

Advent & Christmas Liturgies

*Prayers, meditations and texts
for worship and celebrations during Advent and Christmas
in Peace Church*



Peace Church United Methodist



The English-Speaking Methodist Congregation in Munich

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1st Sunday of Advent

1. Call to Worship

Now is the time of watching and waiting.

**The time of pregnant expectation
of new life.**

Now is the season of hope unfolding.

**The dark winter season
when hope is waiting to be born.**

Let us come before God
with receptive and willing spirits.

May our soul magnify God's name
and may our spirits rejoice
in God our Saviour!

Rejoice!

**God comes to bring
the birthday of life and hope.**

Amen.



2. The Village Gossips

An Advent drama from „Cloth for the Cradle“, Iona Community, Scotland

Narrator: In any small village, news travel quickly. Therefore it is only to be expected that the strange changes in the lives of Mary and Elizabeth might have been food for other people's thought.

Mrs Matthew: Well, you know how I'm not one for gossip, but wait till I tell you this. You know that old woman Elizabeth with the man who's never spoken for nine months.

Mr Luke: Sure, what about her?

Mrs Matthew: They say she's had a little boy.

Mr Luke: At her age? She's eighty-eight, I think.

Mrs Matthew: Well, that's what I heard, ...and it was on very good authority!

Mr Luke: Are you sure you've got the right woman? You are not mixing her up with her cousin?

Mrs Matthew: Who? Mary?

Mr Luke: That's her. Now, I'm not one to talk about anybody, but wait till I tell you this... she's pregnant.

Mrs Matthew: Never! How do you know?

Mr Luke: You can tell. You can just tell.

Mrs Matthew: Oh okay, you can tell... all right...

Mr Luke: I heard her in the shop last week asking for a dress eight sizes too big for her. There we are... I draw my own conclusions...

Mrs Matthew: So can it be true that she and a certain young man are about to leave the district.

Mr Luke: Who's the young man?

Mrs Matthew: The joiner's boy – Joseph.

Mr Luke: Never!

Mrs Matthew: Well, that's what they say, and I'm not one for gossip.

Mr Luke: So, have you heard what they are saying about this so-called "census"?

Mrs Matthew: No. Tell us...

Matthew 1: 18-25

¹⁸ This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

²⁰ But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ²³ "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us").

²⁴ When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. ²⁵ But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

3. Joseph - Remembering God's Promise

Reflection on Matthew 1: 18-25

"Dreamer, you know you are a dreamer..."
Do you remember this song by Supertramp? It was written in 1975. I was thirteen then.

"Dreamer, you know you are a dreamer..."
...and a little later in the song it says:
"I said dreamer, you are nothing but a dreamer... stupid little dreamer..."
This song is about a guy with big dreams who is incapable of acting on them, so they never come true.

But isn't there something very wrong with calling a dreamer "just" a dreamer, or "nothing but a dreamer"? Isn't there also something wrong when we think that dreams must come true and only then are they worth anything?

Don't dreams connect us with God and his kingdom, with God and his dream of a better world – no matter whether they come true or not? Don't dreams help us to stay alive when times are hard? Don't dreams nourish our hopes and hold us when things seem to go terribly wrong?

"Dreams must be dreamed so that what has to happen can happen", I read in an article on our Bible text today.

Dreams of peace and justice, and a better world, must be dreamed so that what has to happen – peace, justice, and a better world – can happen...

For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.

But be glad and rejoice for ever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight. I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress..., says God.

And dreamers listen to such things. Dreamers are people who listen to voices and angels... And dreamers are people who make new things possible, who save life and enable new beginnings...

Such a dreamer is the Joseph of our Christmas narratives. Joseph's dreams must be dreamed so that the saviour of humankind can be born and remain safe. As easy as that...

The circumstances of Joseph's future marriage were significantly less than ideal. The year they got betrothed, Joseph discovered that Mary was pregnant. How? By whom? Who could possibly believe Mary's absurd claim that the "Holy Spirit" had made her pregnant? How dumb did she think he was?

How devastated Joseph must have been as he wrestled with his hurt and anger over what he assumed was her unfaithfulness, and the betrayal of all his hopes and dreams for marriage. And yet, he attempted to do "the honourable thing."

He planned to end the engagement quietly, so as not to draw negative attention to her, but certainly also not to his own embarrassment.

Because honestly... How to tell family and friends why the engagement was suddenly off? How does one explain, after all, that he has been cheated on by God?

What do we do when our dream for the future suddenly ends, with no satisfactory explanation?

I remember the hurt and pain a very close friend of mine felt when a long and deep relationship came to an end. Gone were the golden hopes for a future of shared companionship, dashed were the dreams of fulfillment, back was her painful loneliness, gone and dead the images of a joy-filled future. Over and over again, it seemed that she would meet the “right” person only to experience hurt, anger, and betrayal when the relationship didn’t develop to meet her expectations. She often felt “cheated on” by God — why wasn’t God providing the wonderful person, the wonderful future, she dreamed of?

Perhaps Joseph felt the same.

What do we do when our dream for the future suddenly ends? What do we do when the perfect job doesn’t materialize, when all the time and energy and study we’ve invested into that particular career path is wasted? What do we do when a marriage doesn’t work out the way we hoped it would, and we are suddenly facing a divorce? What do we do when our child falls prey to addiction, and we are made to face questions about our failures as parents? What do we do when

we develop cancer and our very life is under the threat of death?

In these difficult, painful moments of life we may feel, like Joseph... We may feel that we have been cheated on by God. If we are doing what we are supposed to, if we are following God the way we believe we are called to, life just shouldn’t work this way, - this is what we tend to think, don’t we?

But what about Joseph? ...in the very moment of his despair, God sends Joseph “the” dream. Not just any dream. Not just a dream of explanation. God surrounds and embraces Joseph with God’s own hopes for a glorious future, God’s own great dream for humanity. God’s dream of a future when humanity is reconciled with a God who desperately loves God’s own creation.

Through Jesus, God will transform the world itself. Through Jesus, God will save His people from their sins. God needs Jesus – no doubt. And to save Jesus, God needs Joseph. And the message, the promise, the dream that God gives Joseph then and each one of us now is: Jesus is Emmanuel. God is with us.

In his book, *God Has a Dream: A Vision of Hope for Our Time*, Archbishop Desmond Tutu writes that “we all experience sadness, we all come at times to despair, and we all lose hope that the suffering in our lives and in the world will ever end” but, he continues, “...there is no such thing as a totally hopeless case. Our God is an expert at dealing with chaos, with brokenness, with all the worst that we can imagine. God created order out of disorder, cosmos out of chaos, and God can do so always, can do so now—in our personal

lives and in our lives as nations, globally... Indeed, God is transforming the world now — through us — because God loves us.”

