

Love Embodied

Gathering

Create a space for worship - perhaps with a small table with a bible, cross and candle.

*This week, it would be appropriate to find a **white or gold cloth** or scarf to signify that this is a special celebration.*

Take some deep breaths as you gather your thoughts towards God.

Gathering

Tonight is a thin place - a meeting point of heaven and earth. Tonight we remember that God meets us in the midst of our lived experience.

Tonight we come together - there is no measure of class or holiness or wisdom - family, guests and strangers.

Bethlehem wasn't the hub of the universe, there was no-one famous to attract a crowd.

In an out-of-the-way place,

God kept and keeps God's promise;
there, here, God sends God's son.

*Based on a reflection from *Cloth From The Cradle*, Wild Goose Worship Group, p.83*

Light Candle

"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not [cannot, will not] overcome it."

(John 1:5)

May the peace and presence of Christ be with you always.

And also with you!

Acknowledgement of Country

The image on the screens tonight is painted by a Kuku Yalanji artist from North Queensland, Lalaria Tusa-Burrununji.

She says this about her work: "On the night that baby Jesus was born, the Star of Bethlehem guided the three wise kings from the East to His birthplace. This represents the star with the middle circle formation representing the meeting place for all who come to seek Jesus. The dots on the outer edges are the individual souls who have come to know and serve the Lord through Christ Jesus."

Across the vast and beautiful land that is now called Australia, indigenous peoples have cared for the earth since time immemorial.

In this place, between the ocean and the mountains, the Wodi Wodi people of the Dharawal nation have lived in harmony with the land and waters and its flora and fauna.

We give thanks for them and this place.

We pay our respect to their Elders, past, present and emerging.

And we pray that we will learn to walk together and to care for one another and this land in ways that honour our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer.



Advent Candles

As we celebrate today, we tell an ancient story -
we are reminded of how it speaks to us from generation to generation.
We come to this circle of light to share in its promise.

“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.” (Isaiah 9:2)

The first flame banishes darkness, inviting us to hope.

The second flame is to bring balance and the promise of harmony and peace.

The third flame is to bring delight and rejoicing - joy!

The fourth flame is for compassion and heart - love in all its fullness.

This final light is for our own rebirth.

This is the candle for CHRIST,

born once again among us,

born everyday in our hearts and in our living in Christ's way of love, compassion and justice.

Let us honour the Light! [pause]

Call To Worship - Christmas Meditation

An unmarried teenage girl was invited—
to carry Christ into this world.

An ordinary carpenter was invited—
to be a father to a child unlike any other.

The shepherds were invited—
outcast and isolated, included at the manger.

The Magi were invited—
foreigners and seekers, included at the manger.

And if she was invited, and he was invited, and they were invited—
then we can trust that we too are invited.

This story is for us. This love is for us.

This is our invitation.

Sanctified Art 2021

We pray...

The smallest word of God,

the tiniest hope,

the most fragile light,

all comes together tonight;

speaks tonight,

is proclaimed tonight,

pronounced tonight

in the biggest word there is:

Love.

Come and be born among us tonight.

Spill The Beans, Issue 45, resources for Christmas Eve/Day, p.46

Sing - O Come All Ye Faithful (TIS 304 - vv1,2,3,6)

So let's sing! It is tempting when we sing Christmas Carols, particularly when they are familiar to us, to belt them out - and in some cases, that is appropriate!

But I want to encourage you tonight to also remain attentive to the words - what are we saying when we sing these carols?

This carol invites us to gather around Light Eternal, to commit ourselves to the way of Christ and to sing our praises with the Angels.

O come, all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant,
come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem;
come and behold him born the king
of angels:

*O come let us adore him,
O come let us adore him,
O come let us adore him,
Christ the Lord!*

True God of true God, Light of Light
eternal,
lo, he abhors not the Virgin's
womb;
Son of the Father, begotten not
created:

O come let us adore him...

See how the shepherds summoned to his
cradle,
leaving their flocks draw nigh with holy fear;
we too will thither bend our joyful footsteps:
O come let us adore him...

Sing choirs of angels, sing in exultation,
sing all ye citizens of heaven above,
"Glory to God, glory in the highest!"
O come let us adore him...

