

Welcome / Announcements / Land Acknowledgement

We recognize that the land where we gather for worship belongs to God, as does all of creation. We also know that this is the unceded territory of the Lkwungen and WSÁNEĆ people. As we pray, reflect, and celebrate in this place, we do so as guests lamenting the injustice in our history. We ask that the God of love and justice lead us along the path of reconciliation, bringing accountability and healing. May we be inspired to forge new relationships of respect and solidarity.

Celebrations / Joys & Concerns

*God's blessing on you. God's blessing on you.
God's blessing, dear friends. God's blessing on you.*

➤ *For mornings bright (verses 1 and 4)*

Call to Worship

Just this morning,
the Creator has drawn forth the sun from below the horizon to give light to a new day.

**Just this morning,
the Christ has come into our midst, for we are many gathered in one place.**

Just this morning, the Spirit has given us breath and voice to shape into prayer and song.

**Already this morning God has done great things in our lives.
All praise and thanks to God.**

We lift our hearts in joy and gratitude as we worship our gracious God, singing...

➤ *The first nowell*

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† Gathering Prayer and Words of Hope

God of majesty and mystery, like the magi following the star, we come to you in wonder. Your purposes are beyond our comprehension – your majesty incomparable – your love beyond imagination – your presence always with us. We praise you for your steadfast love, and offer you our trust for the days ahead as we seek to follow faithfully in the footsteps of Christ, our newborn King.

God of light and life, you have come to us in Christ Jesus to open a path to new life, but we often fall back on what is familiar. We confess that we are in love with our old ways

and our resolution for change is all too short. Forgive us when our resolve wavers and shine your light on the way we can follow into your future. **Amen**

Be assured of God's forgiveness. Make a new start this year – be at peace with God, secure in the knowledge of God's love.

➤ *We three kings*

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† Prayer for Understanding

Holy One, we give you thanks for the gift of Jesus – Emmanuel. Reassure us in our struggles and steady us as we travel life's paths, guided by the light of your word. Amen

Scripture **Isaiah 63: 7-9** [OT 693]

I will recount the gracious deeds of the Lord, the praiseworthy acts of the Lord, because of all that the Lord has done for us, and the great favor to the house of Israel that he has shown them according to his mercy, according to the abundance of his steadfast love. For he said, "Surely they are my people, children who will not deal falsely;" and he became their savior in all their distress. It was no messenger or angel but his presence that saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.

Matthew 2: 1-23 [NT 2]

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage."

When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: *And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.*"

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage."

When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they

saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him."

Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: *Out of Egypt I have called my son.*

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: *A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.*

When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead."

Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, "He will be called a Nazorean."

This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God!**

Message ***What is the Good News?***

The Gospel reading from Matthew covers a lot of ground this morning – from soup to nuts as my mother might say – from the ridiculous to the sublime – from reverence to carnage. Gospel means good news so here we are looking for the good news of Jesus Christ in this ancient text. What can we find?

First there are the Wise Guys from the East. I love the wise men – the Magi – with their flowing, fancy robes; their bejeweled headdresses; their carved boxes of gold, silver and fine wood. I envy them – their time to seek and follow that ancient star; their freedom to do as they please, go where they will; their confidence that their quest will not be in vain. I respect the wise men – their courage in the face of Herod's certain wrath; their conviction in Jesus as king; their devotion and joyful worship – their reverence.

The wise men foreshadow the coming of people from east and west to bow before the *King of the Jews*. They show us that Jesus is one to whom homage is due and their worship points to Jesus as not only king of some people but a king for all. The wise men make it clear that although Jesus may be ignored by some and rejected by others, he is the joy of those who find him.

Their gifts are considered symbolic – gold for royalty, a gift of love fit for a king; incense for divinity, a reverent offering to a god; and myrrh for suffering humanity, needed at every human funeral. The magi force us to look at King Jesus in stark contrast to King Herod. In their gift of gold, we see the giving up of the old economics. Frankincense means letting go of old patterns of worship and ever-new forms of propaganda. Myrrh means the renunciation of death and violence, bloodshed and slaughter, arms and warfare as a means of settling disputes.

