

Sunday 22nd December 2024

Written Carol Service

By Marc Williamson

This service will be a largely traditional carol service, with a flow of familiar readings and songs, and liturgical prayers. As you journey through it, may you encounter something of the God born in Jesus and born in us each day.

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In anticipation of the story we know so well, we begin with these famous words from the prophet Isaiah:

Reading: Isaiah 9:2; 6-7.

(New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised)

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them light has shined.
For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.
He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness
from this time onwards and for evermore.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

HYMN: Once in Royal David's City - STF 214

(Cecil Frances Alexander)

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| 1. Once in royal David's city
stood a lowly cattle shed,
where a mother laid her baby
in a manger for his bed:
Mary was that mother mild,
Jesus Christ her little child. | 2. He came down to earth from heaven
who is God and Lord of all,
and his shelter was a stable,
and his cradle was a stall;
with the needy, poor and lowly
lived on earth our Saviour holy. |
| 3. And our eyes at last shall see him,
through his own redeeming love,
for that child so dear and gentle
is our Lord in heaven above;
and he leads his children on
to the place where he is gone. | 4. Not in that poor lowly stable,
with the oxen standing by,
we shall see him; but in heaven,
set at God's right hand on high;
there his children gather round
bright like stars, with glory crowned. |

Let us join in prayers of confession, adoration and invocation. We confess by recognising who we are as we come. We adore the God who welcomes us. We recognise God's presence as we worship.

Let us pray:

(Drawing from: O Come all ye Faithful (John Francis Wade) and Vagabonds (Stuart Townend))

O come, all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant. Come and behold him, born the King of Angels
Come, all you vagabonds, come all you 'don't belongs'
Winners and losers, come, people like me.
Come all you travellers tired from the journey,
Come wait a while, stay a while, welcomed you'll be:

O Come Let Us Adore Him, Christ, the Lord

Come all you questioners, looking for answers, and searching for reasons and sense in it all;
Come all you fallen, and come all you broken,
Find strength for your body and food for your soul.

Come those who worry about houses and money,
And all those who don't have a care in the world;
From every station and orientation,
the helpless, the hopeless, the young and the old:
O Come Let Us Adore Him, Christ, the Lord

Come all believers and dreamers and schemers,
And come all you restless just searching for home;
Movers and shakers and givers and takers, the happy, the sad, and the lost and alone.
Come self-sufficient with wearied ambition, and come those who feel at the end of the road.
Fiery debaters and religion haters, accusers, abusers, the hurt and ignored:
O Come Let Us Adore Him, Christ, the Lord

O come to the manger, meet our God: Emmanuel,
O come to the manger, where heaven's hope meets earth,
O come to the manger, and worship with the angels,
The Saviour, Messiah, at the place of Love's birth:
O Come Let Us Adore Him, Christ, the Lord

AMEN

READING: John 1:1-14 - The Word made flesh.

(New Testament for Everyone)

In the beginning was the Word. The Word was close beside God, and the Word was God. In the beginning, he was close beside God.

All things came into existence through him; not one thing that exists came into existence without him. Life was in him, and this life was the light of the human race. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

There was a man called John, who was sent from God. He came as evidence, to give evidence about the light, so that everyone might believe through him. He was not himself the light, but he came to give evidence about the light.

The true light, which gives light to every human being, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, and the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to anyone who did accept him, he gave the right to become God's children; yes, to anyone who believed in his name. They were not born from blood, or from fleshly desire, or from the intention of a man, but from God.

And the Word became flesh, and lived among us. We gazed upon his glory, glory like that of the father's only son, full of grace and truth.