John Francis Wade

Reading: Isaiah 42:5-9, 14

⁵ Thus says God, the Lord,
who created the heavens and stretched them out,
who spread out the earth and what comes from it,
who gives breath to the people upon it
and spirit to those who walk in it:

⁶ I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness,
I have taken you by the hand and kept you;
I have given you as a covenant to the people,
a light to the nations,

⁷ to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
from the prison those who sit in darkness.

⁸ I am the Lord, that is my name;
my glory I give to no other,
nor my praise to idols.

⁹ See, the former things have come to pass,
and new things I now declare;
before they spring forth,
I tell you of them.

¹⁴ For a long time I have held my peace,
I have kept still and restrained myself;
now I will cry out like a woman in labour,
I will gasp and pant.

For the Word of God in Scripture,
for the Word of God among us,
for the Word of God within us,
Thanks be to God!

Introduction to prayer

We pray now, a prayer of confession.

As we do, remember that confession means two things:

Yes, it means we admit those things we haven't got right;

But it also means we confess, we name, who we believe God to be.

So let us pray...

Prayer

Into the darkness of this world, loving God,
you spoke life and light.

Into our need, you spoke abundance and hope.

Into our fears and doubts, you spoke comfort and joy.

On this night,

we join together in humble adoration,

some doubting,

some grieving,

some full of joy,

some full of hope,

but all seeking to know you better

and celebrate the birth of Jesus our Saviour.

On this night,

we remember with thankfulness

the miracle, the world changing,

life-transforming news that into a stable,

to young parents,

and to the whole world,

the greatest gift of all was given;

Jesus Christ is born,

and nothing will ever be the same.

On this night of great celebration,

we come asking for your forgiveness

for all that we have done that we know we shouldn't

and all that we haven't done that we know we should,

and for all those things that lie heavily on our hearts which we bring to you now,

in silence:

Silence

Help us, merciful God,

to know the forgiveness and love that you offer freely,

and to take comfort and peace in this.

On this night,

in the middle of our thoughts of the season,

the food, the drink, the presents,

the visiting, and the entertainment,

we have come, Loving God,

to worship you,

and remember,

that into this world of darkness you speak life and light;

into our need, you speak abundance and hope;
into our fears and doubts, you speak comfort and joy;
this night, and always. Amen.

Adapted from Spill The Beans, Issue 45, resources for Christmas Eve/Day, p.47

Listening for God's Voice

Christmas Video

In many traditions, it is customary on Christmas Eve to stage a pageant or play of some kind. Sometimes it is a more traditional nativity, and sometimes, like tonight, it is a bit more quirky. Let's see...

<https://vimeo.com/783579078/e92e285331>

So now as we prepare to listen to the story of Jesus' birth as it is told to us in the gospel attributed to Luke... let us pray...

Holy God,

We've heard this story a million times—

Mary and Joseph, the angels, the shepherds.

We've heard it a million times,

but we want to hear it like it's the first.

So move among us.

Circle back.

Draw close.

Crack open our hearts and fill them with your goodness.

Help us to hear what it is you might be saying to us

with curiosity, joy, and hope.

Come be here with us. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen

Reading: Luke 2:1-20

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph 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. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And 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.

⁸ In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

¹⁴ 'Glory to God in the highest heaven,

and on earth peace among those whom he favours!'

¹⁵ 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.' ¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But

Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

For the Word of God in Scripture,
for the Word of God among us,
for the Word of God within us,
Thanks be to God!

Reflection

How many ways can the story of Jesus' birth be told?

When it was originally recounted, the telling of the events of that night would have been passed from ear to ear - story-teller to story-teller.

Over time, it lost some detail and accumulated explanations and interpretations.

At some stage it was written down - by the authors of the gospels attributed to Luke and Matthew - each with a very different focus yet both writing in a way to convince us not just of this child's birth but of who he would become.

Through the ages, artists have attempted to depict the scene and have placed their own interpretations on what happened.

In our time, movies and videos attempt to re-create that night.

But more than a story in the pages of an ancient text;

more than a movie to be watched while devouring buckets of popcorn;

there is really only one way the events of Jesus' birth can be shared authentically - and that is through the lives of the people who commit themselves to the way of living that he grew up to embody.

What do I mean?

We can talk all we like about angels who announce this birth; and shepherds and wise folk who come to visit the child - we can wonder at the mystery and beauty of it all... But it matters not one iota unless the people who say they know this child love the world as much as he did and does.