Joseph’s life certainly didn’t work out the way he had expected it would. Joseph’s life was totally and completely transformed; he’d given his consent to play a key role as father to God’s own Son.

Joseph and Mary were given the monumental task of raising Jesus into the man he would become. In order to live in God’s dream, in order to play his role in God’s story, Joseph had to be willing to give up some of his own dreams. Small as they were in comparison to God’s. That surely was a painful process, full of uncertainty and full of the unknown.

But in the midst of the uncertainty, Joseph clung to the memory of the message God had given him, the promise of the glorious future which Joseph would help come into being.

God doesn’t come to save our dreams; God gives us new dreams and by doing so he saves us.

When facing life’s heartbreaking moments of loss and grief, what can save us is to remember. ...to remember God’s promise that God is with us.

Remembering God’s promise is not a passive acceptance of whatever happens to us. Remembering God’s promise is an active choice to trust that God will never abandon us, even in the moment of our greatest need.

Remembering allows us to let go of the illusion of control we have over our lives, and it gives us the strength to let go of our dreams and expectations in favour of God’s great dream.

Remembering God’s presence with us allows us to move forward without fear—even into an unknown future. It helps us to believe in dreams, to listen to God’s voice, to save lives, and to enable new beginnings.

The world needs dreamers, not only in Advent but always. Amen.

Like Joseph

like Joseph
doing the job
building a house
like Joseph
choosing a wife
and expecting the child
like Joseph
listening to the angel
and being open to dreams
like Joseph
finding meaning even in the dark sides of life
like Joseph
not losing faith in all the contradictions
like Joseph
caring for Mary and the child
caring for the hope of the world
seeing the dangers
and facing what comes
leaving the friends and fleeing
like Joseph
staying in the foreign land and waiting
like Joseph
listening to God's call
and doing each day simply
what needs to be done

4. Pastoral Prayer on 1st Sunday in Advent

Advent God, in the hurry of getting ready for Christmas, help us to be quiet and not miss the real beauty and truth of the season. Let us not misunderstand you, even though we often feel and ask like John the Baptist.

Enable us to see beyond the harsh reality and be touched by your promise of new life and lasting hope. Let us never give up, but discover the times of waiting and longing as times in which we can grow and bring about something new... Let us open our hearts and homes to those who seek safety, happiness, love and joy. And in them let us see you.

Give peace and strength to those who are lonely or distressed or angry. Grant rest and renewal to those who are tired.

Touch with healing all bodies that are sick, minds that are disturbed, hearts that ache.

Make whole the relationships that have been broken, and give new friendships where life is barren and empty.

Create your beautiful kingdom within us, and help us to share it with others.

Teach us God, how to live in this time. Teach us to be still and touch the hope of these days.

Teach us to move on with this hope deep in our hearts.

Teach us to be imaginative with all our gifts, that they may bless the world, and, blessing the world, bless us as well.

Let our children discover a sense of wonder that will never leave them, and enable those of us who are older to rediscover a feeling for mystery during this special season of the year.

Make us aware of your presence in little things – a cup of tea, a flickering candle, snow flakes and smiles.... that we may see light and not darkness, life and not death.

Give a purpose to our lives, and protect us and guide us, when we walk your way. Wrap us in your love and light when we journey through Advent and prepare to celebrate your coming.

And let us respond to your coming by giving to others what you have given us: joy, peace, light and happiness.

Amen.



2nd Sunday of Advent

Luke 1: 26-38

²⁶ In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, ²⁷ to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

²⁹ Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. ³⁰ But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. ³¹ You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, ³³ and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

³⁴ "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

³⁵ The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. ³⁶ Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. ³⁷ For no word from God will ever fail."

³⁸ "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.

5. Mary discovers she is having a baby

Mary has been described "the best supporting character" in the greatest drama ever played on the stage of history, the drama of which Jesus was the star.

Unfortunately we know so little about her. The first time she appears on the stage of history she is engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. In Jewish society in those days engagement was much more serious than in our society. In first-century Palestine

engagement was quite as binding as marriage itself. Should the fiancée die, the girl would have been regarded a widow.

Mary had probably not even reached her teens. She would still have been living at home in Nazareth with her parents. It was in the sixth month of her cousin Elizabeth's pregnancy that the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary. Mary, so the angel says, deserves God's favour. That is how he begins his message.

Why Mary? Was she, for instance, particularly devout? Or warm-hearted and loving? Or was she wiser than all the others? Braver? We have no answer to that. What is true of Mary, is true of us all. God's choosing us is mere grace. And grace is always undeserved.

No wonder Mary is much perplexed as the texts says. The particular favour that Mary is to experience is that she will conceive and give birth to a son, whom she will name Jesus. He will be great, and he will be called the son of the most high... What an amazing message.

Every woman may believe that her firstborn is to be special, but with Mary's child this was different. He is to be the Messiah who they all had been waiting for. He would free God's oppressed people.

Mary's first thought however, is not about her son, but about the fact that she is to give birth: How, she asks, can this be? I am a virgin. I do not have a man.

For a girl in Mary's time and of Mary's age a child before she moved in with Joseph was unthinkable. And Gabriel is not to explain, he simply assigns all responsibility of what happens to Mary to God. The Holy Spirit will come upon you... The same spirit that was active in the creation of the world.

And just to affirm all this, Gabriel mentions the miracle that had happened to Elizabeth. She was old and infertile, and yet at the point when the angel came to Mary, Elizabeth was already six months pregnant. Nothing, Gabriel says, will be impossible with God.

And Mary – she accepts God's will for her life. Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.

In one sense she must have recognised that she did not have any option. And yet Mary was not a puppet on a string. She could have rejected God's calling on her life. Instead she says her "Yes" to God's plan. And the angel departs.

Every year in Advent, this story is suggested to the preacher to talk about and reflect on. So what do we do with it? What comes to us through the text? What speaks to us? Which themes does it hold in store?

First of all I discover in the story God's extraordinary ability to surprise us.

Nothing will be impossible with God. These words sum up the whole life that Jesus will later live. The life that began as a miracle – a virgin birth – was full of miracles later: the feeding of 5000, or realistically 20000 at least... the turning water into wine, the healing of the sick and the raising of the dead, and above all Jesus' own resurrection. With God all these impossible acts become possible.



And the ascension of Jesus did not mark the end of God's mighty acts among his people. Luke tells us in the book of acts how God continues to work miracles among Jesus' followers. And if we just look around we still discover how God involves himself in his world.

The challenge I think, is a challenge to our own expectations. The degree to which God can surprise us, is the degree to which we give room to the spirit to work in our lives and in our churches.

(pause)

A second theme I discover is that of grace.

God in his grace chose Mary to be the mother of our Lord. Nothing is said by Luke about Mary's virtues, or about her weaknesses. Mary was just an ordinary girl. But this is precisely something that can be found often in the Bible: God uses the ordinary people.