The wise men from the east bring attention from the gentile world and draw us to the universal message of Jesus. They bring the good news as joy-filled worship. The magi bring the good news of Jesus Christ in their gifts to honour a new era – the reign of Christ.

In the flight into Egypt and the subsequent move from Egypt to Nazareth you can feel the intrigue and the fear – the movie music I imagine here is intense, building in speed but quietly threatening. Once again Joseph is dreaming, and an angel's voice directs him. Once again, he is obedient. The family gathers itself together in the dark of night and sets out for a foreign land. No time to plan, to book accommodation or secure safe passage. No opportunity to pack, to send a telegram to friend, to kiss a relative good-bye. Flee! Flee into the night...

The watchful angel returns to the family some years later when the danger is past, encouraging them to go home. The dreams continue and Nazareth is seen as the safest destination so that is where the family ends up. Matthew tells us that this fulfills what the prophets had said.

They were refugees in Egypt for a time. This family knew the distress of homelessness and being out of contact with loved ones. The world has many people like that today,

some because of natural disasters, and others because of war or the displacement of innocent people. For all of them, Joseph, Mary and Jesus stand as an icon of God's abiding love and concern for the whole human family.

The good news in this part of the story is that Jesus understands every aspect of our human condition – not only our joy and praise but our fear and despair. The good news is that Jesus resembles us in every way, shares our insecurity and vulnerability.

In fleeing to Egypt, the holy family escapes the evil of Herod's fear and the slaughter of the infants. Herod was known to be a cruel and power-hungry man. The more people struggled under his rule, the more repressive it became. People's movements and freedom of association were curtailed. Those who defied him were publicly punished or put to death. He is said to have executed his favourite wife, several of his sons, and others close to him. Herod lived in terror of intrigue or assassination so the very idea of one *born king of the Jews* must have sent him into a fit of suspicion and fear. And all of Jerusalem with him.

Herod's brute power and the atrocity he perpetrates to ensure his position sharply contrast with the Christmas nativity still fresh in our minds – a vulnerable babe in a softly lit manger and a mighty autocrat, the incarnation of God's love and grace distinguished from the enactment of ruthless power. Matthew wants us to focus on two kings in this story – not the three we so often sing about – but two: King Herod and King Jesus. These are two different royal majesties with competing sovereignties. King Jesus is not just one more king – not just bigger and better, but fundamentally new and different. His reign is the fulfillment of God's purpose.

So, is the good news just that Jesus is not like Herod? Is it simply that we can choose good over evil? We celebrate Christmas as a time of joy and peace, yet we are never far from the reality of powers turned evil and violent in our world. We are never far from tragedy. So, what is the good news in this part of today's reading? Where is the crumb of hope amidst the slaughter and sadness?

It is, I think, in the wailing and loud lamentation – in Rachel weeping inconsolably. The good news is that we are not alone even in this low moment because God promises to be an abiding presence. This wailing, weeping voice is the lamentation of our God. I have heard the wailing and weeping – I'm sure you have heard it too. The sound is set against the gentle *Silent Night* and the soothing *Away in a Manger*. It is the voice of God mourning staggering loss – the voice of God with us. Emmanuel. **Amen**

Offering and Prayer *Praise God from whom all blessings flow* 306

The Magi offered rare and expensive gifts to honour the new-born Christ child. We may not bring gold, frankincense and myrrh, but all our gifts are used by God to build God's kingdom in the world. Let us present our gifts and offerings.

God of neighbourhoods and nations, we bring our gifts to you, grateful that you are with us in good times and hard times. We do not know what the year ahead will hold but your love shines like a star to guide us. Bless these gifts and bless us – use them and us in the service of your mission in the world. Amen

The Apostles' Creed

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I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the father, and he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen

Invitation to the Lord's Table

The table of the Lord is ready. It is the table of companionship with Jesus.

