

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.*

Call to Worship

*Behold, I bring you good news of great joy;  
for to you is born in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord!*

***Jesus has arrived in grace and mystery,  
renewing faded hopes and announcing peace to a weary world.***

*Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom God favours!*

***Jesus comes among us in power and glory, inspiring joy and calling us to lives that are full of God's love.***

*Jesus, the light of the world, is born.*

***Let Christ's light shine in the darkest corners of our lives.***

***Let Christ's light shine in the darkest corners of our world. God is with us. (The candle is lit)***

***Let us pray: God of grace and glory, as we celebrate this Christmas, transform our hearts and our lives so that your Good News is not an old story but a fresh truth lived out every day through the power of Jesus Christ. Amen***

➤ ***Rise up, rise up***

***130 MV (repeat)***

† Prayer

Most Holy God, with wonder and joy we come before you. We come from the aftermath of, what has been for most of us, a different celebration of Christmas. Please do not allow the glory of Bethlehem to slowly fade from our focus, but let it illuminate all our worship, home life and service in the wider world. In the name of your holy son, we pray.

Loving God, we admit to you and to each other that we are beings in whom darkness and light are uncomfortably mixed. We are beings of cleverness yet foolishness – faith yet much unrest – strength and frailty – compassion yet self-interest. We want to be close to you but sometimes we ignore you – we praise and defy you – we serve you yet evade you – we love you but too often deny you.

Lord have mercy upon us. Christ forgive us. God of liberation and healing, through your grace in Christ Jesus, we ask to be cleansed and made young in the Spirit once again. We pray together... ***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

God's word called you into existence and fixed you forever in God's love. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts – sing with gratitude – the Lord has forgiven you. Sisters and brothers, your sins are forgiven – be at peace.

➤ *Once in royal David's city*

166 (words from PCUSA 140)

### † Prayer for Understanding

**God of all wisdom, thank you for grounding our lives in your love. Draw us together as we seek to nurture one another in faith. Open our hearts and minds to the inspiration of your Holy Word. In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen**

### Scripture    **Luke 2: 22-40**

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "*Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord*"), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, "*a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.*"

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah.

Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, "*Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.*"

And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him.

Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "*This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed – and a sword will pierce your own soul too.*"

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day.

At that moment she came and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth.

The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

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

## Message

*Lord God, you now have set your servant free to go in peace as promised in your word; my eyes have seen the Saviour Christ the Lord, prepared by you for all the world to see, to shine on nations trapped in darkest night, the glory of your people, and their light.*

This paraphrase from our reading today was written by Rae Whitney and is included in our hymnal – number 791 – the “Our Hope in God” section rather than in the Advent/Christmas section like most other songs that reference Luke, chapter 2. Maybe both sections – Christmas and hoping in God – are the same thing. In the season of Christmas, we are doing much more than celebrating a birth – we are celebrating the fulfillment of God’s promise to come among us as hope and joy and light. Celebrating Jesus – in the manger, on the cross, risen.

And this season of Christmas has been a strange one for many of us – hunkered down at home. We didn’t travel or host guests or shop the sales or attend events. We went to Christmas Eve services through our computer – singing loud and lone with no one to judge or harmonize. On this last Sunday of 2020 we’re in the midst of the Christmas season – not even halfway through the 12 days. It is the final Sunday in a year that has been challenging for all of us – divisions over race and politics and masks – isolation and devastating consequences for livelihoods, families and nations, as well as mental and physical health. Most of us are glad to see this year go because despite our natural trepidation we sincerely hope and believe that 2021 will be better – if not immediately, then eventually! I read someone say that we exit 2020 with a sigh and a moan – we lament the losses and give thanks for moments of extraordinary kindness and support. We are tired. We would love to see something spectacular – to truly celebrate God’s promised hope.

And so we head with Mary and Joseph and Jesus, now 40 days old, from a Bethlehem barn to the Temple in Jerusalem. There is such detail in this passage – the intriguing story about Simeon and Anna in the Temple on the day when Jesus was formally dedicated to God according to the custom of the Law. I’m not sure why this particular moment is important to include. We’ve already had two visits from the angel Gabriel – one to Zechariah and one to Mary. We **know** that Jesus, despite his humble birth, was divinely sent – we **know** he is Christ and Savior and Lord. We have heard the choir of angels and seen the astounded shepherds. After all that hoopla, these two old folks in the Temple making a fuss and marveling over Jesus to affirm his heavenly credentials seems like overkill and a bit anticlimactic.

But here it is... and so this morning we take time to ponder in our hearts – along with Mary – what it all might mean.

I imagine that Mary and Joseph didn’t anticipate being the center of attention during their trip to the Temple. It was a normal part of life – ritual purification for Mary after having a child and the presentation of their first born in the Temple. This would have been a ceremony by a quiet set of humble-looking, poorly attired parents offering only pigeons in sacrifice who, by all outward appearances, would disappear from the Temple – and from the consciousness of everyone in the Temple – about as quickly and quietly as they had appeared there in the first

place. They are not expecting to be noticed but Simeon and Anna have waited decades for the anointed one, fasting and praying for insight to recognize God's beloved. When the baby Jesus enters the temple, carried by his parents, they see God's vision incarnate in a little baby. Anna and Simeon see more than meets the eye – they see the Messiah.