HYMN: O Come, O Come Immanuel - STF 180

(John Mason Neale)

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| 1. O come, O come, Immanuel,
and ransom captive Israel,
that mourns in lonely exile here
until the Son of God appear:
<i>Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel
shall come to you, O Israel.</i> | 2. O come, O come, O Lord of might
who to your tribes, on Sinai's height,
in ancient times did give the law
in cloud, and majesty, and awe:
<i>Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel
shall come to you, O Israel.</i> |
| 3. O come, O Rod of Jesse, free
your own from Satan's tyranny;
from depths of hell your people save,
and give them victory o'er the grave:
<i>Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel
shall come to you, O Israel.</i> | 4. O come, O Key of David, come,
and open wide our heavenly home;
make safe the way that leads on high,
and close the path to misery:
<i>Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel
shall come to you, O Israel.</i> |

5. O come, O Day-spring, come and cheer
our spirits by your advent here;
disperse the gloomy clouds of night,
and death's dark shadows put to flight:
*Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel
shall come to you, O Israel.*

READING: Luke 1:26-38 - The annunciation of the birth of Jesus. *(New Testament for Everyone)*

In the sixth month, Gabriel (the angel) was sent from God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man called Joseph, from the family of David. The virgin was called Mary.

“Greetings, favoured one!” said the angel when he arrived. “May the Lord be with you!” She was disturbed at this, and wondered what such a greeting might mean.

“Don’t be afraid, Mary,” said the angel to her. “You’re in favour with God. Listen: you will conceive in your womb and will have a son; and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be a great man, and he’ll be called the son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of David his father, and he shall reign over the house of Jacob forever. His kingdom will never come to an end.”

“How will this happen?” said Mary to the angel. “I’m still a virgin!”

“The holy spirit will come upon you,” replied the angel, “and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. For that reason the holy one who is born from you will be called God’s Son.

“Let me tell you this, too: your cousin Elizabeth, in her old age, has also conceived a son. This is the sixth month for her, a woman who people used to say was barren. With God, you see, nothing is impossible.”

“Here I am,” said Mary; “I’m the Lord’s servant-girl. Let it happen to me as you’ve said.” Then the angel left her.

Mary’s Song:

A reimagining of Mary’s response to the Angel, and Luke 1:46-55

When the angel first visited me I said “let it be with me according to your word” and opened my heart and flesh to God to use me as a willing vessel. It took all I was to stand in that moment and say “Here I am.” Now it’s getting real.

Of course, Joseph needed to know, but the angel dealt with that too. Joseph, the very model of grace and humility who is choosing to partner with me on this journey of service. What other man would still choose to take me as his wife, to love, honour and cherish even in the face of this ridiculous and yet sublime blessing of God!?

Choosing. That’s important in this whole story. God chose me, I chose to say yes, Joseph chose to stay with me... And I continue to choose to believe that God will fulfil the promises made to me, to my people Israel and to the world beyond.

I choose to magnify the Lord, to let my soul sing and my Spirit rejoice because God is my saviour. I choose to marvel in the ridiculousness of God seeing me of all people and blessing me with this gift! Who am I to be chosen, of all the women on earth, and yet I choose to be chosen, and choose not to be held back by the doubts of my worth.

Because how I choose to respond matters! If this turns out the way God promises then people for generations will look to me to see how I lived, to see how I served, to see how I chose to let myself be used by God. They will see the great things, the blessings, of favour poured on the humble and lowly. And so I choose to sing of his might, holiness and fame.

In this very act of choosing me to bear his son, to birth his Kingdom come, he is proclaiming mercy to those who fear the Lord. In lifting me up God shows strength untold, scattering the

proud, humbling the powerful, lifting the lowly. In this moment now, and in the child that follows, the hungry are fed with the richest of foods, the richest are left with their hunger.

God has chosen to hear me, his servant, and us, his people, and chosen to respond. Chosen to step in. Chosen to hear our cries from heaven and is stepping in for once and for all times, for this and every generation, to fulfil the promise he chose to make.

God has chosen mercy. God has chosen me. And by God's Spirit I choose to be blessed and will birth into this word the living love of God.

I choose to be part of God's promise.

Do you?

