

Welcome / Announcements / Land Acknowledgement

As we come to worship in Jesus' name we acknowledge with gratitude and respect the Lkwungen people – the Songhees, Esquimalt and WSÁNEĆ – on whose traditional and unceded territory we gather. We lament current and historic injustices on this land. We live here not knowing the full story of the land and its people but seeking to learn more, and, by the grace of God, trying to walk a more hopeful and helpful path.

Call to Worship [from *Cloth for the Cradle*, p. 114]

A boy has been born for us;

A child has been given to us.

And his name shall be called

Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, the Prince of Peace.

Once we were no people;

Now we are God's people.

Once we walked in darkness;

Now we have seen a great light.

Let us worship our Gracious God!

□ *Angels from the realms of glory*

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† Gathering Prayer / the Lord's Prayer / Words of Hope

Most Holy God, with wonder and joy we come before you. We come from the aftermath of Christmas celebrations, contented though weary, relaxed and thankful. 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 light and darkness are uncomfortably mixed.

We are beings of cleverness yet foolishness – faith yet much unrest – strength yet frailty – compassion yet self-interest. We want to be close to you, yet we ignore you – we praise you yet defy you – we serve you yet evade you – we love you yet 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 in confident hope as Jesus taught... ***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***

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. Friends, your sins are forgiven – be at peace.

📖 *Once in royal David's city*

166 (words from PCUSA 140)

† Prayer for Understanding

Holy God, your Word makes all things new. Send your Holy Spirit to refresh our minds and hearts, and embrace your truth revealed in Christ, your Word made flesh. Amen

Scripture **Isaiah 61: 10 – 62: 3** [OT 692]

I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations. For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until her vindication shines out like the dawn, and her salvation like a burning torch. The nations shall see your vindication, and all the kings your glory; and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will give. You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.

Psalm 148 *displayed/responsive*

Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord from the heavens; praise the Lord in the heights!

Praise the Lord, all the angels; praise the Lord, all the host of heaven!

Praise the Lord, sun and moon; praise the Lord, all you shining stars!

Praise the Lord, you highest heavens, and you waters above the heavens!

Let them praise the name of the Lord, who commanded and they were created. who established them forever and ever; and fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed.

Praise the Lord from the earth,

**you sea monsters and all deeps, fire and hail, snow and frost,
stormy wind fulfilling God's command!**

Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars!

Wild animals and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds!

Rulers of the earth and all peoples, leaders and all judges of the earth!

Young men and women alike, old and young together!

**Let them praise the name of the Lord, whose name alone is exalted;
whose glory is above earth and heaven.**

The Lord has raised up a horn for the people, praise for all the faithful,
for the people of Israel who are close to their God.

Praise the Lord!

Galatians 4: 4-7 [NT 189]

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "*Abba! Father!*"

So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

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

□ *Il est né*

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Message

So, Advent is finished – all that waiting! And Jesus was born – again – so Christmas is over, and we can focus on the New Year. Make some resolutions we won't keep, think about a year that we might be inclined to say "good riddance" to. The war in Ukraine grinds on and exacts its terrible toll day by day in ways too few of us are even tracking anymore. War in Israel and Gaza broke out too and the death toll and the sheer number of children being slaughtered is sickening. And tensions continue and violence continues in places like Sudan and Darfur and gunfire has erupted in the US a record number of times in 2023 with a devastating number of deaths – almost 2 per day is one statistic I came across.

Yes, the future looks bleak. We seem bent on self-destruction – hell bent. Yet, people tend to be surprisingly festive as the old year turns to the new what with the corks popping and the glasses full of bubbles and the kissing of those you love!

But hang on just a minute before pushing Christmas back into those storage bins for another year because it isn't over – not yet. In fact, this is the day of *seven swans a swimming* – yes, we are still in the thick of Christmas. The twelve days begin on December 25th and continue to the Feast of the Epiphany on January 6th. That is the day to un-deck the halls and give up hope that the mistletoe will work its magic.

The baby was born – *born of a woman, born under the law* – as it says in Galatians. So, now that we've had Jesus' birthday party why would we keep celebrating – why isn't Christmas over? Because that birth changed it all – God became one with us in a unique way – the child born in the manger grows up experience the joys and suffering of incarnate life – grows up to redeem us. We are blessed with membership in God's

kingdom – given the privilege of being “working models of new creation” – invited to thrive in God’s glorious and eternal presence and participate in the Creator’s divine love of the world.

As Christmas continues however, this is often considered a “low Sunday” in spirit and attendance despite the fact that we are still hearing the Christmas message of messy incarnation and hope when hope is nearly lost. We need to hang on to Christmas spiritually and speak for the presence of God in undramatic and unexpected moments of life. Maybe we could try to remember – and work toward realizing – God’s dream of salvation for the whole earth – an end to injustice, poverty, and war.

Maybe we could notice God in our midst – in the micro as well as the macro. If we can notice God in a Bethlehem baby, perhaps we can notice God in all things – discover God’s presence in every aspect of our lives. Wouldn’t that be something!?

It would be different that’s for sure – different from the litany of woe that often pervades our lives... a neighbour of ours died just before Christmas, a friend’s dog is suffering with kidney failure, I saw another homeless person curled up with all their belongings in a doorway just down the street, someone I know posted that 15 years ago Gaza was being bombed and is again... I’m sure you could make your own recitation...

It makes me think of the Psalm I read last Sunday, *"How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?"* Or the words of Habakkuk, *"How long, Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen?"* And Jesus’ cry of abandonment: *"My God, why have you forsaken me?"*

It would be great to notice God in our midst but honestly, I sometimes wonder – even as I affirm the good news that God is with us, among us, working and blessing – I wonder just how, when and where is God doing all this? Will we ever experience this age of shalom and wholeness that is promised? Will we ever as a society love justice more than power and profit? Will we ever privilege the vulnerable over the rich and powerful?

