

twelvebaskets



ADVENT 4C

A complete Sunday service ready to use
for worship and inspire ideas in your church

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Fourth Sunday of Advent - Year C
19th December 2021



Order of Service

Call to worship

Hymn:

706 STF – Longing for light, we wait in darkness OR

176 STF – Like a candle flame, flickering small in our darkness

Opening Prayers

The Lord's Prayer

All Age Talk

Hymn:

175 STF – Light of the world, you stepped down into darkness OR

193 STF – Born in the night, Mary's child

Readings: Micah 5:2-5a; Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-45

Reflections on the readings

Hymn:

209 STF – Let me tell you about a baby OR

186 STF – Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord!

What am I being called to?

Hymn:

522 STF – I should like to speak to you OR

662 STF – Have you heard God's voice; has your heart been stirred?

Intercessions

Offering / collection

Blessing the offering

Hymn:

204 STF – In the bleak midwinter OR

208 STF – Let earth and heaven combine

Blessing

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Call to worship

We praise you, the God who created the universe.

We worship you, the God who chose to walk amongst us in Palestine 2,000 years ago.

We give you thanks, the God who still chooses to live and move and have your being amongst us now, at the end of 2021.

Open our hearts to your coming.

Come, Lord Jesus.

Amen.¹

Hymn:

706 STF – Longing for light, we wait in darkness OR

176 STF – Like a candle flame, flickering small in our darkness

Opening Prayers

God of the manger, God of the shepherds, God of the angels - we worship you this day. We come before you, seeking the peace of an Advent God.

We stand with the angels.

We stand in the presence of God.

Today, we worship a God who came to a young woman in Nazareth, in unknowable ways, and who made the impossible possible and who made the uncomprehensible happen, a God who became a tiny baby boy, who contracted infinite power and strength into a fragile, feeble and dependent human life. We worship a Christmas God.

We stand with the angels.

We stand in the presence of God.

The Christmas God who came, you are also the God who comes - today, now, into our lives.

We, like John the Baptist, look for ways we can prepare the way for you to come. We seek to know you more, and to do your will in the world around us.

We have failed, we have fallen short, but we know the peace, the acceptance, the warmth of the Advent God.

This morning, we look to your coming Lord,

¹ Call to Worship written by Tim Baker

We stand with the angels.

We stand in the presence of God.

Amen.²

We say together the Lord's Prayer

All Age Talk

It was a meeting of the mums.

Two expectant mothers, one old, one young.

One was six months along; the other, newly pregnant. And the fact that they were expecting was totally unexpected! Both of them were pregnant when really neither one of them should have been, under normal circumstances. But these circumstances were anything but normal. What was happening was much better than normal.

This meeting of the mums was the visitation of Mary to Elizabeth. Elizabeth was the older woman; Mary, the younger. Elizabeth was in her sixth month; Mary's pregnancy had just started. It was at this time that Mary goes to visit her older relative Elizabeth, traveling from her home in Nazareth, up in Galilee, down to the home of Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah in the hill country of Judah.

"The Visitation" is the term that is commonly used when referring to this meeting of these two most uncommon mothers, Mary and Elizabeth. What happened between these two mothers was special because we hear in the Bible text- "When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit."

This moment is special because even in the womb Jesus brought blessings. You see at Christmas we celebrate the blessing and the gift Jesus is when he was born. However, what we cannot forget is the blessing Jesus was even as a baby.³

Hymn:

175 STF – Light of the world, you stepped down into darkness OR

193 STF – Born in the night, Mary's child

Readings: Micah 5:2-5a; Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-45

² Opening prayers written by Tim Baker

³ All Age Talk written by Matt Forsyth

Reflections on the reading

Christmas is coming - it's so nearly here now, the anticipation is almost unbearable in the most excited children's eyes. And perhaps in yours too?

Christmas is coming, and however you feel about tinsel, mince pies, turkey and family parties, this is a vital moment in the Christian calendar.

Christmas is coming – the birth of the revolution. The revolution that still goes on in every time and place, 2,000 years after the strange stories of a man from the Middle East. The revolution that was not about violent overthrows or changing governments, but the revolution of love preached and enacted by Jesus Christ of Nazareth. In these next few days, we celebrate that birth, and we keep the revolution alive.

So, this morning, we have three thoughts to share with you about this love-revolution, this radical message called Christmas...

[You may wish to use three different voices to communicate these three different points].

Number one - The Unexpected Revolution.