Whatever Simeon and Anna were expecting, when the moment came it was quiet and peaceful and intimate. The old man cuddles the baby and shares emotional words of hope and warning. He tells about pain and struggle to come – about falling and rising. And then he says that this is enough now – he is ready to die. He has seen salvation and he can depart in peace. Anna, also old and approaching the end of her days, adds her own joy and praise. She has been praying night and day for years to experience this very moment – a moment she'll be telling everybody about for some time to come.

Did you notice that Simeon talks about the *falling and rising* – not rising and falling as we might expect. And Anna worshipped *night and day* – not day and night – her vigil in anticipation of the one who will redeem Israel, a reversal of expectations just as surely as Mary's song before Jesus' birth proclaims. These two prophets remind us, even as we stumble from the warmth of the manger, that there is no resurrection without crucifixion. There is no unbinding without binding. God is eternally at work to bring healing to all facets of our lives.

Maybe this scene in the Temple from Luke's gospel isn't spectacular but in its own understated way it gives us hope. A magnificent Messianic spectacle it is not. But there is something about this scene's humble trappings – something about the picture of these ancient-looking people bearing witness to something no one else could see – something about the fact that it was precisely two old folks like this whom the Holy Spirit would raise up to bear witness. There is just something about all this that speaks volumes about the ways of God and the fundamentally surprising nature of the gospel.

As 2020 mercifully draws to its conclusion, maybe this story is a reminder that God is with us – speaking to us – delivering us – even when the skies don't split asunder to reveal some magnificent maneuvering of God. Sometimes God speaks loudest through the quietest of incidents. As we continue celebrating the birth of Christ in the remaining days of Christmas, we affirm our hope in God – entering 2021 with Jesus, our source of light and joy – God's promised Saviour. Amen

➤ *Born in the night*

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#### † Prayer

God of love, as we celebrate the birth and life of Jesus, we are filled with thanks. Our gratitude overflows in prayers for our world – the world you love.

We pray for all children. Guard their minds – protect their bodies – strengthen their characters – and give them joy. Help them look to the future with hope and trust.

We pray for the most aged among us – those whom Simeon and Anna bring to mind. Protect them in the midst of the ongoing pandemic and reassure them of their value to you and to us, even when we cannot meet together.

We pray for those whose hearts are filled with pain and fear. We pray for those for whom Christmas is linked with loss or grief.

**(A silence is kept.)**

Surround each one with a strong sense of your comforting presence.

We pray for those who do not have enough to eat, and for those who lack adequate shelter in our community and in desperate corners of the world... For those who eat alone, without the comfort of human contact... For those whose hearts and lives have been broken by trauma and loss... For those who struggle with the many costs of the pandemic.

**(A silence is kept.)**

Surround each one with a strong sense of your comforting presence.

We pray for family members and friends – those nearby and those we could not meet with this year.

**(A silence is kept.)**

Remind them of our steadfast love, and to any struggling this season, O God, give your gift of peace.

As the year draws to a close, we surrender to you, O God, the challenges it has held for us so that they will not remain as burdens. Remind us of the good things that have offered us encouragement in times of isolation. We give you thanks for the people who continue to care for us and care about us. Give us courage and wisdom for the year ahead.

We pray that our leaders will have wisdom and generosity of spirit for the decisions they must make on our behalf. Guide scientists working to produce vaccines against COVID-19 and support all those essential workers whose faithfulness to their responsibilities helps us all cope in these difficult days.

Grant us all the hope, joy and peace we find through trusting you. Amen

➤ *Angels we have heard on high*

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PWS&D Sharing    **Christ is Born!**

Our church, through Presbyterian World Service & Development, is faithfully responding to God's call to help those in need.

Inspired by God's promise of abundant life, our church responds to the call to walk with and serve those in need. With compassion, justice and love, through PWS&D, we are working to assist the most vulnerable and marginalized.

We are responding to poverty, injustice, oppression and disasters around the world. Together we walk hand-in-hand with the hungry and sick, those confronted by prejudice, the persecuted and those affected by conflict and violence.

We are helping to restore human dignity, ease the pain of want, promote self-help and encourage community cooperation to benefit all.

As we celebrate Christ's birth, let us be reminded to stand in solidarity with those facing adversity. Without your support and your voice, this vital work would not be possible! Thank you for your ongoing and generous support.

### † Offering and Prayer

In the season of Christmas, we celebrate God's gifts to us in Christ Jesus and express our love for each other in the gifts we exchange. Our gifts today express our love for God and our gratitude for all we have received in love this year.

**Good and gracious God, your love overflows in the goodness we have met even in this challenging year. As one year closes and another begins, help us trust your goodness. Bless the gifts we bring to you so that they may provide others with the hope we know in Christ Jesus and the love you share with the world through him.**

Blessing [poem "Christmas Comes" from Ann Weems, Kneeling in Bethlehem]

In case you thought Christmas was over I am offering this poem as a closing blessing...

*Christmas comes every time we see God in other persons.*

*The human and the holy meet in Bethlehem*

*or in Times Square,*

*for Christmas comes like a golden storm on its way*

*to Jerusalem –*

*Determinedly, inevitably. . . .*

*Even now it comes*

*in the face of hatred and warring –*

*no atrocity too terrible to stop it,*

*no Herod strong enough,*

*no hurt deep enough,*

*no curse shocking enough*

*no disaster shattering enough.*

*For someone on earth will see the star,*

*someone will hear the angel voices,*

*someone will run to Bethlehem,*

*someone will know peace and goodwill:*

*The Christ will be born!*

May God bless you and keep you always. Amen

➤ *We will go out with joy*

*539 (PCUSA)*