It is a place where love and grace never end – where we grow in relationship with Jesus. It is the table of sharing with the poor and broken – where Christ becomes flesh.

We come seeking strength and healing. We come seeking unity with Christ.

Come to this table, you who have much faith... and you who would like to have more...

You who have been here often... and you have not been for a long time...

You who have tried to follow Jesus... and you who have failed...

Come... It is Christ who invites us to meet him here.

† Celebrating Together with Thanksgiving

God be with you.

And also with you.

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them to God.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is good to give God thanks and praise.

Gracious God, we praise your holy name, giving thanks with our lips and our lives. Through the words of your prophets you gave us hope by promising a Redeemer. And now we rejoice that in your Son, Jesus Christ, the Saviour has come and will come again in power and glory making all things new. When we were nothing, you made us something. When we had no name and no faith and no future – you called us your children.

When we lost our way, or turned away, you did not abandon us. In Jesus, the Word became flesh, giving us a vision of your glory that all people might be brought out of darkness into your marvelous light. Therefore, with all your faithful people from every time and place we join the angels to sing with joy...

O holy, holy, holy God, O God of time and space. All earth and sea and sky above bear witness to your grace. Hosanna in the highest heav'n, creation sings your praise. And blessed is the one who comes and bears your name always!

Faithful God, we offer you our praise and thanks as we return to you these holy gifts of bread and wine. Remembering that on the night of his arrest Jesus sat down to eat with friends. During the meal, he took the bread, said a prayer, broke it and shared it with everyone at the table, saying: *"This is my body which is for you. Do this to remember me."*

At the end of the meal, he took a cup of wine and raised it, saying: *"This is God's new covenant, made possible because of my death. Drink this all of you, to remember me."*

We ponder, O God, the mystery of his promise that in this meal we are joined to him and to one another as a holy people. We offer you our praise and thanks for Jesus Christ, who took flesh and lived among us, was baptized for our sins, taught us your way of truth, loved us in our lovelessness and died that we may have life.

Gracious God, following Jesus' example, we take this bread and wine, the ordinary things of the world, which Christ makes special. We know that with you is mercy and the power to change us. Therefore, we proclaim the mystery of faith...

***Sing Christ has died and Christ is risen, Christ will come again!
Sing Christ has died and Christ is risen, Christ will come again!***

God of grace and power, you invite us to share in mysteries that are beyond understanding. In simple trust, we seek the transforming power of your Spirit us and upon this bread and wine. By the miracle of your grace may they be for us your body – vibrant with your life, renewing and making us whole. And as the bread and wine which we now eat and drink are changed into us, may we be changed again into you – bone of your bone – flesh of your flesh, loving and caring in the world.

Through Christ, with Christ, in Christ, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honour is yours, almighty God, for ever and ever and so we sing...

Amen, amen, O Holy One! Hosanna and amen!

Amen, amen, O Holy One! Hosanna and amen!

Sharing Bread and Cup

The one who was with God in the beginning, is with us in this bread.

The one of whom the prophets spoke now speaks to us in this cup.

The bread of life – the cup of grace – we remember and share with thanksgiving.

Come and share in these gifts. In them God comes to us so that we may come to God.

Please come forward to receive Holy Communion – everyone is welcome at this table.

If you are unable to come to the front, please signal an elder who will come and serve you.

We use gluten-free bread. Both juice and wine are available.

† Prayer after Communion

Loving God, we give you thanks for this holy mystery in which you have united us with Christ. Grant that we may go into the world in the strength of your Spirit, to give ourselves for others as we live and work to your praise and glory. **Amen**

➤ ***Our Father in heaven** (The Lord's Prayer – no repeats) 469*

Blessing

Let us go in courage and confidence to face the year ahead, sure that the light of Christ will guide us. May God bless you and keep you – may God's face shine upon you – may God be gracious to you, giving you joy and peace this day and every day. Amen

➤ ***We are marching** (repeat)*

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