

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS**CALL TO WORSHIP:**

*The angel said to Mary, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you,
and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.*

So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. ...

For no word from God will ever fail.”

(Luke 1.35, 37)

Let us worship God.

HYMN: O come, o come, Emmanuel

PRAYER OF APPROACH AND CONFESSION:

Almighty God, our Father:

On this final Sunday of Advent, we are glad to come into your presence to worship you, because we realize that part of our preparation for Christmas involves preparing ourselves spiritually. We confess, though, that, at busy times like this, we too easily lose sight of you in the midst of our daily routines and struggles. We acknowledge that our relationship with you suffers as a result. So also does our sense of what is and what is not important, as well as our relationships with the people around us.

Forgive us for neglecting you, we pray, as well as for the wrong choices we have made and the wrong actions we have done as a result. Through the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit, enable us to correct our mistakes, and to give ourselves to you more willingly and more fully. We pray in the name of Jesus, our Savior, who came once, and will come again; and we pray together now, as he taught us:

THE LORD’S PRAYER

(Matthew 6.9-13, KJV)

ASSURANCE OF FORGIVENESS:

Hear this good news from the scriptures:

This is how we know what love is:

*God sent his only Son into the world
so that we might live through him.*

*This is love: not that we have loved God,
but that he loved us,*

and sent his Son to be the sacrifice that pays for our sins.

(1 John 4.9-10)

So, if we have confessed our sin to God sincerely,
let us be assured that God will forgive us.

LIGHTING OF THE FOURTH ADVENT CANDLE:

In our in-person service today, we will be lighting the fourth candle on our Advent wreath at this point in the service — the Candle of **Love**.

For this recorded service, however, we're doing a virtual lighting of the candle, using the candle-lighting liturgy provided by the national church that we will use in our in-person service also.

Love is a gift of God.

Love burns in our hearts.

Love is warmth in a world that is often bitter and cold.

In Jesus Christ, we receive God's gift of love.

At this point, the candle will be lit.

Let us pray.

Source of light:

Shine in our lives and in your world

with your unending love.

Through Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.

SCRIPTURE READINGS:

- **OT Reading:** Micah 5.1-5a - A ruler from Bethlehem

This reading is a message of hope. It speaks of a future king of Israel, who will be born in Bethlehem, the hometown of the great King David.

- **Psalm:** Psalm 80 - "Hear us, Shepherd of Israel".

Psalm 80 is a community lament, or prayer for help.

It appears that Israel has been invaded, or perhaps even defeated, by an enemy — a crisis that the Israelites interpret as a sign that God is angry with them.

The "grapevine" that is spoken of signifies the people of Israel themselves, whom God has "transplanted" from Egypt to the land of Canaan.

The psalm thus prays for God to set things right again.

Notice that there's a recurring refrain, beginning with the words, "Restore us". It divides the psalm into three unequal parts.

- **Letter Reading:** Hebrews 10.1-10 - "When Christ came into the world ..."

In this reading, the writer interprets a few words from Psalm 40 as Jesus' own words, volunteering to go into the world to serve as the sacrifice that pays for human sin.

- **Gospel Reading:** Luke 1.39-56 - Mary visits Elizabeth

Chapters 1 and 2 of Luke tell the parallel stories of the events leading up to the births of John the Baptist and Jesus.

In this reading, these two stories come together briefly, as the two expectant mothers meet — Elizabeth, the mother of John; and Mary, the mother of Jesus. Mary has just been told that she will have a special baby, and that her relative Elizabeth also is pregnant. So she pays Elizabeth a visit.

HYMN: Hope is a star

SERMON: “Setting the Stage”

On the four Sundays of Advent, the Common Lectionary has us reflect on the same themes every year. On the First Sunday, we reflect on the promised Second Coming of Jesus, and the feelings of anticipation and hope that it stirs up within us. On the Second and Third Sundays, we reflect on the ministry of John the Baptist, the prophet called by God to prepare the people of First-Century Israel for the ministry of Jesus. And on the Fourth Sunday of Advent, we reflect on the events leading up to the birth of Jesus.