This child, comes amongst us into the middle our our messiness, lives our lives, feels our joy and pain in his daily living, and dies our death. And through it all, he teaches and heals and encourages and restores and transforms, reminding us of what it means to be human, to be made in the image of God, loved and cherished for who we are.

His way of engaging in the world is one of endless love, grace and mercy for those around him; he invites us into a way of being that is aware of and loves the people around us, that respects and cares for creation, that knows that the world is about so much more than me, me, me.

He encourages us to look out for the people that are too often overlooked - people who may not have status in the world's eyes, but who are loved children of God.

He urges us to feed people who would otherwise go hungry; to ensure that everyone is clothed against the cold and have a roof over their heads; to be a companion to people who are lonely, sad or struggling.

And we all know, deep down, that when we all do our part, our community is happier and healthier for it.

Importantly, it is no good talking about peace and goodwill for a couple of weeks in December, if we are not committed to living with goodwill and working for peace every day of the year.

It is one thing to say that we know and even appreciate the story of Jesus' birth and quite another to seek a relationship with the person this baby becomes.

It is one thing to try to be nice to our neighbours at Christmas time and something so much more to love them as much as we love ourselves for the rest of the year.

Here, in this community, we are trying hard to be good neighbours, to look out for anyone who might be hurting, struggling or alone. It is sometimes really hard - our society doesn't make it easy to make connections, or for people to ask for help - and there are people who don't agree with us or who sometimes take advantage. But as we have opened up the grounds here for people to enjoy the spaces outside, as we have opened up the buildings for groups to gather and feel safe, as we have cared for one another through illness and grief, even as we have worked our way through disagreements and misunderstandings, in all this, God is with us - Immanuel - born into our everyday - vulnerable and yet, Love embodied.

This is the same God whom Isaiah speaks of as having created the heavens and the earth, who breathes life into each one of us (Isaiah 9:5), whose intention for us has always been for us to care for one another (Isaiah 9:6-7), and who recognises that our transformation is often born out of struggle, like childbirth (Isaiah 9:14).

So as we look again at the baby that is sung about by angels, visited by shepherds and wise ones, perhaps with Mary we too can ponder these events deeply in our hearts (Luke 2:19). And however you plan to spend the next few days, can I encourage you to find some space to ponder - ponder the events of this child's birth, and ask yourself - does your life authentically reflect the love, peace and goodwill that we speak about at Christmas time, that Jesus exemplified in his living and loving - and not just at this time of the year but in all your days? Does your life embody the Love that is present to us in Jesus?

May you know the peace, hope, love and joy that this baby brings into the world.

May you know the healing, restoration and transformation he offers to our living.

And may you have the courage to share such love with the world you encounter.

Let us pray...

Immanuel - God with us,

open our hearts to your coming amongst us now and every day,

help us to shape our lives in ways that proclaims the good news of your coming in all that we say and do. May we learn to sing with joy like the angels

believe with our whole being like the shepherds

and to seek you with our hearts, souls, mind and strength like the wise ones. Amen.

Responding

Sing - Where Is The Room (Carol our Christmas 48)

This carol might be new for many. It is written by Shirley Murray and included in a collection of carols compiled in New Zealand. Phillip will play it through and then we will sing it - join in if you can, or feel free to listen and reflect on the questions it asks.

Where is the room,
where is the house of Christmas?

Where shall we welcome Jesus,
where are the signs of home?

Where are the signs of home?

Let Christ have space,
place at the heart of living,
centre for birth's new breathing,

cradle for hope and peace,
cradle for hope and peace.

Let there be room,
room for the friend and stranger,
room without hurt or anger,
room for whoever come,
room for whoever come.

Let love be here,
love from the Christmas stable,
love at our open table,

love to be shared all year,
love to be shared all year.

Shirley Murray

Holy Communion

If you would like to share in Communion and are unable to join with us in-person, please let Rev Kath or Rhonda Back know. We would love to bring Communion to you in your home at a time that suits you.

Prayers of the People (Rhonda Back)

Advent has come to an end,
Christmas is here,
we come to this place,
with joy in our hearts,
praise on our lips,
and hope in our minds,
and with thanks in our souls.