As God in his grace called Mary to serve his purposes, so God calls us, too. God is not looking for us to prove ourselves before he calls us; rather, our task is to prove ourselves and give our best once he has called us.

(pause)

Closely following the theme of grace is the theme of faith.

Mary's response to the grace of God was a sign of faith: Here am I, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word.

Mary was willing to trust God, whatever happened. She was willing to believe that

God could use her, however inadequate she may have felt.

What was true of Mary, needs to be true of us. We too, need to be willing to respond to the call of God in our own lives, whatever that may be, and however inadequate we may feel. Responding in faith involves risk... It involves handing over our lives and our future to God.

(pause)

Finally there is the theme of obedience.

Mary's acceptance of God's call upon her life was leading to shame and disgrace. That is how things were in those days. Mary's neighbours would undoubtedly have been rejecting Mary as soon as they heard that she was expecting a baby while she was still only engaged. And all the more if they learned that Joseph was not the father...

Following God's call surely does not make you anyone's darling, not then and not today. We have to risk loneliness and pain. And we have to carry our crosses, just as Jesus did, and as Mary saw him do...

(pause)

Overwhelmed by the fact that God has chosen her to be the mother of his son, Mary then turned to think of her child to be. Like any other mother, Mary dreamed of great things for her son. Enormous dreams she had. And little did she know about what it really meant that all generations would be blessed...

Inspired by the visit of the angel and his message that her son would be the Messiah, Mary sang of the coming revolution of which her son would be the leader. The powerful would be

brought down from their thrones, and the lowly lifted up, the hungry would be filled with good things, and the rich being sent away.

So certain was Mary of the coming revolution that she spoke of the future as if it had already arrived. The very fact that God was causing her to conceive a baby was in itself a sign that the revolution had already started.

Mary was a child of her time, and so, too, were her dreams. The hopes she expressed were very much the popular hopes of the day. The coming Messiah was going to be a powerful political figure who would restore the fortunes of the people of God. This is what Mary seriously expected, and so did many others with her.

But instead of Jesus putting down the mighty from their thrones, they put him down. Jesus had come to bring about a spiritual revolution, yes. But he did not redistribute wealth and become a worldly king. In this sense Mary was wrong.

But, precisely because of the value that Jesus gave to the poor and the marginalized throughout his ministry, we believe that the world of politics and economics must be of concern to us Christians. Jesus calls us to side with the nobodies of this world and leads us to the little nobody there, outside the comfort zone, away in a manger....

The revolution that Mary sang about, and that Jesus started still needs to go on because we believe...

...that God hopes and works for a world where all shall be included in the feast of life, and that in Christ we see how costly it is to bring that world about.

We believe that God's strategy for a new world is to put the poorest first, and that nothing is more important for God's people than to bring the poor good news.

We believe that rich and poor alike can be generous, wise and creative because all are made in God's image, and that all are made poorer when they are left out. We believe that loving our neighbours means working for justice, so that all have a say in what happens to them.

We believe that God made the good earth to sustain and delight us, and that we are called to take care of it and enjoy it.

We believe that the God of all creation is at work beyond all boundaries we set, making common cause with all who wish to belong.

We long for a time when the meek shall inherit the earth and all who hunger and thirst after justice shall be satisfied,

...and we believe that, despite the persistence of evil, now is always the time when more good can be done and we can make a difference.

Amen



6. Advent Intercessions

God of Elizabeth and Mary,
you visited your people with news
of the world's redemption
in the coming of the Savior.
Make our hearts leap with joy,
and fill our mouths with songs of praise,
that we may announce
glad tidings of peace,
and welcome the Christ in our midst.
God, as we joyfully await
the coming of the Christ,
let us pray for the needs of the church,
our community, and the world.

We pray for the leaders of the nations.
We pray for the governments
around the world, -
particularly for those who are seeking
for justice and peace.
God, we pray for the community
in which we live.
We pray for our neighbours,
and we remember all those
who are sad, lonely and afraid.

We pray for all who are angry and
disappointed, frustrated,
stressed up and bitter.
We pray for all who are facing losses,
who mourn, and whose lives
are filled with sadness.
We pray for all in any special need.
And we remember all those
who are facing times of uncertainty,
rejection and fear.
We ask for love, care and
compassion between people,
we ask for hope and joy to fill their lives.

God, you keep your promises,
you have given us a sign of your love
through Jesus Christ, our Saviour,
who was promised from ages past.
We believe as Joseph did
the message of your presence
whispered by an angel,
and offer our prayers for your world,
confident of your care
and mercy for all creation.
Amen.

7. Blessing

Now go in peace
to love and serve the world.
And may your waiting be in hope,
each day be lived in faith
and the light of Christmas
be moving toward you.
Amen.



3rd Sunday of Advent

8. Waiting

A dramatised Advent reading

(This reading requires six readers and six props. The readers represent biblical and other figures who looked or are looking for Jesus.)

Symbols:

wise man – gold box
widow – headscarf
old man – stick
young woman – knitting or baby clothes
everyman – modern hat
God – candle

(Reader Two puts down the gold box)



Reader Three (holding the headscarf):

I am a poor widow looking for a purpose. I am tired of being talked about, treated as a statistic, pushed into the margins of human conversation. I want to meet someone who will have time for me, someone who will listen to me, someone who will not take for granted who I am or what I have to offer. Pray for me and for all poor people who are waiting to be taken seriously.

Reader One (holding the candle):

2 Peter 3: 13-15

But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home. Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.

Reader Two (holding the gold box):

I am a wise man looking for a sign. I believe that the world is meant to be a fairer place and that I should help to change it. I have access to people of power and authority but I am not sure how to use my influence. Pray for me and for all other influential ones who are waiting on a sign.

(Reader Three puts down the headscarf)



Reader Four (holding the stick):

I am an old man waiting for my death. I have looked at the world so long that it wearies me. I have prayed to God so hard for my people to be delivered from all that diminishes and destroys them. And I wonder, as my life closes, if change will ever come. Pray for me and for all older folk who are waiting for a saviour.

(Reader Four puts down the stick)



Reader Five (holding the knitting or baby clothes):

I am a young mother waiting for my child to be born. I feel the new life inside me, I sense great promise throughout me, I know my love grows for the one I have not seen. Yet I fear that the world may be a hostile place for the little one who is to come. Pray for me and for all expectant mothers who are waiting for their child to be born.

(Reader Five puts down the knitting or baby clothes)



Reader Six (holding the modern hat):

I am everywoman and everyman. In my loneliness, I am waiting to be visited; in my uncertainty, I am waiting to be reassured; in my happiness, I am waiting for a deeper fulfilment; in my soul I am waiting to be wanted. Pray for me, and for yourself, for we are all waiting.

