

Christmas Worship

Christmas Traditions



By The Rev. Jennifer Geddes

Call to Worship (inspired by Psalm 96)

One: Sing to God! Sing new songs of praise, sing the familiar carols! Let all the earth sing!

All: Sing of God's wonders and glory! For God is worthy of our songs.

One: Even the stars sing! Even the beasts sing!

All: For great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised.

Hymn: #159 O Come All Ye Faithful (vs 1-4)

Prayer of Approach and Confession

Loving God, as we buzz with anticipation, as visions of surprises and gifts dance in our heads, as we burst with joy and belt out our favourite songs, draw us into a moment of worship. As Joseph found a place of rest amongst the beasts, bring us to a place of rest. As Mary pondered all these things, help us to ponder all that this means for us. As the angels proclaimed good news of great joy, help us to proclaim these words too. As the shepherds were amazed, help us to find amazement amongst the familiar traditions. As Jesus found his place in a manger,

help us to find our place in your world.

We confess it is hard for us to be drawn into a moment of peace. We are unsettled and question how this story could have any meaning for us today. We think often too much about ourselves rather than others. We do not proclaim any good news, nor are we amazed at this story of love, let alone show love for one another. This time of year can often sharpen our differences and what has kept us apart rather than bring us closer. We often get distracted by the artificial lights that decorate our houses rather than seeking the light of this world. As we unite our voices in prayer, unite our hearts in peace, hear us as we pray the prayer Jesus taught us...

The Lord's Prayer

Words of Assurance

The people who walk in darkness have seen a great light; walk in the assurance of God's grace and know that we are forgiven. Forgive yourself. Forgive one another. And find peace with God.

Lighting of the Christ Candle:

Use the PWS&D responsive readings.

Scripture #1

Luke 2:1-7

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. (NRSV)

Hymn: #165 O Little Town of Bethlehem

Scripture #2

Luke 2: 8-20

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So, they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. (NRSV)

Time for the Young and the Young at Heart: A Sweet Nativity

(This version was inspired by one I heard as a kid (as told by my dad, the Rev. Bob Geddes) and by a version that uses candies from the UK. I have re-imagined it using candy and chocolate bars that are readily available in Canada. I like to place the candies, in order, in a wrapped box, so that each one I take out is a "surprise". After the service I tend to give out the candies to the young (or young at heart) in attendance.)

At Christmas time, one story you will hear many times is that of the Nativity. As you know it's a WONDERBAR story. It all began with a girl called Mary who was visited by an angel. Was it a MIRAGE? No, it was a vision. The angel said she was the most EXCEL-lent of women and that she would give birth to God's son. When she heard this her tummy was turned to JELLYBEANS because, how could this be? She was not yet married to Joseph. To have a baby now would mean that the whole town would talk and SNICKER. Joseph thought that he should divorce her.

But Joseph was told in a dream that this child would be a real LIFE SAVER and so he remained with Mary.

But before the baby arrived, political events overtook them, and they went on a MOMENTOS journey. Joseph had to return to Bethlehem for the census - it was miles away. They had to travel on a donkey simply because in those days there were no AEROplanes.

When they arrived, Joseph tried to find lodgings, but all they heard was “No Room” from the Inn Keeper. However, there was room in the stable, where all there were ALL SORTS of animals including a real nice KIT KAT. It was there that the baby was born. He was named Jesus, which means saviour.

Later that night, AFTER EIGHT in fact, there were some happy shepherds, you might even call them JOLLY RANCHERS, out watching their flock. When all of a sudden angels appeared in the sky and sang “Glory to God in the Highest”. The shepherds went to Bethlehem to see the child. When they got there, they knelt to worship this son of God.

Meanwhile in a far country, there were some wise men. Many people called them SMARTIES. Some say there were three of them, like the THREE MUSKETEERS. They were busily scanning the sky when they saw a new light. Could it be MARS? No, it was a special STAR BURST signalling the birth of a King. They knew they were meant to follow the star, so they climbed up on the “CAMELS” and made the long journey. They went to Herod’s Palace to see if Herod knew about this royal birth. Herod was angry because he wanted to be the only MR. BIG in the land. He told them that he wanted to go and worship the baby as well, so the wise men were to report to him on their way back.

The wise men set off and eventually found the young Jesus and they offered him their BOUNTY – Frankincense, Myrrh, and even a POT OF GOLD. Then God warned them in a dream that Herod was up to his TWIX and really wanted to kill the child. So, they went home via a different route.

Now there are some OLD FASHIONED HUMBUGS who don’t believe this story, but according to the Bible, Jesus was born so that everyone, including MIKE AND IKE, REESE and OH, HENRY might come to know God's love for them. That is one sweet

Nativity story.

Hymn: #139 Hark! The herald angels sing

Meditation

Christmas is often filled with anticipation, but it is also loaded with traditions. For me this starts in mid-November when I put together our advent calendar and it doesn't end until Epiphany when we take down the tree. One of these traditions is finding ways to hear the Christmas story in a new way - like the version of a Sweet Nativity.

But as I reflected on all these traditions that seem to cascade down on me at this time of the year, I reflected on the various changes, transitions, or adaptations that so many of the traditions had on me, particularly throughout my adult life, like when I lived in an apartment building that didn't allow real trees. So, I bought a potted plant and decorated it instead. Or the first Christmas Eve service away from my home church when I made the congregation sing "Lo How a Rose Ere Blooming" - because it's a family favourite - even though many in the congregation didn't know it. Or I thought about the transitions that happen in a family once the matriarchs and patriarchs are gone or when children marry and create their own traditions. Or, of course, how traditions had to be adapted over the last two years with gift opening taking place over Zoom or virtual services. You know, my Christmases were steeped in tradition, but those traditions have always changed or evolved with circumstance.