We give thanks for Mary,
the mother of Jesus,
a young woman who accepted a challenge and a gift,
and helped changed the universe forever.

We give thanks for Joseph,
a young man who accepted a challenge and a gift,
and helped change the universe forever.

We give thanks for Jesus,
your Son, who came into this world,
fully God, fully human,
and changed the universe forever.

On this night we hold in our hearts those who we wish were still with us to celebrate this Christmas, and we pray for everyone missing someone at this time of year. Help them to know the comfort of your love, and the love of all those who are still with them.

On this night we pray for
all who are alone
all who are hungry
and all who have little.

Give them joy in these difficult days,
and help us and everyone with the power and ability to help to do so.

On this night
we pray for all who do not get a day off,
who work to keep us all safe and well and fed,
help them to know the thanks that we all have for them.

On this night
we pray for ourselves
in this season of hope, of light, of joy, even in the darkness,
help us to take time to remember the true meaning of why we celebrate.

Advent has come to an end,
Christmas is here,
we come to this place,
with joy in our hearts,
praise on our lips,
and hope in our minds,
and with thanks in our souls,
be with us, loving God,
we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Adapted from Spill The Beans, Issue 45, resources for Christmas Eve/Day, p.48

Offering - Christmas Bowl

As we have prayed - so we choose to live.

Jesus was not born into a home like ours.

He was born into poverty.

He was born into simplicity.

He was born into a manger in Bethlehem.

And despite the little he might have had, Jesus still spent the rest of his days on earth giving to others.

Generosity is in the DNA of our faith. We give what we can, not because we should or because scripture says to. We give because we're family. We give because we belong to one another.

Tonight we give to offer hope to some of the most vulnerable people in the world today.

All of our offering is given to the work of The Christmas Bowl / Act for Peace.

Video - Christmas Bowl:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P_cyYONGh_g&list=PLqrYzj1veb8eZqdkbYW-L8h7nu4lyUza&index=7

We pray...

Gracious God,

in this season of giving and receiving

we present these tokens of money

as a sign of our commitment

to your church, your mission and your message.

Take them and use them

for your good and the good of all.

We pray especially, for the work of Act For Peace, that your love and grace will be known through the projects they facilitate and the people they encourage.

Keep the message of Christmas in our hearts all year long.

Amen.

Spill The Beans, Issue 45, resources for Christmas Eve/Day, p.46

Sending

Sing - Hark The Herald Angels Sing (TIS 303)

As we end our time together and move into the night to continue celebrating in other ways, we sing a carol that invites us to listen for the song of the Angels and to join them in sharing good news with the world we encounter.

Hark! the herald angels sing

peace on earth, and mercy mild,

glory to the new-born King,

God and sinners reconciled.

Joyful, all you nations, rise,
join the triumph of the skies;
with the angelic hosts proclaim,
"Christ is born in Bethlehem."
Hark the herald angels sing
glory to the new-born King.

Christ, by highest heaven adored,
Christ, the everlasting Lord,
late in time behold him come,
off-spring of a virgin's womb:
veiled in flesh the Godhead see;
hail the incarnate Deity,
pleased as human flesh to dwell,
Jesus our Immanuel

Blessing

On this night
prophets' words have sprung to life
in flesh and blood and bone -
for God, our God, makes all things new.

On this night
darkness shrinks before the light
now come into the world -
for God, our God, makes all things new.

On this night
glory shimmies 'cross the skies
while startled shepherds stop and stare -
for God, our God, makes all things new.

On this night
a new-born's cry puts heaven's hope inside our hearts and heralds' peace on earth, good
will to all -
for God, our God, makes all things new.

On this night:
rejoice, give thanks, be blessed,
for unto us, a child is born -
for God, our God, makes all things new.

Spill The Beans, Issue 45, resources for Christmas Eve/Day, p.50

Blessing

And be blessed in the name of God, the source of all life and inspiration.
Be blessed in the name of the Christ whose birth liberates our expectations.
Be blessed in the name of the Spirit as she breathes new life through us all. Amen.

Adapted from a blessing by Rev Keree Casey, Of Ash and Rainbows

Hark the herald angels sing
glory to the new-born King.

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 we no more need die,
born to raise us from the earth,
born to give us second birth
Hark the herald angels sing
glory to the new-born King.

Charles Wesley