(Reader Six puts down the modern hat)



Reader One:

I am the Lord, your God. I have waited on you, and I have heard your prayer. Now is the right time, and I am coming soon. So, prepare a way in the desert, a cradle in the hay, a meeting place in the market place, a table in an upstairs room, a cross on a hill, a grave in a garden, a throne in your heart as in heaven. For now again, I will bend down and remember you. I will answer your prayer, and your waiting will end in joy.

(Reader One puts down the candle in the middle of all other symbols).



9. O Little Town of Bethlehem

Sermon on Micah 5: 2-5a

Here we go: It is Advent again.
“Advent” means “coming”. And, as every year, we are invited to reflect on the coming of God:
God coming to us.
At Christmas.
The child in the manger.
Bethlehem.

Micah 5: 2-5a

“But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.”

Therefore Israel will be abandoned until the time when she who is in labour bears a son, and the rest of his brothers return to join the Israelites.

He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth.

And he will be our peace.

For Christians the Old Testament does not stand on its own, but is also a book about Jesus, in the sense that it prepares for the coming of the Messiah and the new people of God. And although Jesus may not be the principal subject of the Old Testament, Christians have claimed that Jesus is the true fulfilment of all

hopes and expectations which we find in the Old Testament.

In this regard it is significant that Jesus began his ministry by proclaiming: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near” (Mark 1:15).

For Jesus, the promise of the Old Testament was realized in his ministry. And for the people who followed Jesus, Jesus was the fulfilment of the hopes and dreams of old.

Time and again, the prophets, for example when they spoke of the one to come, spoke more than they actually knew. And this is not surprising. Because first and foremost, the prophets had a message to bring to the people of their own day. Their task was not to foretell the future but to foretell God’s word, God’s story with his people.

The prophet Micah’s task was to be the advocate of God among a people who had forgotten that they were God’s chosen children. Disaster was on the way. Some prophets, priests and rulers had fed the people with a false optimism. The majority thought all was going to be okay, and only Micah and a few others saw that no good times were coming.

Micah’s task was to alert the people to the danger, and to challenge their trust in a God who would always protect them.

Micah had to tell them that God saw their sin and their disobedience... God had kept his promises, Micah said, but

the people had not. The greed of the wealthy and the powerful who seized the property and possessions from persons weaker than them, the failures of the rulers and priests, lead Micah to talk of coming disasters. Jerusalem, he said, would become a heap of ruins...

But then, in all the laments and predictions of destruction, Micah turns to words of hope. That is where today's sermon text comes on stage. Does Micah need a break from all the heaviness of doom? Does he see that punishment is never the final word of God? Does he know deep inside that hope is possible even in the face of terrible situations that cannot be changed?

The promise of a new ruler to come from the town of Bethlehem is so familiar to us Christians. It is often cited during the Advent and Christmas seasons: the Wise Men quote Micah 5:2 in response to Herod's question about where the Messiah would be born; Bethlehem is the home town of David.

If Micah locates the birth place of the new king, the new ruler in David's town, he makes people see the continuation of the ancient promises that God had given to David.

Although Israel endured the reigns of some terrible kings, and then saw the entire loss of the monarchy and the take-over by all sorts of mighty and power-obsessed neighbouring nations, hope remained that God had not withdrawn the promise that a son of David would always sit on the throne.

At the time of Jesus, many Jews still looked for such a Messiah...

Who is the new king from Bethlehem? There are various answers to this question. But in Advent we, of course, remember that Christians had so long associated this text with the birth of Jesus that it is hard to read it otherwise. In Advent we are interested in the prophets and what they predict concerning the person of Jesus.

In this text 700 years before the first Christmas, the prophet Micah shared with the people that a future ruler, shepherd of the people, bringer of security and peace, should come from Bethlehem. The child born there would be a king whose greatness and peace would one day fill the whole earth.

Micah's Advent themes are Hope and Peace. "God is coming," he says. "In your weakness, be people of hope."

Bethlehem is a small Judean village, some five or six miles to the south of Jerusalem. It stands on a grey limestone ridge, surrounded by fertile countryside. It lived up to its name "House of Bread".

Micah lived in a time of great darkness. God's people had failed. They were oppressed by the Assyrians, defenceless and weak. And yet, says Micah, there was still hope!

God was going to send a king. But he passed by Jerusalem, turned his back on the seat of government and human power, and turned his attention to little Bethlehem. A tiny spot from which a ruler would come.

Hope would spring forth from weakness, from a child of poverty, born in a cattle shed, in an insignificant market town.

God goes back to the roots of King David.

The prophet Isaiah predicts the same thing. God brings forward his salvation through human weakness. A shoot growing from a stump (Isaiah 11). A child of Bethlehem, born in a feeding trough, who becomes a refugee, a homeless preacher, who is crucified on a wooden cross. Human weakness - and God uses it. He or she is not interested in capital cities, or armies, or presidents.

The world has fallen into darkness under the grip of evil power. There is hopelessness, powerlessness, the need of salvation. The people long for someone who restores the world to a good place. According to Micah the expected king comes as a child, utterly dependent, vulnerable. He can't look after himself. He lives a humble life.

God chooses what is weak in the world. He did it then; and he does it now. The fact that we do not perceive ourselves to be important does not mean to say that God has not got important things to do through us.

God keeps his promises. In a way that was beyond Micah's imaginings, God's Messiah did come from Bethlehem. Micah believed that God had a wonderful future in store: Peace, and the day when nations "shall beat their swords into plough shares, and their spears into pruning hooks," and war shall be no more. The day too will come when all will "sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees," and economic oppression will come to an end. God will come; and, for the people, there will be well-being!

As Christians in Advent we see Jesus in Micah's passage. But we should not forget that Micah's prophecy was a word of hope intended to address the distress of people who live in a particular time and place. God would finally send some decent rulers to relieve the terrible situation of abuse of power, corruption, violence and oppression. There would be security in the future, integrity, justice, peace...

Can a biblical text that seems obviously speaking to a specific people in times long ago somehow be freed from its earliest historical context so that it can continue to speak a word from God to a world that constantly faces new challenges?

The book of Micah spoke to his contemporaries. It spoke to the people in Jesus' time, when they searched the scriptures to find passages that would help to understand who Jesus was. Micah also speaks to us today. We read his words in a time and place far distant from the prophet's time.

We are not Micah's first audience. But our questions are not unlike those raised by the people in old Israel. Our fears are similar. Our sins are similar. Our need for a word of warning and a glimmer of hope beyond the everyday demands may be similar. And, so we stretch the meaning of the ancient text so that it can speak to us directly.

And: we are allowed to see more than is actually there. We can see more than Micah meant to say. The text is not Micah's, nor does it belong to ancient Israel. It belongs to all people who need it. To all who need words of hope, images of peace, and dreams of justice.

