

Welcome and Land Acknowledgement

As we gather in the name of Jesus we acknowledge with gratitude and respect the Lkwungen people – the Songhees, Esquimalt and WSÁNEĆ – on whose traditional and unceded territory we gather.

Advent Candle Lighting

In this season of Advent, we celebrate God's love.

Soon we will welcome the beautiful and radical love of God as Jesus Christ comes to live among us.

We embrace our identity as God's beloved children and let this truth guide our decisions and relationships.

In our homes and in our church, we offer hospitality, welcoming those we don't know, those who are in need, and those who are different from us.

We demonstrate our care for creation in real and tangible ways through the products we buy, the food we eat, and the way we live every day.

Together, we are a sign of God's love for the world. (The candle is lit)

Let us pray... God of extravagant generosity, in Jesus we discover the depth of your care and the lengths you will go to save us. Forgive us when we ignore those in need, trample your creation and refuse to share all that we receive from you. Teach us to love our neighbours, caring for each other in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen

➤ *Prepare the way of the Lord*

112 (repeat)

† Prayer

God of majesty and mercy, you are powerful, you are holy, and you are loving. You come among us as a child – new life born among us and for us. We come to worship you trusting your wisdom with Joseph – pondering your mystery with Mary. We offer our love for all that you have been – all that you are – all that you will be.

God of mystery and mercy, you came to be with us and offer new life in Christ, yet we often stray from your side. You came to offer love, but we confess that we can be stubborn and selfish in the ways we live. You came to reconcile all people, but we confess that we often resist repairing relationships and so remain divided.

*Forgive who we have been – amend who we are – and direct who we shall be, through Jesus Christ who reaches out from the manger and the cross, encouraging us to pray... **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 debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen***

Words of Hope

Words from Christina Rossetti fit the Advent theme for today: *“Love came down at Christmas; Love all lovely, love divine. Love shall be our token, Love for plea and gift and sign.”* We meet God’s gift of love in the Christ Child, whose forgiveness restores us for whatever lies ahead, giving us reason to rejoice. Thanks be to God for this hope!

➤ *For all the love (verses 1 – 4) (tune: For all the saints) 440*

† Prayer for Understanding

Loving God hear our cries and come near to us! As we wait for your promised one to be born anew in our lives, bless us with patience and vision – faithfulness and courage. Fill us with your holy word, we pray in the name of Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen

Scripture **Luke 1: 26-38 and 46-55**

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, *“Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.”*

But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

The angel said to her, *“Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”*

Mary said to the angel, *“How can this be, since I am a virgin?”*

The angel said to her, *“The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.”*

Then Mary said, *“Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”*

Then the angel departed from her.

----- *(Emmanuel, Emmanuel 114)*

And Mary said: *“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.*

His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the

powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Message ***God-bearers / Christ-bearers***

I keep hearing people moan that Christmas is cancelled this year. No! I want to shout out, "no!" Christmas will be different this year – quieter, reflective, perhaps less frantic and more meaningful. Christmas is coming – Emmanuel soon will be here. We are continuing in Advent hope to wait and our invitation for this final Sunday before Christmas is to slowly sink into God's presence, which – like a womb – is always already within us, with us, and around us. Advent is a gestation period, a pregnant pause in anticipation of a birth – a birth that will happen no matter the circumstances of the world. Christmas is not now – not ever "cancelled"! We are invited to slow down, hold the space, and see what God is birthing in our midst – to open our eyes in wonder, and expectantly wait for what is already in the process of being born.

Mary is called to be a servant of the Lord – like Samuel and Moses and so many others before her – ordinary and extraordinary representatives. In her we see that God watches – we see that God gets involved. God does things, all kinds of things – great and small, mighty, mundane, or miraculous – God is constantly at work. More than that, God regularly uses other people to point out and share what God is doing. Take today's reading where the angel Gabriel bursts unexpectedly into the life of an ordinary teenage girl named Mary to tell her that she has found favor with God and will conceive, carry, and bear the Son of God. An amazing thing! Yet in our tradition we struggle with how to honor Mary – the God-bearer. We have a certain befuddlement when encountering the Lord's mother. We often don't seem to know what to do with Mary in the Protestant world.

Think about her experience for a moment... Mary is perplexed, confused and perhaps troubled by the angel's words. And how could she not be? She is just a common, ordinary, everyday person – of little account in her world – definitely not the stuff of legends... and she knows it. She is to be the God-bearer? – the Christ-bearer? Only after expressing her wonder and dismay, and then hearing again Gabriel's affirmation and promise, does she manage to summon the courage to believe that God is indeed favoring her – blessing her – by working in and through her to bless the world.

God is always at work in surprising ways in our broken world. And God is engaged in this surprising work in all ages, not merely in the first century. We are all Mothers of God, for God is always needing to be born.

Do we think God is done interrupting people's lives to use them for the benefit of the world, or might we imagine that God is still doing something extraordinary in the world? Who in the world today is made special to serve the Lord? Who are the God-bearers – the Christ-bearers now? Is it possible that we are favored by God? Is it possible that God hopes and plans to do marvelous things through our lives? Perhaps not conceive and bear the Son of God, but so what – that one's been done already anyway! Think how many other wonderful things there are that God may want to accomplish through us...

Can we imagine that God needs to be born again in and through us? Maybe, like Mary, you are perplexed, confused, and perhaps troubled by the idea – the proclamation – that God has noticed you – that God favors you – that God just may have wondrous things to accomplish through your life. Congratulations – you too are to be a God-bearer!

