

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS**CALL TO WORSHIP:**

*The Word became flesh,
and made his dwelling among us.
We have seen his glory,
the glory of the one and only Son who came from the Father,
full of grace and truth.*

(John 1.14)

Let us worship God.

HYMN: O come, all ye faithful

PRAYER OF APPROACH AND CONFESSION:

Almighty, holy, and loving God:

We do indeed come into your presence this evening to adore Jesus our Lord, and to celebrate his coming from heaven to be born among us human beings as a human being. We praise you that in him, you came close to us, in order to draw us closer to you.

We confess, however that we still like to keep our distance from you. We don't like you to have too much influence in our lives, and we still like to do things our own way.

Help us to realize that this attitude lies at the heart of our sinfulness, that it draws us away from you, and that it leads us to do things that are wrong.

Forgive our sin, we pray. As we hear and celebrate the Christmas story once again, help us to make new room for you in our lives, and to allow you to influence and shape us to be the people you want us to be.

We pray in the name of Jesus, our Savior — the Word who became flesh and lived among us.
Amen.

ASSURANCE OF FORGIVENESS:

Hear this good news from the scriptures:

*When the set time had fully come,
God sent his Son,
born of a woman, born under the law,
to redeem those who were under the law,
so that we might receive adoption as God's children.*

(Galatians 4.4-5)

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

HYMN: It came upon the midnight clear

INTRODUCTION TO THE READINGS:

In this next part of the service, we will listen to the Christmas story, as found in the Gospels of Luke and Matthew. There will be four readings, each of which will be followed by a reflection. In our in-person service, we will also sing a hymn after each reflection, before going on to the next reading.

FIRST READING: Luke 1.26-38 - The annunciation to Mary

REFLECTION:

Luke begins his account of the birth of Jesus by telling about an event that has come to be known as “the Annunciation”, meaning “the announcement”. In this event, an angel appears to a young woman named Mary, and announces to her that God has chosen her to be the mother of a special child.

“Announces” is probably a good word. The angel, named Gabriel, doesn’t ask Mary if she’d like to take on this role, or try to persuade her to take it on, or even tell her to take it on. He simply announces it; he says it’s going to happen.

This event is much like the various call stories we find in the Bible. By “call stories”, I mean stories in which God calls a person to take on a particular role, or to do a particular task. Two of the best known call stories in the Old Testament are God’s calling of Moses to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt, at the time when they were enslaved to the Egyptians; and God’s calling of the boy Samuel, which led to Samuel’s becoming the last of Israel’s so-called judges, and one of the first of Israel’s prophets.

Why would God call Mary, then, to be the mother of Jesus? Why her? Luke doesn’t tell us, and all that the angel says to her is, *You have found favor with God* (Luke 1.30). So, Christians have wondered about this for over nineteen hundred years. Some have come to the conclusion that Mary must’ve merited this assignment in some way — that she was unusually pious, or virtuous, and that that made her a logical choice. Others claim that there was nothing particularly unusual or outstanding about Mary — that she was simply a plain, ordinary young woman, who was no more deserving of this assignment than any other young woman. I myself tend to favor the latter opinion.

At the end of the story, Mary says “Yes” to the assignment. However, as in a good many biblical stories, we’re not told what she was thinking or feeling. Did she yes eagerly, or with reservations, or reluctantly? Was she willing, or did she feel coerced? It wasn’t quite as simple a thing as the angel’s announcement implied. After all, she was engaged to a man named Joseph — engaged, but not yet married. What would he think of her pregnancy? For that matter, what would her family think? What would everyone think? This assignment that the an-

gel has announced to Mary would certainly complicate her life. Yet, her response to the angel is, *I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled* (Luke 1.38).

HYMN:

In our in-person service, we will sing the hymn “The angel Gabriel from heaven came” at this point. It’s a paraphrase of the account of the Annunciation that we just read. The final verse speaks of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. It’s a medieval hymn from the Basque region of northern Spain. It was translated into English in either the late 1800s or early 1900s by an Anglican priest named Sabine Baring-Gould.

SECOND READING: Matthew 1.18-25 - The annunciation to Joseph

REFLECTION:

It’s interesting that, in their respective accounts of the events leading up to the birth of Jesus, Luke’s Gospel focuses on Mary, while Matthew’s Gospel focuses on Joseph. Joseph is significant, because it’s through him that Jesus’ ancestry goes back to the great King David.

In Matthew’s Gospel, it’s Joseph who experiences an annunciation — except that it doesn’t happen until after Mary has become pregnant. Unlike Luke, Matthew hints at the difficulties posed by this unanticipated pregnancy — for both Mary and Joseph. Joseph therefore feels he can not go ahead with their intended marriage, and decides to break the engagement — although discreetly, not wanting to cause Mary any more embarrassment or shame than she would already experience as an unwed mother.

It’s at this point, then, that the annunciation takes place. An angel appears to Joseph in a dream, with a message. It’s interesting that in the first two chapters of Matthew, angels appear repeatedly to Joseph in dreams to give him instructions or warnings. It reminds us of Joseph in the Book of Genesis, who also had revelatory dreams.