Let's pause to commit ourselves with the prayer Jesus Gave to his disciples:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your Name,
your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.

Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and for ever.

AMEN

READING: Luke 2:1-7

(The Voice)

Around the time of Elizabeth's amazing pregnancy and John's birth, the emperor in Rome, Caesar Augustus, required everyone in the Roman Empire to participate in a massive census—the first census since Quirinius had become governor of Syria. Each person had to go to his or her ancestral city to be counted.

Mary's fiancé Joseph, from Nazareth in Galilee, had to participate in the census in the same way everyone else did. Because he was a descendant of King David, his ancestral city was Bethlehem, David's birthplace. Mary, who was now late in her pregnancy that the messenger Gabriel had predicted, accompanied Joseph. While in Bethlehem, she went into labour and gave birth to her firstborn son. She wrapped the baby in a blanket and laid Him in a feeding trough because the inn had no room for them.

HYMN: O Little Town of Bethlehem - STF 213

(Phillips Brooks)

1. O little town of Bethlehem,
how still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
the silent stars go by.
Yet in thy dark streets shineth
the everlasting light;
the hopes and fears of all the years
are met in thee tonight.
2. O morning stars, together
proclaim the holy birth,
and praises sing to God the King,
and peace to all the earth!
For Christ is born of Mary;
and, gathered all above,
while mortals sleep, the angels keep
their watch of wondering love.
3. How silently, how silently,
the wondrous gift is given!
So God imparts to human hearts
the blessings of his heaven.
No ear may hear his coming;
but in this world of sin,
where meek souls will receive him
still the dear Christ enters in.
4. O holy Child of Bethlehem,
descend to us, we pray;
cast out our sin, and enter in;
be born in us today!
We hear the Christmas angels
the great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide with us,
our Lord Immanuel!

We come to another moment of prayer as we bring our hearts and concerns for ourselves, those we know and love, and those we are yet to know and love. We pray for our world, and a discovery of the love, hope, joy and peace offered in Jesus.

Let us pray:

Love divine, all loves excelling, joy of Heaven to earth come down:
God of Creation with a heart for all that you have made,
you journeyed into creation's groaning darkness.
Your incarnation spoke and speaks of good news for all,
promising acts of redemption and grace for all creation.
Breathe into your world in its darkness the way you did that first Christmas:
With promise and hope, causing heaven and nature to sing.

In the darkness shine your everlasting light

Love divine, all loves excelling, joy of Heaven to earth come down:
God of Justice with a heart for humanity you journeyed into humanity's darkness.
Your incarnation spoke and speaks of good news for all,
promising peace, justice and righteousness for all.
Dwell once again with those who live in the shadow of injustice,
In our own country, but also with those who are living in fear
and under oppression across the world.
Whilst there are many in need, many longing for your presence,
we ask for your particular blessing and peace to be born in Bethlehem
and the surrounding areas again this day.
May the presence of your Spirit be a threat to powers of injustice,
A promise to those in need, and cause all to recognise you in worship.

In the darkness shine your everlasting light

Love divine, all loves excelling, joy of Heaven to earth come down:
God of compassion with a heart for our human experience,
who took on human form in order to share our experiences,
you know and care about our moments of darkness.
Your incarnation and example inspire us with hope, peace, joy and love.
May we once again be aware of your presence today in our moments of need,
and in the needs of those we know, love, and sometimes struggle to love.
May we know your presence as we seek to follow you in the path of light
and may you illuminate our darkness.

In the darkness shine your everlasting light

O come to us, abide with us, Our Lord, Emmanuel.
Fix in us thy humble dwelling. Be born in us this day.