God is within us, waiting to be born. God is outside of us, asking for our openness. We open our spirits to this great mystery and discover that we also are God-bearers – Christ-bearers in our world.

How do we bear God? How is divine incarnation made evident in our lives? It shows up in our individual experience – in our stories – our pain – our joy – our unique ways of being in the world. Take a moment to contemplate that God is at work in and through you and your life. Imagine one, specific way you have or can make a difference – a way or a time or a place where God may be at work in and through you...

Being a Christ-bearer – giving birth to God today – begins in the spaces where we are, not trying to work up the energy to be where we aren't. Transformation occurs when we know we are loved – when we know we are enough in this moment. It is what we possess now that is the body out of which God is birthed.

Mary is sometimes referred to as the *Mother of God*. In the Eastern Orthodox Christian tradition, there is a strong emphasis on Mary as the *Mother of God*, which can be seen in the frequent use of the term *theotokos* – literally *God-bearer*. Mary is *Theotokos* – the one who gives birth to God. From her we know that God is also within us, inseparable from our body, soul, and spirit. In this sense we are called to emulate Mary's willing vulnerability to use her life, her body, her very self to bear witness to – to birth – God into the world.

Life, birth, and growth: Mary's unexpected pregnancy, Jesus' life, the lives of famous people or less famous but equally significant people like a grandparent, friend, prayer partner or child in our lives all show us what it looks like to birth God into the world – to be God-bearers – Christ-bearers. Imagine...

Greetings favored ones. The Lord is with you and intends to do great things through you.

How can this be? We are but ordinary, everyday people.

Yet you have found favor through God, and the Holy Spirit will come upon you, guide you, and work through you to care for this world and people God loves so much. For nothing is impossible with God.

Here am I – a servant of the Lord – a Christ-bearer. Let it be with me according to your word.

It is an incredible thing to be noticed, to be blessed, to be invited into meaningful work as part of God's divine action. It is a truly amazing thing to be God-bearers in the world. **Amen**

➤ *The angel Gabriel from heaven*

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† Prayer

Spirit of Hope, whenever the world seems confusing and bleak, you pierce the darkness with light, bringing hope and vision for the way ahead. This has been a difficult and confusing year of pandemic, and so we thank you for lessons learned and changes of heart – for new discoveries and hope restored. As nature around us prepares for the long sleep of winter, we pray for those who are ill or dying, and for those who are bereaved or feel any burden of loss.

(A silence is kept.)

O God, reach out to all of us in Christ, and give us hope for the living of these days.

O God of Peace, within our lives and relationships, and in communities around the world, there is conflict and antagonism, mistrust and resentment. We pray for all places where violence has done its worst – where cruelty and suspicion appear to win the day, and where the vulnerable live in fear and despair.

(A silence is kept.)

O God, reach out to all of us in Christ, and give us peace in these times.

O Creator of Joy, we thank you for moments of joy and celebration in our lives, for pleasure given and received – for quiet times spent in reflection and remembering, and for happy gatherings, even if they had to be small. In these colder, darker days, we remember those who feel left out or neglected, those who have found the months of pandemic restrictions a heavy burden, and those we find difficult to love, even at a distance.

(A silence is kept.)

O God, reach out to all of us in Christ, and give us joy to share in the days ahead.

O Love Come Down at Christmas, you call us to live in communion with you and one another. You form us into families, circles of friendship, and communities. Today we pray for our family members, whether we're close or estranged – for our friends, whether nearby or far away – and for neighbours who share our community, like minded or not.

(A silence is kept.)

Help us express both our love and concern in gentle words and kind actions. O God, reach out to all of us in Christ, and strengthen our love for you and for one another. Amen

➤ *Lord, you were rich*

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PWS&D Sharing **A Mother's LOVE**

In Afghanistan, Murzia had several difficult pregnancies, including two miscarriages. When Murzia learned that she was pregnant with her fourth child, she was determined to have a different experience.

In Afghanistan, late-night deliveries are often not attended by health care professionals. Even during times when medical staff are available, many women do not have the transportation or finances necessary to access their services.

Murzia's determination paid off when one of her peers advised her of an affordable treatment option, close to her home. She decided to visit the PWS&D-supported health centre. There, she was able to receive months of neonatal support and was assisted with a prompt and hygienic delivery of a healthy baby boy by the dedicated staff.

"I am a very happy mother. My newborn is healthy, and my health has improved, too," Murzia enthusiastically shared.

This Advent season help mothers deliver healthy babies with access to safe, clean and affordable maternal health services. Go to www.werespond.ca / (416) 441-1111

† Offering and Prayer

The fourth Sunday in Advent celebrates God's gift of love. At this time of year, we give gifts to express our love. So let your offering today be a sign of your love for God and those in God's world who need our love to brighten dark days and difficult times.

God of love and joy, God of peace and hope, we are so grateful for these Advent gifts, which bring comfort and courage even in the most challenging times. Receive our gifts as tokens of our love and loyalty. Bless them with your grace so that they will bring love to those who need it. Bless our lives, too, so that we shine with your love, blessing others in the name of Jesus. Amen

Blessing [based on Romans 16: 25-27]

Go with the blessing of God who is able to strengthen you according to the gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ. Go by the grace of Jesus who reveals the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed. Go in the company of the Holy Spirit according to the command of the eternal God to bring about the obedience of faith. May you be continually blessed as together we journey in faith. Amen

➤ *We will go out with joy*

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