In this case, the angel’s message is one of reassurance. It’s all right to go ahead with the wedding, he tells Joseph, because the baby that Mary has conceived *is from the Holy Spirit* (Matthew 1.20). That’s all the explanation Joseph gets.

As in Mary’s annunciation experience, Joseph is instructed to name the baby “Jesus”. “Jesus” incidentally, is the Greek form of the Hebrew name “Yeshua”, which means “Yahweh saves”. In other cases, this name is translated into English as “Joshua”, as in the name of the man who succeeded Moses as Israel’s leader at the end of the Exodus. He, too, is called *Iēsoûs* in Greek.

The angel’s message thus prompts Joseph to change his mind about breaking the engagement, and to go ahead with the wedding plans. Matthew then notes the birth of Jesus almost as an afterthought. All that he says is, *But [Joseph] did not consummate their marriage until [Mary] gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name “Jesus”* (Matthew 1.25). That one verse

is Matthew's version of the Christmas story!

Matthew interprets the birth of Jesus as the fulfillment of a prophecy in the book of Isaiah, which says, *The young woman will conceive, and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel* (Isaiah 7.14). However, Matthew was working from the Greek translation of the Old Testament, which actually says “virgin” rather than “young woman”; and so that's how Matthew quotes it: *The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Emmanuel* (Matthew 1.23). Incidentally, the Hebrew name Immanuel means “God is with us”. It's a most appropriate title for Jesus, isn't it? For in him, God had entered the world in physical form to literally be “with” us human beings.

HYMN:

In our in-person service, we will sing the hymn “The hands that first held Mary's child ...” at this point. This 20th-Century hymn is one of the few Christmas hymns that highlight Joseph. The words were written by an American named Thomas Troeger. The tune is older than that, though; it was composed by the famous 19th-Century English composer Sir Arthur Seymour Sullivan, of “Gilbert and Sullivan” fame.

THIRD READING: Luke 2.1-7 - The birth of Jesus

REFLECTION:

Fortunately, Luke's account of the birth of Jesus is much more detailed than Matthew's. His explanation of how “Jesus of Nazareth” happened to be born in Bethlehem is that a census, ordered by the Roman Emperor, forced Joseph and Mary to travel to Bethlehem, Joseph's ancestral home; and that Jesus was born while they were there. Interestingly, in Luke's account, as opposed to Matthew's, Joseph and Mary are not yet married at the time of Jesus' birth. Luke says that Joseph went to Bethlehem to register for the census *with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him* (Luke 2.5). The fact that Jesus was born in Bethlehem rather than Nazareth underscores his connection to the great King David. Again, it is pointed out that Jesus' connection to David is through Joseph.

It was a most understated way for Jesus to enter the world — as a helpless baby, born to a young couple away from home, in less-than-ideal accommodations. As the well-known Christmas hymn puts it, “How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is giv'n!” Luke doesn't say anything about Jesus' having been born in a stable; but the fact that he says that Mary *placed him in a manger* (Luke 2.7) implies that a stable was indeed his birthplace. Throughout history, some have imagined the stable to be a small wooden shed, while others have imagined it to be a cave.

Luke's words, *there was no room for them in the inn* (Luke 2.7) have prompted some to imagine Joseph and Mary going from inn to inn, desperately looking for lodging, and being turned away time after time, because there were no vacancies; and finally being offered lodging in a

stable by a sympathetic innkeeper. Whether that's the way it actually happened, we don't know.

HYMN:

We'll be singing the hymn "Silent night! Holy night!" at this point in our in-person service. The first verse imagines the scene in the stable after the excitement and distress of childbirth is over, and as the newborn Jesus is sleeping in his makeshift cradle. The second verse speaks of the appearance of the angel to the shepherds, which we'll read in a few moments. The final verse affirms Jesus as the Son of God. The hymn was written in the year 1818 by an Austrian priest named Joseph Mohr, and set to music by his organist, Franz Gruber. It was translated from the original German into English later in the 1800s.

FOURTH READING: Luke 2.8-21 - The shepherds and the angels

REFLECTION:

Not only did Jesus come into the world in an unspectacular, understated way; his birth also was *announced* in an unspectacular, understated way. The audience was simply a group of shepherds, who were tending their sheep somewhere in the fields outside Bethlehem.

In spite of the fact that shepherds are mentioned quite often in the Old Testament, that the kings of Israel were sometimes referred to as "shepherds" of the people, and that God himself was from time to time referred to as Israel's "shepherd", shepherds were not considered high class people, and shepherding was not considered a "white-collar" occupation. In fact, shepherds were pretty low on the social ladder.

Yet, remarkably, it was to shepherds that the announcement was made — not to the mayor and town council, not to the president of the Chamber of Commerce, nor to the rabbis of Bethlehem's synagogues. And, presumably, the shepherds were the *only* ones who witnessed the appearance of the angel and of the *great company of the heavenly host* (Luke 2.9, 13).