The text is not limited to Micah's time. God's spirit continues to work through this text. It gives us words of hope and peace. It strengthens our faith and enables us to share what we believe with others. It wants to help us understand God's will for our time and place. It keeps us in touch with God.

Micah had a dream. He dreamed of a day when peace would fill the earth. We too dream of a day when war shall be no more. We dream of peace for our neighbours. We dream of peace for the whole world. We dream of peace in Bolivia, in Syria, in Hongkong, in Iran and in any other trouble spot of this bruised earth with its heart-aching people.

The lesson for Advent in our text can be that we watch out for peace, that we learn peace, and that we practice peace; that we submit to the God in the child, and, in our weakness, work for peace.

With God the dream of peace can come true. And with Jesus who showed us how to make peace, we can help it happen in the world.

Let us this Advent, be people of hope and peace. Let us trust in God, love our neighbours, and point to the glorious future God has in store for us. Nothing more, and nothing less. Advent for Future. Amen.

10. Prayer in Christmas Time

God of wonder, love and grace,
we thank you for your presence,
your love and your peace.
We bring before you all the people,
who we love near and far...
We bring before you all the concerns
we bear in our hearts and minds.

And we pray God,
we pray for the peace of the world,
the welfare of the church,
the unity of all people.

We pray for the governments
of the nations,
the leaders of the world,
and all in authority.

We pray for those oppressed,
for those in despair,
and for all who are hungry.

We pray for those who are unemployed,
and for those who can't see the joy
and peace of Christmas,
because it is so dark in their own lives.

We pray, God, for those whom we love,
here with us or far away,
we pray for neighbours and friends,
all those whose lives
are closely linked with ours.

We pray for the glory of your name,
God,
turn us from all that is evil,
and grant us grace
to put our whole trust and confidence
in your loving purpose for the world.

Strengthen us by your Spirit, God,
to serve you with a willing heart
and a cheerful spirit.
Amen.

4th Sunday of Advent

11. In the peoples' darkness there shall be light

Sermon on Isaiah 9: 2-6

Isaiah 9: 2-6

The people walking in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of deep
darkness

a light has dawned.

³You have enlarged the nation
and increased their joy;
they rejoice before you
as people rejoice at the harvest,
as warriors rejoice
when dividing the plunder.

⁴For as in the day of Midian's defeat,
you have shattered
the yoke that burdens them,
the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor.

⁵Every warrior's boot used in battle
and every garment rolled in blood
will be destined for burning,
will be fuel for the fire.

⁶For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his
shoulders.

And he will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

All the readings and stories in this service today express: Advent is a season characterised by outrageous promise. And second: In Advent we are especially conscious of the power of darkness, into which we want the light of Christ to come.

And many all over the earth experience the darkness with great immediacy as hunger, disease, military repression, war and of course countless individual shadows in peoples' lives...

Here the images and visions of Isaiah become relevant: the vision of liberation for oppressed people by the disarming birth of a divine child... ...the change from bloody wars to a peace which remains forever and never will be broken...

Isaiah paints pictures of hope for liberation and peace; pictures beyond human possibilities, pictures expressing a vast part of our deepest wishes and desires.

In the people's darkness there shall be light. As dawn comes, it will rise and shine into the land of shadows. It will come unexpectedly: Then the yoke of the enslaved will be broken, their chains will be torn off and the rods of their oppressors will be taken away. The stamping boots of the soldiers, the uniforms of murderers covered with blood will be destroyed. The joy of the



nation will be heard everywhere... There will be no more tears but peace eternal.

All these pictures point towards the two last verses of our text: *"For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders..."* That is the centre, the unique event. The change of all things that can come true.

As clearly as the prophet on the one hand speaks of hunger, slavery, oppression and military regime, so he speaks on the other hand promising: the vision of the birth of the child and the coming of God's peace that wants to shine in the midst of all earthly conflicts and experiences.

Advent is not just something to be celebrated in our hearts and families. Advent has got a lot to do with the whole world and the needs and suffering of all humankind.

Isaiah's message is meant for all people and not given to individuals only. It needs to be heard in the slums of the poor and in the prisons and hiding places of the politically persecuted. It is a message against the production of weapons and the striving for power. And – correctly understood – it leads to Jesus who sets people free. It leads to the people who live in darkness – waiting for him and waiting for us.

Those who lived in a land of darkness in Isaiah's time were parts of the people of Israel who had fallen into the hands of Assyrian oppressors. The boots of the tramping warriors, the garments rolled in blood, the rod of the guards and the brutality of the torturers were well known to every captured Israelite.



But for the prophet, Assyria is more than just Assyria: it stands for every kind of violence against God and people, and it is the byword of inhuman oppression at all times and everywhere.

Isaiah sees the concrete need of his people, but he also talks of a destiny that can happen to any people at any time. His words and pictures are open: captives and prisoners at all times can find themselves in them, can see their destinies reflected, can find their hopes put into words.

The people who live in a land of deep darkness... Isaiah describes them as passing through the land, greatly distressed and hungry (Isaiah 8:21). In a land of deep darkness I can also see the millions of people held in prisons, robbed of their freedom because of their political ideas, their ethnic identity and their attempts to stand up for their faith. I can see all those living in exile... being deported, tortured and made speechless all over the world. I can see the children in the countries of war and political conflict, injured, frightened to death, their eyes full of fear and horror... traumatised for the rest of their lives...

And to all those in darkness ... according to Isaiah there shall be light.



A child will be born... to make all the difference. A child will be born... for the peace of all.

It is certainly not only in Isaiah's time important to talk about the darkness and point out the shadows... It is at all times essential to accuse violence and dismiss oppression and protest against war! This can help and inform, make aware and wake people up. But often it does not immediately set the captives free, nor does it make an end to repression and misuse of power.

Isaiah must know that and therefore moves on to his strongest picture: God himself, he says, will come and take the yoke from the shoulders of his bent down people. God himself will take away the rods of the slave masters and break them forever. The power of the victors, their loud iron boots and their bloody coats will be wiped out by God. Wars will be overcome... There will be no more arming, no more aggression... ...and swords will be melted into ploughs.

But how?

Can not the liberation of the oppressed only be achieved by again using arms and violence? How can repression and wars be overcome without causing new oppression and fighting other wars? Without tramping boots and blood on

uniforms, soldiers in the streets and bombs killing the innocent as well?

Isaiah's pictures all lead to the one: the birth of a royal child. A prince of peace who brings along the destruction of all arms and establishes joy and light for all. "...for a child has been born..., a son is given to us.."

This is something somehow only God can think of: so different from human planning and thinking. Liberation and peace through the birth of a small and helpless child who has got no power or means of defence at all. God relinquishes power, and is found in the fragile and vulnerable body of a baby...

Not the pride and might of grown-up men are expected to change the world but the defencelessness and hope that comes in a new born child.