In today’s Old Testament reading, then, we have a prophecy from Micah about the town of Bethlehem being the birthplace of a future king of Israel. Today’s reading from the Letters speaks of the heavenly Jesus preparing to come into the world. And in today’s Gospel reading, we have a story involving Jesus’ mother, Mary, who, in the early months of her pregnancy, visits a relative of hers: Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist.

Bethlehem — a small town about a dozen kilometers south of Israel’s capital city, Jerusalem. Prior to the birth of Jesus, its only claim to fame was that it was the birthplace and hometown of the great King David. After David had made Jerusalem his capital city, all subsequent kings of Israel were presumably born there. The striking thing about the prophecy in today’s reading from Micah, then, is the fact that it predicts that a future king of Israel will be born in Bethlehem. The prophecy doesn’t explicitly say that this future king will be a descendant of *David*; but the fact that he is to come from David’s hometown *implies* that he will be a descendant of David.

The Gospel writer Matthew, in the Epiphany story, interprets this prophecy as a prediction that *Jesus* would be born in Bethlehem. When the Magi arrive in Jerusalem, looking for *the one who has been born king of the Jews* (Matthew 2.2), and King Herod asks the chief priests and teachers of the law where the Messiah is supposed to be born, they tell him “Bethlehem”, quoting this very passage from Micah (Matthew 2.4-6).

In Luke’s Gospel, Bethlehem isn’t mentioned until we get to the Christmas story in Chapter 2. Joseph and Mary’s home is in Nazareth, in the northern region of Galilee; and the only reason Jesus happens to be born in Bethlehem is that Joseph and Mary are forced to travel there because of a census ordered by the Roman Emperor (Luke 2.1-7).

Why Bethlehem then? Why wasn’t Jesus born in one of Israel’s important cities, like Jerusa-

lem, or Sepphoris, or Caesarea? If it was God's *plan* that he should be born there, it would be consistent with the understated way in which Jesus came into the world, as well as the understated way in which he would later carry out his ministry. On the other hand, Bethlehem underscores Jesus' connection to the great King David, since Joseph, Mary's husband, was a descendant of David.

Today's reading from the Letter to the Hebrews pictures Jesus' coming into the world from his own point of view. In Hebrews, Jesus is portrayed as a pre-existent being, as he is also in the Gospel of John. That is, both books portray Jesus as a heavenly being who came down from heaven, as it were, in order to live for a time among human beings, *as* a human being. As one familiar Christmas hymn puts it, "He came down to earth from heaven / who is God and Lord of all".

In this part of Hebrews, the writer is arguing that Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross is superior to the sacrifices of animals that were offered at the temple in Jerusalem. In today's reading, then, the writer portrays Jesus as actually volunteering to serve as that sacrificial victim, quoting verses from the Greek translation of Psalm 40:

*Sacrifice and offering you did not desire,
but a body you prepared for me;
with burnt offerings and sin offerings
you were not pleased
Then I said, "Here I am —
it is written about me in the scroll —
I have come to do your will, my God.* (Hebrews 10.5-7; compare Psalm 40.6-8)

It's interesting to contemplate what it must've been *like* for Jesus to prepare to leave heaven and enter the world in human form. How must he have felt? I would suspect that, most of the time, we don't even think about it. But in today's reading, the writer of Hebrews portrays him as being fully aware of what would happen to him, but nevertheless being willing to go ahead.

The reading from the Letters thus links Jesus' birth in Bethlehem with his death on the cross. At Christmastime, I believe, many prefer to forget about the cross, and concentrate on the manger. Today's reading, then, reminds us *not* to do that, but to keep the *entire* story of Jesus in mind as we celebrate his birth.

In today's Gospel reading, we return to earth, as it were, as we focus on the young woman who would become Jesus' mother: Mary. She has just been visited by an angel, who has given her the startling news that God has chosen her to give birth to Jesus. One other piece of news that the angel gives her is that her relative Elizabeth also is going to have a baby; and that Elizabeth is already in the sixth month of her pregnancy.

Luke begins his Gospel by telling the stories of the events leading up to the births of both John the Baptist and Jesus. He begins with the story of how John's birth is announced ahead of

time to his father, a priest named Zechariah, the husband of Elizabeth. The announcement is made by an angel named Gabriel. Next, Luke tells of that same angel's appearing to Mary, announcing to her that God has chosen her to be the mother of Jesus. Then comes today's reading, in which Mary goes to visit Elizabeth. Following today's reading, then, is the account of the birth of John the Baptist, followed in turn by the account of the birth of Jesus — the well-known Christmas story in Luke, Chapter 2.

