dark contentious beneficial wrestling.
Who knew The Divine Wrestler was an image of what God is like?
Let's pause with that thought and image for a moment longer...

We continue with a quote from a favourite read of mine *'The Bad Christian's Manifesto'* by author Dave Tomlinson. It notes...*"Christianity is simple but never simplistic. We only get anywhere near the truth when all the easy things to say about God have been deconstructed, so that our image of God ceases to be just a big projection of our own self-centred fantasies. When the dismantling is done, we either sense we are confronting an energy so immense and unconditioned that we have no words to describe it, or we give up."*¹¹ Let's not give up. Let's hang on.

We all have two things in common. We are human. We struggle. Full stop.
Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.¹²
Until daybreak. They wrestled in darkness.
Dark. We've all been there, or thereabouts, in our own unique way. Likely more than once. If not, wait a while. Human struggle is the basic common ground between ourselves and another (ourselves and the Other) While grappling within those unarticulated spaces where we come into contact with the rawness of life and, through outward circumstance, inner turmoil or by the hands of another, we are hollowed out - those are the very places where treasure is to be found should we dare to look closely enough. With this in mind, I invite us to listen to this Martin Wroe poem entitled *'Dark'*.

¹¹ *Reviewing Philip Pulman's book 'The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ' Rowan Williams points out...pg. 198/199*

¹² *Genesis 32:4*

DARK – Martin Wroe ¹³

*You are the dark of the world
When all is brightness and dazzle*

*You are a deepening mystery
When life is a surfeit of simple solutions*

*You are the nagging doubt and secret sceptic
When everyone believes so much*

*You are jangling discord, right out of tune
When all the sounds are harmony*

*You are abstract art of paint and poem
When our propaganda makes everything clear*

*You are parched throat, desert defeat
When there's water, water everywhere*

*You are the silent absence, gone-missing god
When the cacophony of belief is deafening*

*You are uncharted journey, road less travelled
When we're all mapped out. Been there, done that*

*You are stranger in the night, throwing us to the ground
When all we want to do is get away*

*You are the cloud of unknowing
When we know-it-all's, know it all*

*You are never ready and take for ever
When we want it now and cannot wait*

*You are the dark of the world
When all is brightness and dazzle.*

It is time to grow up. To stop regarding the dark in a black and white child-like way as I once did. To no longer label darkness as simply 'the enemy' but consider embracing it as a potential friend. It was Swiss Psychiatrist Carl Jung who taught people to acknowledge and integrate the often-suppressed shadow side of their personalities to encourage balanced wholeness and wellbeing, *shalom*. Our dark-sides are regularly viewed in an entirely negative way. Conveniently overlooking the fact they represent the seat of creativity. Hidden treasure-troves of spiritual energy waiting to be harnessed then redirected in positive beneficial ways¹⁴- in relation to life as well as faith, for ourselves and others.

Though commonly overlooked today, darkness has always held an honoured place in the Christian tradition. Tomlinson notes, "*Expressions such as 'dark night of the soul' and 'cloud of unknowing' represent aspects of human experience that are*

¹³ Martin Wroe 'How to lose your life' 2012

¹⁴ Based on Dave Tomlinson 2014 book 'The Bad Christian's Manifesto' Pages 195-197

*confusing, painful and potentially faith destroying. Yet they are also seen as the necessary path to greater spiritual enlightenment. God is the creator of darkness as well as light.”*¹⁵

As momentous as Jacob’s wrestling-match was I suspect he still struggled on, as do we. Such is life.

The Message Bible has God reminding Job, and us alike, “*Don’t blame fate when things go wrong – trouble doesn’t come from nowhere. It’s human! Mortals are born and bred for trouble, as certainly as sparks fly upward.*”¹⁶

Jesus certainly never promised anyone an easy life either – far from it. Advising us, that in the real world we inhabit trouble is inevitable. But amidst that, to take heart and courage and be of good cheer, for he has overcome the world.¹⁷ He has been here and has prevailed. He did so, through dark contentious beneficial wrestling. Through the ultimate painful, lonely moment of divine defeat, crucifixion, which we should never forget ended in resurrection - literal and metaphorical transformation.

All this should serve as an encouragement that in our own dark times we too may be blessed if we hang on long enough.

We may determinedly prevail.

We may gain invaluable personal experience.

We may unearth hidden treasure.

We may understand we are never truly alone.

We may discover transformation can and does occur.

That despite the fact we may never be the same again, that’s no bad thing.

And no matter what, we are deeply loved and known and called by name – and sometimes that, in itself, is enough.

Best of all, we come *to know* God in a new and deeper way.

The term ‘*to know*’ in Hebrew is *yada*. This has multiple shades of meaning, including to be acquainted with, to perceive or understand. It’s not just head-knowledge but also heart-knowledge based on personal experience. In Semitic languages, *to know* something or someone takes on a special added meaning in relationships. Primarily based on making a promise, a covenant, it denotes loyalty, faithfulness and openness - between two people or in community - in all aspects of life. Service, support, comfort, friendship etc. Sharing genuine communication, connection and thereby intimacy with someone, is *to know* them. There’s a difference between knowing *about* someone and *knowing* them by having a continuing relationship *with* them. The latter requires ongoing trust and vulnerability, involves willingness and risk. In committed relationship, in marriage in particular, *to know* one another is to choose to be both spiritually *and* physically intimate.