The kingdom of Peace will come through a child – disarmingly defenceless. Isaiah's mighty visions of the end of violence and oppression are given evidence by the birth of a tiny human being.

Hard to believe?

...for those in the lands and prisons of darkness, who fight for their rights and desperately try to survive.





Can a child help?

Isaiah claims, it can. Because a child turns all the rules of the games played up to now upside down... A child completely calls into question and changes the values and thoughts which we so far hold deep within us... A new born child is helpless...sure, but in its innocence it is the tiny beginning of something new...

Its defencelessness makes arming useless. Weapons can be put aside and clenched fists can be opened.

Things don't have to stay as they always were.

New life is possible...

We can change.

We can open ourselves towards a future and a life in peace... "... for a child has been born to us..." – not a harsh and bitter old man who is seeking revenge, but a small child.

The freedom of our world lies in the hands of someone as helpless and powerless as a new born baby.

And all authority rests upon these innocent small shoulders promising life not death, peace not war, and freedom instead of oppression.

A new human being is born. New humanity finds a way...The peace, the freedom and the justice of God are resting upon this child that is born for us.

It is important to us to know, what its authority looks like, if we seek to start living with it.

A child will establish eternal peace. A child will uphold it with justice and righteousness. Peace and justice will embrace where the new human being is born. ... Peace and justice will come alive when new human beings live in this world and work for the values this child brings along. Then there can be a time without masters or slaves... Then we can will literally leave each other in peace, we can establish each others rights and accept one another's dignity.

Isaiah's vision – is it a dream? Or could it come true? Here and today?

Isaiah has shared his most precious dream with the people who live in darkness... and he wants to share it with us. We can believe in it. We can help it come true.

The prophet in his time had a vague assumption of the divine child and he called it:

Wonderful Counsellor,
Mighty God,
Everlasting Father,
Prince of Peace.

But today we know the child. We know the person and are acquainted with his way from a manger to the cross always knowing that such only is the way to freedom and peace for our world.

Isaiah was waiting. But we know, Christ is already here. The one who can bring peace is right among us.

We can follow him. We can make his kingdom of peace visible to others. And we can help his justice come true.

I am deeply convinced that we all can do it - through the power of God, through his love and his light. We only have to dare to live the lives of new born people... We only have to dare to see the injustice which we too often prefer to ignore in our world... We "only" have to stand up against repression, violence and exploitation. We only have to... and Isaiah's dream would come true. God's promise brought forth by his people.

Advent is a challenge to prepare for a new way of life. And it is a call to help the ancient visions of humankind come true. We can do it – if we just do it

together – and of course in no other than God's name!

Amen.

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ,
your world awaits you.
In the longing of the persecuted
for justice;
in the longing of the poor
for prosperity;
in the longing of our hearts
for a new way of life.
Set us free from fear and faithlessness
that we may be ready to welcome you
and pass on as much of your light as
possible
in the places of darkness we see
and experience every day.
Amen.

12. Blessing

The light of the Christmas star to you,
the warmth of home and hearth to you,
the cheer and good will of friends to you,
the hope of a childlike heart to you,
the joy of a thousand angels to you,
the love of the Son,
and God's peace to you.
Amen.



Nativity

13. Opening Prayer

Loving God, thank you.
Thank you for this day
and all the children and adults
in this church.
Thank you God for our lives,
for the smiles of children
and the hugs of parents.
Thank you for prayers, songs and stories.
Thank you for the Christmas
preparations in our homes and houses.
Thank you for the light of this season
and the joy of people,
Thank you for friends to walk at our side
and for so many gifts we can give.

Thank you for your coming at
Christmas, God
Which we remember with our songs
and stories to day.
Thank you for Jesus who showed us
how to live as your child.
Help us to live as your children.
Show us how you can use us,
so that we may help this earth
to become a place where everybody is
happy.
Amen.

14. Joy to the World

The Christmas Story according to the Gospel of Luke

Reading I

Luke 2: 1-2

1 In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered.

2 This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria.

Reflection: the Census

The evangelist Luke begins his account of the birth of Jesus by setting it within a clear historical framework. No doubt, first and foremost, Luke was concerned to show that he was recounting facts, not fiction. The Christmas story is no fairy tale. The birth of Jesus and the census that caused Joseph and Mary to make their way to Bethlehem are rooted in historical reality. Luke makes it clear that

he is not dealing with philosophy but with history. At Christmas we celebrate the birth not of an idea, but of a child, who is Christ the Lord.



Reading II

Luke 2: 3-7

3 All went to their own towns to be registered.

4 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.

5 He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.

6 While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child.

7 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.

Reflection: The Birth of Jesus

Tax demands are never welcome, and not least when they involve a meeting with a tax inspector and a trip to the other side of the country... Joseph took Mary with him. And it was there in Bethlehem that Mary gave birth to her firstborn son! And like any other mother in those days, Mary wrapped the baby in bands of cloth.

The birth was probably like any other birth. And no doubt, Jesus was like any other baby. No “little Lord Jesus no crying he makes...”

Baby Jesus was placed in a manger which is a sign of the mess and of the muddle into which God came. No place less hygienic than an animal feeding trough. Mind boggling... No fancy Moses basket in this story, instead a first century equivalent of an orange box.

This was the sign by which the shepherds knew that they had arrived at the right place. The manger was a sign of recognition.

The manger was too, a sign of the future to come. It was a sign of the lifestyle

Jesus was to adopt when he began his ministry.

To one would-be follower Jesus said: “*Foxes have holes, and the birds have nests; but the son of man has nowhere to lay his head*” (Luke 9:58). Jesus expects his followers to let go of material comforts and live a life in poverty and on the move...

Last but not least: the manger was a sign of the present. It was a sign of the depths to which God went in coming among us... the manger is a sign of God renouncing power and might, humbling himself and admitting himself totally into the mess of earthly life... no matter what.

The thought of a saviour lying in a manger is almost beyond comprehension. It is so different from what people would have expected.

Song: What Child Is This (MH 219)



Reading III

Luke 2: 8-14

8 In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.

9 Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

10 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:

12 This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.»

13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God

14 «Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace!»

Reflection: Joy to the World

If we only had the story of the wise men, then it might seem that Jesus is only relevant to the wise and the wealthy. But the truth is that Jesus is also of relevance to those who are not particularly wise, those who have little or no say in how the world goes... and those who possess almost nothing.

The shepherds in our reading were living in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks. Three or four shepherds, each of them taking a turn to keep watch during that night.

Who were these shepherds? In the first-century Palestine shepherds had a reputation for being downright irreligious. They were so irreligious that they were called “people of the dirt”, “scumbags”, if you like. No self-respecting Jewish parents would have wanted their daughter to marry a shepherd. Shepherds had as much standing in the Jewish community as tax collectors. Their bad reputation was not entirely their fault. Their job meant that

they were unable to keep the Jewish ceremonial law. They were unable to go to the temple regularly. They were rough and ready, and people of that day thought shepherds just couldn't be trusted... Shepherds were the outlaws of their time...