At the beginning of JRR Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, which was quite recently turned into a series of blockbuster films, a whole host of dwarves arrive at Bilbo Baggins' house and simply invite themselves in, and begin partying. Our host (the eponymous hobbit) is too polite and good-mannered to turn them away and ends up providing food and drink aplenty until they are all settled in and begin making plans for the adventure they are about to set off on. This opening chapter is called 'The Unexpected Party'.

When, several years later, Tolkien's keenly awaited sequel 'The Lord of the Rings' came out, the opening chapter title was an in-joke for readers of *The Hobbit* – it was called 'The Long-Expected Party'.

In some ways, the Christmas story is both of these - it captures the paradox of Tolkien's two chapter names by being both long-expected and entirely unexpected. Of course, the Israelites were keenly awaiting a Messiah, the Hebrew Bible is full of references to the coming Saviour, and under the tyranny of Rome they were more ready than ever for someone to come and turn the table. They had been waiting a long time for something to party about...

However, this Jesus Revolution, the party that started on that first Christmas and which has been going on ever since, was not what anybody expected. Look at the figure of John the Baptist – whose mother's story we hear a little bit from in today's readings but who (during Advent) we see described as a wild man, offensive, antagonistic, in direct opposition to both religious and political leaders. He is hardly the choice one might have expected as the herald of the Messiah, as the one sent to prepare the way for Jesus. And yet, this ranting hermit is given a vital, unexpected role in Jesus' revolutionary movement.

Today's Micah passage reminds us of the lowly status of Bethlehem: 'one of the little clans of Judah', but it also promises that something remarkable is going to happen there. Sometimes, when you read all the classic Old Testament readings prophesying Jesus' birth, it is hard to see how it was unexpected at all! However, let that be a warning to us – how many hints, clues, calls and invitations have we overlooked, even just this week? Are we missing out on the invitation to join another unexpected revolution today?

The final line of the Micah reading is also an important invitation into the unexpected: 'he (the Messiah) shall be the one of peace'. Perhaps that doesn't sound so surprising these days: most of us would wish for world peace if we could have it. But for the times of this Old Testament prophet, when much of your tribal identity was forged in war against opposing tribes, peace was a radical concept.

What counter-cultural revolution are we being invited into today? Is it 'and he will be the one of selflessness'? Or 'he will be the one of gift'? Or 'he will be the one of poverty'? Perhaps you have your own images of how Jesus helps us to be different from the world around us, to invite hope and possibility amongst so much pain...

Will you join the unexpected revolution?

[Pause]

Number two - The Spirit-filled Revolution

Luke's gospel reading for today is Mary's visit to Elizabeth, the meeting of the pregnant women, the coming together of the mothers of two of the most significant figures of the New Testament: John the Baptist and Jesus himself. This is the moment when the baby John leaps in Elizabeth's womb – some sort of spiritual recognition of what is going on here perhaps? An early indication of John's role: to warn people that Jesus is coming, even his own mother? And Elizabeth's blessing for Mary is surely a significant moment for the young virgin as she grows into her new role, in the midst of a difficult context to bear a child.

However, the line we are exploring in a bit more depth this morning is that short sentence in the middle of the passage: 'And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit'. The encounter with Jesus, even the unborn Jesus, just beginning to take shape in Mary's womb, leads Elizabeth into an experience of the Holy Spirit.

This revolution, this Jesus-revolution, is not just about following the teachings of one man who lived in Palestine a couple of thousand years ago, who the stories claim was born of a virgin and was resurrected after his crucifixion at the hands of the Romans. Christ is the heart of Christianity, but Christ is not a historical figure (or at least, not just a historical figure) Christ is part of a living-breathing God who continues to move amongst and inspire people each day, by his Spirit. The world we live in is Spirit-filled, the divine is at work, filling people's hearts, transforming lives, nudging, inviting, calling. To put it in the words of American thinker Rob Bell – everything is spiritual.

So if we want to be a part of the unexpected revolution, we are also invited into the spirit-filled revolution. The movement that looks to go deeper than the surface level, that connects with people at the level of their very souls and builds a connection between the human and the divine. We are a spirit-people.

[Pause]

Number three - The Deconstruction Revolution.

In another story, later in the Gospels, Jesus talks in candid ways about the temple, saying that he will tear it down and rebuild it in three days. His listeners, assuming he is talking about the physical building of the temple in Jerusalem, are aghast and offended saying – it took forty-six years to build this temple, it cannot be rebuilt so soon.