AMEN

HYMN: Love Divine - STF 503

(Charles Wesley)

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| <p>1. Love divine, all loves excelling,
joy of heaven to earth come down,
fix in us thy humble dwelling,
all thy faithful mercies crown.
Jesu, thou art all compassion,
pure, unbounded love thou art;
visit us with thy salvation,
enter every trembling heart.</p> | <p>2. Come, almighty to deliver,
let us all thy life receive;
suddenly return, and never,
never more thy temples leave.
Thee we would be always blessing,
serve thee as thy hosts above,
pray, and praise thee, without ceasing,
glory in thy perfect love.</p> |
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3. Finish then thy new creation, pure and spotless let us be;
let us see thy great salvation, perfectly restored in thee:
changed from glory into glory, till in heaven we take our place,
till we cast our crowns before thee, lost in wonder, love, and praise!

READING: Luke 2:8-20

(New Testament for Everyone)

There were shepherds in that region, out in the open, keeping a night watch around their flock. An angel of the Lord stood in front of them. The glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

“Don’t be afraid,” the angel said to them. “Look: I’ve got good news for you, news which will make everybody very happy. Today a saviour has been born for you—the Messiah, the Lord!—in David’s town. This will be the sign for you: you’ll find the baby wrapped up, and lying in a feeding-trough.”

Suddenly, with the angel, there was a crowd of the heavenly armies. They were praising God, saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and peace upon earth among those in his favour.”

So when the angels had gone away again into heaven, the shepherds said to each other, “Well then; let’s go to Bethlehem and see what it’s all about, all this that the Lord has told us.”

So they hurried off, and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the feeding-trough. When they saw it, they told them what had been said to them about this child. And all the people who heard it were amazed at the things the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured all these things and mused over them in her heart.

The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told to them.

HYMN: Joy to the World - STF 330

(Isaac Watts)

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| 1. Joy to the world, the Lord is come!
Let earth receive her King;
let every heart prepare him room,
and heaven and nature sing,
and heaven and nature sing,
and heaven, and heaven
and nature sing. | 2. Joy to the world, the Saviour reigns!
Let all their songs employ;
while fields and floods,
rocks, hills and plains
repeat the sounding joy,
repeat the sounding joy,
repeat, repeat the sounding joy. |
| 3. He rules the world with truth and grace,
and makes the nations prove the glories of his righteousness
and wonders of his love, and wonders of his love,
and wonders, wonders of his love. | |

POEM: “Not Much Changed”

Not much changed that silent night
That holy night, beyond the fright of shepherds in their field.
Nothing changed in Bethlehem, in David’s town when “Love came down”
At least not on that night.

Though Mary knew, along with a few significant minority players,
That something stirred, a Holy word, filling souls with hope, joy, love and peace.
But not much changed that Christmas night.

When the shepherds had gone and the family were alone - Jesus, and Mary, and Joseph -
Their worries remained, their fears were the same,
Considering raising this child, their child, God’s child, Immanuel.

I imagine they saw out the night
 The sleepless night, of the parents of a newborn baby:
 Held their breath when he stirred, at every noise they heard, at every breath they didn't hear,
 Before finding a new rhythm of life as a family of three.

At eight days old, in the story we're told, Jesus was brought to the temple.
 As per religious law: "Every firstborn male shall be called holy to the Lord."
 A ritual decision: Name, circumcision, a sacrifice
 Offered to God of two turtle doves, paid for with what they could offer.

There light dawned in the eyes of the patient and wise
 Who lived their lives in humble expectation
 That the Messiah, foretold in prophecies old, bringer of grace-filled liberation,
 Would be born to men, be seen by them in their generation:
 Simeon and Anna, bit-part characters, whose lives had been waiting for this day,
 For this child to save, God's people, all people. A light, revelation.
 But even then, not much changed.

Eighteen months after, imagine the laughter of a toddler in a house,
 Hushed by the arrival of strangers...
 Their tale describes how they followed the skies
 From lands afar, to where they are, in search of a new-born king.
 To offer their worship, to bow down low to show
 Their adoration with presents, and presence.