And yet, it was to them that God sent the choir of angels. It was to them that God made known that a Saviour was born in David's city. It was the shepherds and no one else, who were the first to receive the good news.



What does this say to us?

Surely this is true: Jesus is good news for everybody! Listen again to the words of the angel: “I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day... a saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”

Jesus does not come to the middle and upper class of his day, nor does he visit their palaces and temples. No. He comes and he is good news for everybody.

It doesn't matter who we are and what we have done, God accepts us as we are! We don't have to reach a certain standard of holiness before God loves us, He loves us as we are and where we are. The good, the best news of all is that nobody is outside the reach of the love of God! And to prove this, God sent his

angels to a bunch of freewheeling shepherds spending the night out there in the fields.

There must have been great joy in these fields that night... The message is amazing. Nobody had ever brought the shepherds good news.

They themselves were regarded as “bad news”. They were on nobody’s guest list. But suddenly they discovered they were on God’s guest list. The doors of the synagogues may have been closed to them, but not the doors of the kingdom of God.

Angels are not an everyday experience. So on that night of nights it was not surprising that the little group of shepherds “were terrified” when an angel of the Lord appeared to them in all his glory.



All that happened is beyond rational explanation. What is important is the message the angel delivered: “Do not be afraid...”

In those days the air was filled with the expectation of a saviour and change. People were sick of war and destruction. They longed for an age of peace and righteousness...

And then this angel out there in the fields pointed to the small village of Bethlehem: Good news, joy to the world, a promise of change comes from the smallest of all places, unexpectedly and as a big surprise. (A bit as if today the message that seems to save us all, would not come from Washington, Paris or Berlin, but from a tiny village in Haiti or Burundi...)

The angels out there in the middle of nowhere first and foremost sing their Gloria to God. They praise God for the birth of this baby and for the fact that in him God was establishing the peace on earth. “The prince of peace will establish peace and justice... and all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire.” (Isaiah 9: 5-7).

Song: Angels from the Realms of Glory (MH 220)

Reading IV

Luke 2: 15-20

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.»

16 So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger.

17 When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child;

18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.

19 But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.

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

Reflection: The Shepherds

The shepherds had their failings. Their lives were far from perfect. They were doubtless rough and ready people, and yet their response to the angel's message is admirable:

First of all they followed up what they had heard. They could have remained in the fields, wondering about what had just happened to them. There surely was much to discuss and talk about... But instead, they said to one another "Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place."

Were they at this point already believers? When they set off for Bethlehem, were they already on a journey of faith? If so, then they set us an example of putting faith into action.

Even though – it is more likely that they were still on a journey toward faith. They had yet to be convinced of the truth of what they'd heard. However, they were willing to go and see for themselves what this baby was all about.

Secondly, they did not delay their journey. They could have debated at length, whether they should go; they could have spent time arguing about the significance of what they'd just heard and seen.

As it was, "they went with haste" to find the baby Jesus. In so doing they impress me a lot, and set an example to us. It is

so easy to spend one's life forever talking about religion, but never actually taking the road to Bethlehem, never looking for Jesus himself.

The third point in our reflecting on the shepherds is that they found Mary and Joseph and the child lying in a manger. Mary, Joseph – and the baby. They'd found him, the tiny newborn baby boy! Even though Bethlehem was a small place in those days, it must have cost the shepherds some searching to find the small child... The finding depends on the searching... The shepherds found because they'd put their minds to the search.

And last but not least: the shepherds told the others! They told others what had been told them about this child. They shared with others their experience with the angels, and later undoubtedly they included the story of finding Jesus himself. And as a result, "all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds had told them". Here again these shepherds are role models to us: they couldn't keep quiet about the wondrous experience. They couldn't keep quiet about Jesus. They just couldn't...

What if we did the same? ...just not keep quiet about our faith, our hope, our God, our saviour...?

After visiting Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus, the shepherds returned "glorifying and praising God." There was much to celebrate. And there is much to celebrate – this Christmas! Amen.

Song: Joy to the World, the Lord Has Come (MH 246)



15. 'Jesus born in a stable' intercessions:

Jesus, born in a stable
because there was no room in the inn;
We pray for the homeless

Jesus, born away from your hometown;
We pray for those away from their
families this Christmas

Jesus, hunted by Herod;
We pray for those in danger, for those
who live in war zones and those who are
treated unjustly

Jesus, living as a refugee in Egypt;
We pray for all refugees in the world and
for the situations they flee from

Jesus, visited by shepherds
and wise men;
We pray that this Christmas, everyone
who is lovely be visited by someone
bringing comfort

Jesus, preacher and teacher;
We pray for all those who search for a
meaning in life, may you provide them
with people to guide them

Jesus, healer and deliverer;
We pray for healing for all those who are
ill this Christmas

Jesus, born as one of us;
We pray today that peace, hope and love
of you be known and felt around the
world.

Jesus, we pray to you knowing that you
hear us,
that you intercede for us
and that you answer our prayers.

Amen

Christmas Eve

16. Call to Worship

This tonight,
is the meeting place of heaven and earth.

**For this tonight, is the stable
in which God keeps his appointment
to meet his people.**

In an out-of-the-way place
which folk never thought to visit –

**there God kept and keeps
his promise;
there God sends his son.**

This church tonight,
is the meeting place of heaven and earth.

**God keeps his appointment
to meet us.
Amen.**

17. Opening Prayer

Gracious God,
we thank you that Christmas each year
is an opportunity for retelling the story,
for giving and receiving,
for worship and song
and for renewal and rededication.

May the worship we share today
lead us to acts of service which
transform people's lives.
May the carols we sing
help others to sing, even in their sadness.
May the gifts we give and get
deepen our spirit of giving.
May the candles we light
remind us that you intend
no one to live in darkness.
May the people we meet
remind us that we meet you
in our neighbours.
May the stories we tell
be good news of great joy to us
and all people.

May the ways you come close to us
at Christmas never be forgotten
but, hidden in our memories,
be a rich resource
to lift us when times are painful
and things don't go well,
because you are our light
this season and always. Amen.



18. Christmas Eve candle-lighting

Opening Prayer with the lighting of five Advent candles

Immanuel, God-with-us,
interrupt and open our eyes
to the wonder of this night,
that we might catch a glimpse
of your glory
in the simplicity of these moments.
May your light shine!

(First candle is lit.)



Immanuel, God-with-us,
interrupt and soften our hearts
to the message of this hour,
that we might turn toward you,
and have the way prepared in us
for your coming.
May your light shine!

(Second candle is lit.)