Luke's account of the birth of Jesus is one of the few stories from the Bible that we still might traditionally hear at this time of year, whether we attend church or not, especially if we are fans of that Christmas special classic, a *Charlie Brown's Christmas*. But what can sometimes happen is that because of its familiarity we miss some of the nuances. When Luke begins with, "In those days" he is setting up the timeline to demonstrate that there was nothing traditional about this birth. There are many expectations and traditions that normally take place during a 1st century Palestinian-Jewish wedding. They don't normally involve an unplanned pregnancy or unexpected trip. And while hospitals were not what they are now, most women traditionally did not give birth among farm animals. Mary and Joseph not only experienced the upheaval that a new baby would bring but the upheaval of political powers. Emperor Augustus was "flexing his muscles" making

sure that everyone was registered so that the correct amount of tribute or taxes would come to him. Luke is not a traditional storyteller because it takes Luke five verses to describe the details around the logistics of this census and only one to describe the birth of Jesus. As a result, we are often left with filling in the blanks: imagining a dialogue between Joseph and the Innkeeper or the possibility that this birth took place in a stable. These images have filled our traditions but are not actually a part of our biblical record.

The story then switches gears and turns to some shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night. I can say with certainty that the usual night of watching sheep didn't involve a choir of angels. Traditionally, shepherds were not very high on the social scale. It is quite possible that their lifestyle meant they were unable to keep kosher laws which meant they were banned from the temple. So, the fact that news of Jesus' birth is first shared with these shepherds is unexpected. Then the angels declare that Jesus brings peace - this is no pax Romana, a peace established through oppression, this is true peace. Peace that is for all people. Peace that will break with the traditions!

Mary, Joseph, Jesus, and the shepherds did not have a traditional night that first Christmas Eve. There was a line that brought me comfort as we adapted during the pandemic. It was, "that Mary and Joseph never had the Christmas we have now - but they had Jesus." No matter what is going on in the world we can still celebrate the transitional time that Christ comes. That, regardless of what traditions can or cannot happen, Jesus is going to come. The love of God knows no restrictions. The love of God does not adhere to boundaries or borders. The love of God surpasses all those traditions. And that is what the peace at Christmas celebrates.

As a kid, every year, at some point over the Christmas season, we would visit the grandparents. Grandma and Grandpa Geddes, both came from musical families. And so, even well before the time I was born, Christmas meant one big jam session. Grandma would often be on the banjo or electric organ in the dining room. Grandpa would be on the fiddle. Dad was on the trumpet or harmonica and others picked up instruments like the recorder, ukulele or bass drum and everyone would sing. When someone started a song too high or low, laughter ensued as vocal cords were tested, and joy abounded. Even when Grandma could no longer speak due to dementia, she could still sing every word to those carols. But

eventually those gatherings and jam sessions stopped as people moved into care or grew up and moved away or died. I haven't played a musical instrument in years. But someone, in their wisdom, recorded some of those Christmas jam sessions and my brother eventually put them on an album. The new tradition is the smiles I get when listening to those jam sessions. And the reminder that Christ comes, traditions or not.

Christmas also celebrates God-with-us, Emmanuel. This does not mean God-above-us or God-beyond-us or God-observing-us from afar. This means that throughout all our traditions or transitions, God is with us, right beside us. God is with us as we adapt our traditions to our changing times. God is with us as we grieve and experience pain, as we feel isolated or seek joy in the little things. Christ comes, whether we plan for it or not, whether our traditions happen or not. Christ comes, born to bring peace, surrounded by sheep and shepherds, and songs of angels. Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace among those whom he favours.

Hymn: #148 It came upon a midnight clear

Prayers of the People

God of Majesty, we are in awe at the story we hear, we revel in wonder, at the familiar story and new insights gained. We thank you that you come to us, no matter what. We thank you that you are with us, in all our traditions and transitions. We thank you for bringing love and light into a world that often feels chaotic and dark.

Give us a moment to pause and pray for those that find this time of year a challenge.

We pray for those who struggle to hear good news because they have fled unrest; those who have had to be on the move because of a decree or war or oppression or power beyond their control.

We pray for those who are struggling to make ends meet; those who have no room to rest their heads.

We pray for those who will spend this time alone, in hospitable or in grief. Make us generous with our time and friendship.

We pray for those who, like the shepherds, will work throughout this time, particularly those who work on the front lines, those who give up their traditions

for our comfort and safety.

We pray for ourselves as we continue to adjust to a different kind of Christmas, one which may involve one less person at our table, or a new family member, one that may be too peaceful or too chaotic. Remind us that no matter what kind of Christmas we are having, Christ still comes to be with us.

In silence, in a moment of calm, hear our personal prayers....(15-20 seconds of silence)

Help all to find a moment to celebrate the new life, the new love, the new song, that this story shares this season. In the name of the one born in Bethlehem, Emmanuel, God with us, Amen.

Hymn: #154 Silent Night

Benediction

On this holy night (or day *if this is a Christmas service*) Glory to God in the highest heavens. See what God has revealed to you this night. God is with you this Christmas and always.

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