Gold, for a King ushering in God's reign, God's Kingdom come;
 Incense, for a Priest bridging the dearth of understanding 'twixt Heav'n and Earth;
 Myrrh, for a prophet as a symbol of hope,
 Healing, restoration, promise and change, noticing the now, and the not yet.

Yet not much changed in that house that day...
 Except for the danger and the need to flee to Egypt because those in power feel threatened:
 What if this baby, born to be King, should win the hearts of men?
 What if this Priest had the ear of God and the favour of the same?
 What if this Prophet's message of hope proclaimed all people free?
 But that day still nothing changed, Herod remained in power.

Upon Jesus' return, so the story goes,
 The child grows and proclaims he knows the heart of God.
 He speaks good news, subverting views that favour the few at the expense of the many.
 His actions just, love, a must, humbly walking with God:
 He seeks, saves, heals, embraces, names and claims the lost.
 And THAT's where things change.

Whilst nothing changed that Christmas night,
 Maybe everything changed that silent night, that Holy night,
 In David's town, when "Love came down" with us to dwell, Immanuel,
 Salvation born that glorious morn, that glorious dawn,
 Of the presence of God here: This world to claim, to serve, to save, to change.

Which brings us to this moment now
 For us to consider how that baby born Immanuel,
 God on Earth with us to dwell, might still be born in us.
 May God take our humble starts, our open hands and willing hearts, and fill us with God's love.
 May God see our bended knees and all that we have to offer, and fill us with God's Spirit.
 May God hear creation's groans, humanity's cries, pain-filled sighs, and be born in us this day.
 May we see transformation through encounters with the Love of God,
 As we seek to live like Jesus.

HYMN: The Servant King - STF 272

(Graham Kendrick)

1. From heaven you came, helpless babe,
entered our world, your glory veiled,
not to be served but to serve,
and give your life that we might live.

Refrain

*This is our God, the Servant King,
he calls us now to follow him,
to bring our lives as a daily offering
of worship to the Servant King.*

2. There in the garden of tears
my heavy load he chose to bear;
his heart with sorrow was torn,
'Yet not my will but yours,' he said. **Refrain**

3. Come see his hands and his feet,
the scars that speak of sacrifice,
hands that flung stars into space
to cruel nails surrendered. **Refrain**

4. So let us learn how to serve and in our lives enthrone him,
each other's needs to prefer, for it is Christ we're serving.

Refrain

READING: John 1:14, 16-18

(New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised)

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

We conclude our service by joining with the angels, not just harkening their song, but proclaiming the arrival of Emmanuel with them.

HYMN: Hark! The Herald Angels Sing - STF 202

(Charles Wesley)

1. Hark! The herald-angels sing
glory to the new-born King,
peace on earth, and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled.
Joyful, all ye nations, rise,
join the triumph of the skies;
with the angelic host proclaim:
'Christ is born in Bethlehem.'
*Hark! The herald-angels sing
glory to the new-born King.*

2. Christ, by highest heaven adored,
Christ, the everlasting Lord,
late in time behold him come,
offspring of a virgin's womb.
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see!
Hail, the incarnate Deity!
Pleased as man with men to dwell,
Jesus, our Immanuel:
*Hark! The herald-angels sing
glory to the new-born King.*

3. Hail, the heaven-born Prince of Peace! Hail, the Sun of Righteousness!
Light and life to all he brings, risen with healing in his wings.
Mild he lays his glory by, born that man no more may die,
born to raise the sons of earth, born to give them second birth:
Hark! The herald-angels sing, glory to the new-born King.

BLESSING:

May we who have worshipped continue to worship, beyond the joy of the season;
May we see the baby born of Mary not just in the manger, but in his adult life of service, his
dying breath of forgiveness, and his ongoing Spirit in each of us;
May God take our humble starts, our open hands and willing hearts, and fill us with God's love;
May God see our bended knees and all that we have to offer, and fill us with God's Spirit;
May God be born in us this day. **AMEN**