The angel who appears to the shepherds announces that he has good news — not only for them, but for all people. In announcing Jesus' birth, the angel uses three titles for him: "Savior", "Messiah" (or "Christ"), and "Lord". These three titles are applied to Jesus throughout the New Testament.

The angel then is joined by a "great company" of other angels, who join in praising God. *Glory to God in the highest!* they exclaim (Luke 2.14a). They also add a blessing: *On earth, peace to human beings, on whom [God's] favor rests* (Luke 2.14b). The *biblical* concept of peace involves more than just the absence of conflict or fighting; it means well-being, in the broadest sense of the term.

When the angels have left, the shepherds decide to go into town to see this baby for themselves.

I often wonder how long it took them to track Jesus and his parents down. However, they eventually find the holy family, and they tell Joseph and Mary about the angel's announcement. Note that there are no angels at the stable itself in Luke's account. Neither are Wise Men present. That's a whole other story.

The final verse of this reading speaks of Jesus' circumcision, a week after his birth. This brief note shows that Joseph and Mary are faithful and observant Jews — a fact that will be demonstrated further in the two stories from Jesus' infancy and childhood that follow in the rest of Chapter 2. Significant also is the fact that the baby is now formally given the name "Jesus", the name that both Mary and Joseph had been instructed to give him in the annunciation stories. This is the first and only time in Luke's account of the Christmas story that Jesus is referred to by name; up to now he has been referred to simply as "the child" or "the baby".

HYMN:

At this point in our in-person service, we will sing the hymn "Angels we have heard on high". In four short verses, the hymn reviews this final part of the Christmas story. The chorus, *Gloria in excelsis Deo*, of course, is Latin, and means "Glory in the highest to God!". The hymn is a loose translation of an 18th-Century French Christmas hymn; the English words were written in 1862 by a Roman Catholic bishop in England named James Chadwick.

LIGHTING OF THE CHRIST CANDLE:

In our in-person service this evening, we will be lighting the candle in the center of our Advent wreath at this point in the service — the **Christ** Candle.

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.

God has come into the world.

Glory to God in the highest!

This is the good news for all people:

to us is born a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

The world is transformed.

And things can not remain the same.

It is made new in hope, peace, joy, and 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 transforming power.

Through Jesus Christ, our Lord, we pray. Amen.

HYMN: O little town of Bethlehem ...

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE, AND THE LORD’S PRAYER:

God of grace and love:

We give you thanks for the Christmas season — for its joy, its festivity, and the way in which it brings out the best in people. Yet we know that if it were not for the birth of Jesus, we would have no *reason* to celebrate — no reason to be any *more* joyful at this time of the year than at any other time.

During Advent, we contemplated your promise to restore and renew the entire creation. This evening, then, we rejoice that the birth of Jesus was one more step in the working-out of your plan.

Out of something small, you have made something big. Out of a small town came a ruler for your people Israel. The small baby, Jesus, grew up to become the Savior of the world; you have exalted him to the highest place, and given him a name that is greater than any other name. On the people who walked in the darkness of a fallen creation, you have shone light. That light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never put it out.

The story is so familiar that we risk taking the birth of Jesus for granted, and failing to grasp its full significance. Help us to see more clearly how Jesus’ birth fits into your plan to redeem the world from the powers of evil and sin. Fill us again with the sense of amazement shown by the shepherds, and with the feeling of jubilation expressed by the angels.

We know only too well that, even though you have shone your light into the world, the world continues to be plagued by the darkness of evil and sin. Grant your blessing, then, we pray, to all those whose lives, in smaller or greater ways, continue to be disrupted by the “darkness” — those dealing with the loss of a loved one; those dealing with illness, injury, or disability; those experiencing difficulties in their family relationships; those struggling to get by on a small income; those dealing with an addiction or compulsive behavior; those who are victims of crime, violence, or war; those whose lives have been disrupted by a natural disaster; and those who are struggling with difficulties brought on by the pandemic. May they all in some way see your light shining on them; and may that give them strength and encouragement in their difficulties.

We thank you that you hear our prayers, gracious God. We offer them up to you, then, in Jesus’ name; and we pray *together*, now, as he taught us:

THE LORD’S PRAYER

(Matthew 6.9-13, KJV)

OFFERING

DOXOLOGY: Hail the heav’n-born Prince of Peace!

PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING AND DEDICATION:

Loving God, our Father:

In this time of gift-giving, we remember with gratitude *your* greatest gift to *us* — Jesus Christ — through whom you bridged the gap between us and you, and made it possible for us to be reconciled with you, through the forgiveness of our sins.

As a *sign* of our gratitude, we now present *these* gifts to *you*, to be used in serving you, and in carrying out your work of caring and helping. As our gifts are put to use, may people sense your love and care through the work that they support.

We pray in the name of Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

HYMN: Joy to the world!

COMMISSIONING AND BLESSING:

Brothers and sisters in Christ:

Go into this Christmas season in peace,
and in the strength of the Holy Spirit,
confident in God's love for you,
and with a renewed commitment to live in his ways.

And may God bless you:

May he sustain you with his power
and fill you with his joy;
in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.