So, the God who seeks *to know* us - who chooses to contend with us in an up-close, personal and intimate way - is the same God of relationship who promises...

**I will give you the treasures of darkness
and riches hidden in secret places,**

¹⁵ Based on Dave Tomlinson 2014 book ‘The Bad Christian’s Manifesto’ Pages 198-201

¹⁶ Job 5:7

¹⁷ John 16:33

**so that you may know that it is I, the Lord,
the God of Israel, who call you by your name** ¹⁸

God is the One who loves us enough not to leave us alone in our mess.
Who knows us whether we realise or not.
Who chooses to contend and persevere with us.
To remain within, and among, us by the Holy Spirit - gifted to us as our ultimate
Friend and Helper. There to continue the life-long work of transforming us from the
inside out. Not only for our own benefit but for the benefit of Others.
The One who is the creator of darkness as well as light.
The creator of treasures of darkness.
Amen

I pray:
May God be with you. With those you love. With those you are called to love.
With those you cannot love in your own strength. With all who struggle.
Alongside all who do not yet know the Lord God who calls them by name.
In happiness and sorrow, good times and bad times.
May you come to know God as the creator of darkness as well as light.
The ultimate creator of treasures of darkness. Amen

SONG: GREAT LIGHT OF THE WORLD (*Bebo Norman*)

Sometimes at night, when I am afraid
I cover my eyes, cover my shame
So here in the dark, broken apart
Come with Your light and fill up my heart

*Oh great light of the world
Fill up my soul
I'm half a man here
So come make me whole
Oh great light of the world
Come to impart
The light of Your grace
To fill up my heart*

The wind of this world can push us around
Folding us up, backing us down
But here in the dark, I'm not alone
So come with Your strength and carry me home
Oh great light of the world...

OFFERING

Emmanuel – God with us – as we bring our offerings of money, time and talents,
multiply them in the giving through Your economy. May we help one another learn
what it is *to know* You and how we can find blessing in both good times and in bad –
the kind of blessing that benefits others, as well as ourselves, in the process. Amen.

¹⁸ *Isaiah 45:3 NRSV*

PRAYERS FOR OTHERS & OURSELVES

We come to You, our Divine Wrestler,
with our own struggles, those of others and of our world.
We express them aloud as well as in the silence of our hearts
Knowing You care, You hear and understand.
Knowing You love, You transform, and are with us.

On this Father's Day

When we celebrate those among us who are fathers in the best sense of the word.
When we specially remember those who are, have been, or continue to father us in
the broadest sense of the word.

Let us not forget those for whom the very word father represents darkness rather
than light.

Whose childhood traumas, carried into adulthood, affect present day relationships.
(Pause)

On this day

Give us new insights into who You are.

Unexpected images and understandings of Your presence.

Where necessary, encourage us to dispense with unhelpful words or images
by replacing them with what resonates most deeply.

That we may better relate to You, more easily approach You, and encourage others
to move ever closer toward Your all-embracing love. (Pause)

On this Sunday,

We uphold one another in community and as individuals.

Whether gathered here within this place, at this time, or tuning in online.

Whether aware or unaware of the troubles we each face.

Beyond these walls, within the neighbourhood of our lives,
remind us to reach out with openness, humility and humanity

toward those we may not understand, nor even wish to,

without the motivation of Your loving acceptance shown to us in Your Son Jesus,
and the discerning presence of Your Holy Spirit. (Pause)

Every day,

Remind us to treasure the world around us, those around us, and ourselves.

Remind us of our greatest treasure, knowing You.

The One whose love is above and beyond, and more than we can imagine.

We share in saying together the words of The Lord's Prayer together...

Our Father in Heaven holy 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 forever. Amen**

SONG: JUST LET ME SAY (*Hillsong Worship*)

Just let me say how much I love You

Let me speak of Your mercy and grace

Just let me live in the shadow of Your beauty

Let me see You face to face
And the earth will shake as Your Word goes forth
And the heavens will tremble and fall
But let me say how much I love You
Oh my Saviour, my Lord and friend

Just let me hear Your finest whispers
As You gently call my name
And let me see Your power and Your glory
Let me feel Your spirit's flame
Let me find You in the desert
'Til this sand is holy ground
And I am found completely surrendered
To You, my Lord and friend

So let me say how much I love You
With all my heart, I long for You
For I am caught in this passion of knowing
This endless love I've found in You
And the depth of grace, the forgiveness found
To be called a child of God
Just makes me say how much I love You
Oh my Saviour, my Lord and friend

OPEN TIME

Short silent reflection followed by invitation to share...
a word of scripture, an encouragement, a short prayer of thanks or testimony...

SONG: HOW GREAT IS OUR GOD (*Chris Tomlin*)

The splendour of a King, clothed in majesty
Let all the Earth rejoice All the Earth rejoice
He wraps Himself in light, And darkness tries to hide
And trembles at His voice, trembles at His voice
How great is our God, sing with me
How great is our God, and all will see
How great, how great is our God

Age to age He stands, And time is in His hands
Beginning and the end, Beginning and the end
The Godhead Three in One, Father Spirit Son
The Lion and the Lamb, The Lion and the Lamb
Name above all names, Worthy of our praise
My heart will sing, How great is our God...

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 for ever more. Amen.

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