Luke doesn't tell us how Mary and Elizabeth were related, but it's clear that they lived a fair distance apart, and also that there was a fair difference in their ages. Mary lived in Nazareth, in the northern region of Galilee, while Elizabeth lived in an unnamed town in Judea, in the south. Mary was young, while Elizabeth was "well along in years", as her husband Zechariah put it at one point (Luke 1.18). It's very unlikely that the two were sisters, then. Perhaps they were cousins. More likely, though, Elizabeth was an aunt of Mary's, or perhaps even an aunt of one of Mary's parents.

Elizabeth has never been able to have children, and by now she is presumably past childbearing age. Yet, she is now six months pregnant. Her child will be John the Baptist, the man we talked about in our service last week.

Luke doesn't tell us Mary's reason for going to visit Elizabeth. The most obvious reason, it would seem, would be to find out if what the angel had told her about Elizabeth's pregnancy was true. If it was, it would be a sign that his message about her own pregnancy also was true. There may have been other reasons as well, such as wanting simply to get away for a time, while she came to terms with the unexpected turn her life had taken. Note that she didn't stay with Elizabeth for the full nine months of her pregnancy, just the first three months. According to Luke's account, she returned home to Nazareth just before Elizabeth's baby was born.

So, Mary travels to the town where Zechariah and Elizabeth live, and just as she greets her relative, Elizabeth's unborn baby stirs in her womb. And that's about all the action that takes place in today's story; the rest is speaking — Elizabeth speaks first, and then Mary speaks.

Elizabeth's words are prompted by the kick from her unborn baby — which she interprets as his leaping for joy at the sound of Mary's voice.

Elizabeth's words indicate that she already knows more about Mary's pregnancy than we would expect. She refers to Mary as *the mother of my Lord* (Luke 1.43). How would Elizabeth know this? Luke attributes this to the action of the Holy Spirit. *Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit*, he says (Luke 1.41). Presumably, this means that the Holy Spirit has revealed to Elizabeth the nature of Mary's pregnancy, as well as the identity of her unborn child. She also pronounces a blessing on Mary: *Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!* Elizabeth exclaims (Luke 1.45). Not only does Elizabeth's *pregnancy* confirm what the angel Gabriel had said to Mary, then; so do Elizabeth's *words*.

Mary speaks next. Her words are traditionally referred to as the "Song of Mary", or the "Mag-

nificat”, because in Latin, her words begin with *Magnificat anima mea Dominum*, which means, of course, “My soul magnifies the Lord” (Luke 1.46b). In modern versions of the Bible, her words are printed as poetry, rather than as prose.

Mary begins by expressing surprise and gratitude at God’s choice of her for the special task of being the mother of Jesus. She says,

*My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God, my Savior,
for he has been mindful
of the humble state of his servant.
From now on, all generations will call me blessed,
for the mighty one has done great things for me —
holy is his name.* (Luke 1.46b-49)

It’s clear that Mary is no one in particular; she’s not a highly-placed person, just someone whom others would consider a “nobody” — or perhaps an “anybody”. In choosing her for this particular assignment, then, God has elevated her from anonymity to a position of prominence.

In the rest of what she says, Mary affirms that this is typical of God’s dealings with human beings. She continues:

*His mercy extends to those who fear him,
from generation to generation.
He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.
He has brought down rulers from their thrones,
but has lifted up the humble.
He has filled the hungry with good things,
but has sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering to be merciful
to Abraham and his descendants for ever,
just as he promised our ancestors.* (Luke 1.50-55)

In speaking of God’s reversing the fortunes of human beings, Mary anticipates things that Jesus himself will say in his teaching later on. For example, all of us are familiar with his sayings, *There are those who are last who will be first, and first who will be last* (Luke 13.30), and *All those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted* (Luke 14.11). The passive forms of those verbs imply that it is *God* who will do the humbling and the exalting, not people themselves. This theme is particularly prominent in Luke’s Gospel, in which Jesus tells parables such as the one about the rich man and Lazarus, and the one about the Pharisee and the tax collector — parables that *aren’t* found in any of the other Gospels.