Most commentaries point to the most likely interpretation – that Jesus was referring to his body as a temple which would be resurrected within three days of his death. However, this story seems also to point to a more fundamental truth at the heart of the Jesus movement: sometimes things have to be torn down.

For many religious people in Jerusalem at the time, it seems The Temple (with capital 'T's) had become more important than God. The temple was built as a very important and powerful way for the Israelites to access their God – it helped them to understand worship, to attain to something higher and more permanent than the nomadic gods of other tribes...but now it was getting in the way. Perhaps that is what Jesus was hinting at when he threatened to tear it down, and certainly what he was getting at when he (less subtly) turned over the tables of the money-changers. This revolution is going to involve some deconstruction of the systems and injustices that have been allowed to stand for too long.

In the Hebrews passage we heard earlier in our service, we see this same impulse – the writer is reflecting on what Jesus said about sacrifices and invites us to see this as a deconstruction of the old system, in order to introduce a new one. 'He abolishes the first in order to establish the second.' In order to do something new, some things might have to be abolished, destroyed, taken-apart, turned upside down, handed over.

This is the challenge we must face up to again today: what are the things we have built that have become obstructions to the revolution?

The early days of the Jesus-movement were radical, counter-cultural, unexpected, spirit-filled, liberated and anti-establishment. Are there places where we have lost some of that impulse? Are there parts of our churches, our church-politics, our institutions that have been introduced with the best of intentions but which now stand as obstacles to spreading the love and peace of Christ?⁴

Hymn:

209 STF – Let me tell you about a baby OR

186 STF – Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord!

What are you being called to?

Today, we have three questions to consider, based on the three ways in which the Christmas revolution:

- The Unexpected Revolution. If we are unexpected and counter-cultural, where have we compromised so far that we are no-longer discernable from the culture we wish to challenge and call out?
- The Spirit-filled Revolution. If we are spirit-filled, what is standing in the way of us answering our calling?
- The Deconstruction Revolution. If Jesus were here now, what would he be inviting us to tear down?

These are difficult questions, and hard for us to hear, let's just pause for a moment and reflect on what the answers might be for us...

[Pause]

Let us pray.

Revolutionary God, we hear your call again today, to be your unexpected people, bringing transformation to a broken world.

⁴ Reflection written by Tim Baker

Christmas God, come again by your Spirit so that, this year, we may know the miracle of God with us, Immanuel.

Living God, we seek you, in Jesus' name.

Amen.

Hymn:

522 STF – I should like to speak to you OR

662 STF – Have you heard God's voice; has your heart been stirred?

Prayers of intercession

Living God, we turn to you in prayer for your world, for people and situations everywhere that need to experience something of the Christmas magic this season.

As we move towards the final few hours before Christmas, we invite you to come into a world crying out for a Prince of Peace, an Everlasting Father, a Mighty God, a Wonderful Counselor. Amongst the darkness, shine your great light.

We pause now to bring our own prayers for the world, this Christmas season...

[Quiet]

God of this Advent season, as the waiting time draws to a close, we commit to you our own lives, our families and friends, our loved ones and neighbours – all who we will encounter over the Christmas period. Move amongst us, that our conversation will be rich and spirit-filled, that our actions will show peace and love, that our revolution of hope can begin again, for the sake of your kingdom.

We pause now to pray for all those we will encounter this Christmas season...

[Quiet]

God who understands grief and pain, we offer to you all who will find the next few days especially hard – those living with loss, fear and doubt.

We pause now to pray for all who find Christmas difficult...

[Quiet]

We bring this, and all our prayers, through Jesus Christ, Immanuel.

Amen.⁵

We will now take up the offering.

Blessing the offering

In this season of gift-giving and gift-exchanging, in this time of marketplaces and discount sales, we take a moment to acknowledge your gift to us, O God.

We pause, to give thanks for your grace at work in our lives.

⁵ Prayers of intercession written by Tim Baker

All we have is gift, and we ask you to bless these gifts as we seek to put them to use to further your kingdom here on earth.

In Jesus' name we pray.

Amen.⁶

Hymn:

204 STF – In the bleak midwinter OR

208 STF – Let earth and heaven combine

Blessing

In the waiting and preparing,

In the final touches and frantic cooking and cleaning,

Amongst the parties and the presents,

Look out for the presence of the Holy One this week.

God is here, this advent.

May you know the divine, moving through, in and around you this Christmas season.

Amen.⁷

⁶ Additional prayers by Tim Baker

⁷ Additional prayers by Tim Baker