I don't have answers to these questions. Nobody does. They have troubled thoughtful people for millennia. But I take comfort that we are encouraged to "live the questions" rather than ignore them – or dismiss them as inappropriate – or to offer pious certitudes and glib clichés. The Jewish tradition from which we come is famous for badgering God, complaining, and arguing with the divine.

And so, we pray. To pray is to invoke the name of God, as Psalm 148 implores all creation to do – to wonder and praise and hope. This poem rejoices in the discovery of a universe of praise. All things praise God – sun, moon, stars, heavens, water over the heavens, sea creatures, ocean depths, lightning, hail, snow, clouds, winds, mountains, hills, fruit trees, cedars, wild creatures, cattle, small creatures, flying birds – 20 distinct parts of creation in addition to angels and the host of heaven before humans are

included! Everybody is a member of the choir and so is called to sing praises to God whose energy flows through all things, inspiring them to praise. We live in an animated universe. All things experience holiness – every breath a prayer and every breath a blessing.

Psalm 148 – described by one commentator as *a fizzing, frothing bottle of champagne in word form – as though the Book of Psalms has all along been shaking and shaking a bottle of bubbly and now as the Psalter comes in for a landing in its final half-dozen songs, the cork has finally given way to the internal pressure and *POP* we end with explosions of praise and worship.*

We moved through Advent celebrating the songs of Luke's gospel and came to Christmas Eve singing a new song of hopeful praise. One Advent song from our study – *O come, O come Emmanuel* – is based on a tradition that emerged to express our prayers for deliverance called the "Great Antiphons," or the "O Antiphons." We don't know the exact origins of them, but they were in liturgical use in Rome by the eighth century. In the west, the "standard" seven antiphons were sung or chanted in the Vesper services for the last seven days of Advent – a thousand-year-old tradition of meditating on the names of Jesus.

Each antiphon is a short paraphrase of Biblical passages. They begin with the particle "O," which is deliberately evocative and exclamatory. They then articulate one of the Messianic names for Jesus from the Old Testament. They conclude with a repeated imperative for deliverance, "Come!" As one scholar put it, *"They comfort, heighten, calm and focus, but they are also direct and demanding."* They are unapologetically impatient – just as I often am!

I want to see the glory and good of the divine in all things and to celebrate with all creation – praising in tune with Psalm 148. I struggle to hold the babe in the manger and the saviour on the cross in my heart and vision as I walk through my days all the while calling out, *"Holy One, do not delay, come and save us!"* Maybe these Great Antiphons are what we all need to intone as we move from this year to the next...

O Wisdom (*Sapientia*)

coming forth from the mouth of the Most High,
reaching from one end to the other,
mightily and sweetly ordering all things:
Come and teach us the way of prudence.

O Lord (*Adonai*) and Ruler of the House of Israel,
who appeared to Moses in the fire of the burning bush,
and gave him the law on Sinai:
Come and redeem us with an outstretched arm.

O Root of Jesse (*Radix*), standing as a sign among the peoples;
before you kings will shut their mouths, to you the nations will make their prayer:

Come and deliver us, and delay no longer.

O Key of David (*Clavis*) and sceptre of the House of Israel;
you open and no one can shut; you shut and no one can open:
Come and lead the prisoners from the prison house,
those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death.

O Morning Star (*Oriens*),
splendor of light eternal and sun of righteousness:
Come and enlighten those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death.

O King of the nations (*Rex Gentium*), and their desire,
the cornerstone making both one:
Come and save the human race, which you fashioned from clay.

O Emmanuel (*Emmanuel*), our king and our lawgiver,
the hope of the nations and their Savior:
Come and save us, O Lord our God.

There is a delightful piece of wordplay that is lost in the translation from Latin to English – a clever reverse acrostic tucked into these Great Antiphons. The first letters of the seven Messianic titles, proceeding from the last to the first, spell *Ero cras* (Emmanuel, Rex, Oriens, Clavis, Radix, Adonai, Sapientia) – literally, **"I will be there tomorrow."** And so, our sevenfold plea to God – *Come and help us*, contains in itself a response from God – *I am coming*. May it be so.

□ **Now greet the swiftly changing year** **810**

Offering and Prayer

Christmas isn't over for us! We celebrate God's gift in Christ Jesus again and again. Grateful for all we have received, we express our love for God in our gifts this day and affirm our commitment to share God's love with others in the year ahead.

□ **Praise God from whom all blessings flow** **306**

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

† Pastoral Prayers

You are with us, O God, to knit us together in mutual love and caring. You pour out abundant gifts that enrich our existence and challenge us to give our best.

Let the words of our mouths proclaim the dawn of redemption that Christ inaugurates. Let the actions that arise from our hearts and minds spread abroad the good news of Christ's reconciling love. Plant in every heart, we pray, the love of the one who is the

Saviour of the world, our Lord Jesus Christ; and with that love burning, make this world of ours a world of hope and promise – for all peoples, and for all times...

Lord, hear our prayers for those people and those situations you have placed upon our hearts this day. Bring to our hearts and minds those for whom you wish us to intercede...

All these things we ask and pray to you about in the name of Jesus, the Christ – the one who was born under the light of a star, and who gives to us the light we need to walk into each day as your holy and beloved people. Amen

□ *Go, tell it on the mountain*

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Blessing

Rejoice this day that Christ is born for us – lived as one of us – died for our sake – and is risen to walk beside us through whatever the future holds. So may the tenderness of God enfold you – the promise of Christ Jesus uphold you – and the strength of the Spirit lead you on to greet the year ahead, filled with grace and truth. Amen

□ *We will go out with joy*