And so, the stage is set for Jesus’ coming into the world — his *first* coming, that is. Jesus vol-

unteers to enter the world in human form, and to serve as the sacrifice that pays for human sin. Little Bethlehem is chosen by God as the place where he will be born. And an otherwise-unknown young woman named Mary is chosen by God to give birth to Jesus, and to raise him.

HYMN: My soul gives glory to my God!

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE:

Faithful and loving God:

We worship you with joy during this season of Advent, as we anticipate the festive season of Christmas.

We thank you in particular today for choosing to have Jesus come into the world in a modest, unspectacular way — by being born as a baby of a human mother, in humble circumstances.

We rejoice that you chose ordinary, unassuming people — Mary and Joseph — to serve as parents for Jesus, just as you chose to have him be born in the town of Bethlehem, rather than in one of Israel's prominent cities.

Help us to believe that you continue to make use of ordinary, unspectacular people to carry out your work in the world today. Help us to yield ourselves to your purpose, as Mary did; trusting that, as you call us to serve you, you also equip us to do the tasks that you give us.

We thank you for all the ordinary, unspectacular people who make up your church; and we pray that you would continue to guide and empower us all as we seek to carry on the ministry of Jesus in today's world. May our goal always be to do acts of kindness in your name, following Jesus' example. At the same time, give us courage to speak out against wrongdoing, and self-discipline to avoid doing wrong ourselves.

As we reflect on Mary's words about how you bring down rulers from their thrones, and lift up the humble, we pray for people in our country and around the world who find themselves holding the short end of the stick — such as Indigenous people, immigrants and refugees, and people with various kinds of disability. Help us as your people to share your concern for those who are disadvantaged and powerless, rather than to perpetuate stereotypes that keep them trapped where they are.

Hear our prayers for members of our congregation and others close to us who are experiencing challenges that make it difficult to feel the joy of this time of year; in particular, those whom we now name before you: _____. Grant each one the blessings they need to sustain them, and assure them of your presence, love, and care.

As we pray for people in positions of authority today, we pray for those in our own community and the surrounding area, such as members of municipal councils, those who provide public services, the police, those in the judicial system, school board trustees, and school administrators. We thank you for the work they do, and we pray for wisdom and strength for them, as they carry out their responsibilities from day to day.

We continue to pray about the pandemic, especially now that the new Omicron variant is caus-

ing numbers of infections to increase, and as governments are having to re-impose restrictions, just as Christmas is approaching. Continue to give wisdom to those who provide advice to the public, we pray. Continue also to strengthen and sustain people in the health care system who are worn down by the ongoing workload and pressure that they are forced to deal with. We pray also that the public may recognize the seriousness of the current situation, and may follow the advice of medical experts and abide by the restrictions that have been put into place for everyone's safety. We pray as well that larger quantities of vaccine may be made available to parts of the world where vaccines have up to now been in short supply.

We pray for people whose lives have been disrupted by recent natural disasters. Today we pray in particular for those affected by this past week's typhoon in the Philippines, that they may receive the support and assistance they need to rebuild their homes and workplaces. We continue to pray as well for those affected by recent tornadoes in the United States, and by flooding, mudslides, and washouts in British Columbia and the Atlantic provinces, that they, too, may receive support to recover from their losses.

We thank you that you hear our prayers, gracious God; and we offer them up to you in the name of Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

OFFERING

PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING AND DEDICATION:

God of grace:

We thank you for your blessings to us — for providing for our needs, and giving us strength and guidance to face each day's challenges.

We give you thanks also that you work through human beings — ordinary, unremarkable people like Elizabeth and Mary — to accomplish your purpose in the world.

As we present these offerings to you, then, we also present our very selves to you, once again, to be your people and your servants. Use our gifts, and make use of us, as you continue carrying out your purpose in the world today.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

HYMN: Once in royal David's city ...

COMMISSIONING AND BLESSING:

Brothers and sisters in Christ:

Go into the week ahead, now,

in peace,

and in the strength of the Holy Spirit,

to continue serving God in the midst of everyday life,

as his people in the world.
And may God bless you:
May he guide and strengthen you each day,
and equip you for the tasks he gives you;
in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.