Immanuel, God-with-us,
interrupt and open our minds
to truly listen to all
who speak and sing this evening,
that we might hear your voice
cry out from many lips.
May your light shine!

(Third candle is lit.)



Immanuel, God-with-us,
interrupt and fill our spirits
with the courage to admit
when we are lost
and the insight to recognize
that we have been found.
May your light shine!

(Fourth candle is lit.)



Immanuel, God-with-us,
with eyes open, hearts softened,
minds listening, and spirits full,
we rejoice that you interrupt
what we have in mind
in order to bring into being
something more than we dare imagine.
May your light shine! Amen.

(Fifth candle is lit.)



Luke 2: 1-20

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. ² (This was the first census that took place while^[a] Quirinius was governor of Syria.) ³ And everyone went to their own town to register.

⁴ So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. ⁵ He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, ⁷ and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

⁸ And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. ⁹ An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

¹³ Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

¹⁶ So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

19. Manger, mess and muddle

Sermon on Luke 2: 1-20

The most famous version of the Christmas story comes from the evangelist Luke. Matthew has a very different one, Mark and John have none.

But Luke has it almost all: the census, the birth in the stable, the shepherds and the angels, - we only have to borrow the kings from Matthew.

Luke makes it clear: the Christmas story is no fairy tale. The birth of Jesus and the census that caused Mary and Joseph to make their way to Bethlehem, are rooted in historical reality. At Christmas we celebrate the birth not of an idea, but of a real child, who is Christ the Lord.

But back to the story: tax demands are never welcome, especially not when they involve a personal appearance with a tax inspector. Joseph, because he was an “offspring of the house of David” had to show up personally in the village of his ancestors: Bethlehem. He took Mary with him. The baby Mary was expecting was due any time.

In modern terms the journey between Nazareth and Bethlehem is not long. It was a distance of only 85 miles. But it was a journey that in those days had to be done on foot, or maybe on a donkey. It was a journey full of hazards: street robbers, dusty and dirty roads and steep mountains... all challenges to everybody – and how much more to Mary in the final stages of her pregnancy.

In Bethlehem Mary gave birth to her firstborn son, and like any other Palestinian mother, she wrapped him in bands of cloth. Then she placed him in a manger. And that manger is a sign of the mess and the muddle into which God came.

We live in a world where status symbols are important. The designer dress, the turbocharged sports car, the Rolex watch, the Lagerfeld handbag: all signs of wealth and success.

How far removed all this is from the world of Jesus...

The only “sign” that the angel gave to the shepherds in our story was that ***“you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger”***.

This was the sign that a saviour, the Messiah, the Lord had come. What an amazing and paradoxical sign! Hardly fitting for one bearing such honoured titles!

In the first place, this sentence said by the angels was expressing a sign of recognition. Needless to say it was not the bands of cloth but the manger that was the key to recognition... There was nothing unusual about babies in cloths. Such cloths were standard in homes rich and poor. Not to wrap a baby up in such a way would have been not to care for the child.

No, it was the fact that the baby was lying in a feeding trough that was significant. No fancy “Moses basket” for this child. Instead, a first century equivalent of an orange box. This was the sign by which the shepherds knew that they had arrived at the right place.

And I wonder by which signs we would know that we are in the right place – in the place where God is being born? Where are the mangers today? Maybe not in this church, but somewhere on our way here, somewhere in our lives, among our friends, or at least somewhere in our thinking, as a burden or a fear, as a memory or an issue of interest or commitment...

A look in the newspaper may help. A look around the city may help. An hour spent in the foreign office department for asylum seekers, a glance into hospital wards and old people’s homes may help. A visit to those who live on

unemployment benefit, or who have to work more than one job to feed the family may help. An afternoon spent in the asylum seekers' place in Baierbrunnerstrasse may reveal more manglers to us than we'd otherwise come across in our well-settled and comfortable lives.

The manger in the Christmas story of Luke was not only a sign of recognition. It was also a sign of the lifestyle Jesus would adopt later in his life. Do you remember how at some point – also in the gospel of Luke – he said: ***“Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.”***

Following Jesus meant letting go of material comforts. Following Jesus means living with manglers... which probably comes as quite a shock in today's status-orientated consumer society.

Most important in all this reflection is that the manger is a sign of God's presence... of the depths to which God went in order to come among us: the “Lord in a manger” is almost beyond comprehension, beyond normal human thinking and expectation. But it is exactly what Luke's Christmas story wants to teach us today... ..and did teach people then.



Not all of the people of the Christmas stories we know were at the manger right from the beginning. In fact only Mary and Joseph.

All the others came only later, after having been told and after having travelled far and searched long. And: there is no mention of animals in the biblical account of Jesus' birth. Just check with the texts in your bulletin. To start with – in the stable – there were only Mary, Joseph and the baby.

And then shepherds are mentioned, shepherds near by. Living in the fields and keeping watch over the sheep.

Here we may well imagine ordinary shepherds and ordinary sheep, people at the bottom end of society, and far from being very godly. In first century Palestine shepherds had a reputation for being downright irreligious. They were so far out of the normal society that they were called “people of dirt”. And no halfway sensible and respectable Jewish parents would have wanted their daughter to marry a shepherd. Shepherds just couldn't be trusted.

And yet, it was to shepherds that God sent the angels' choir. It was to shepherds that God made known that a saviour was born. It was the shepherds and not the wise men, who were the first to receive the news!

What does this say to us? Surely this: Jesus is good news for everybody!

Listen again to the words of the angel: ***“I am bringing you good news of great joy for all people: to you is born this day... a saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”***



...spoken to the underdogs and the outcast. To all – not only to church members, middle and upper class people with beautiful clothes, posh cars and heavy bank accounts. Spoken to the world...

It obviously doesn't matter who we are or what we have done. God speaks to us, comes to us, accepts us just as we are. We don't have to reach a certain standard of holiness before God loves us. He loves us as we are. We don't have to prove ourselves. We don't have to become somebody else or something better.

The good news is that there is nobody outside the reach of God's love! And to prove this, God sent the message of his son's birth to a bunch of freewheeling shepherds spending the night in the fields, taking care of their sheep.

Nobody had ever brought them good news before. And suddenly they discovered that they were on God's guest list. To them a saviour was born! No wonder, after visiting Mary and Joseph and their baby, the shepherds returned glorifying and praising God. There was much to celebrate! Glory to God in the highest...

So, what do these shepherds teach us tonight? The shepherds had their failings. Their lives were far from

perfect. They were doubtless rough-and-ready people. And yet their response to the choir of the angels is adorable.

First of all, they followed up what they'd heard. They could have remained in the fields, wondering about what they had just experienced. There was surely much to talk about. But instead they said to each other ***"Let us now go to Bethlehem and see..."***

Were they at this point already "believers"? When they set off for Bethlehem, were they already on a journey of faith? If so, then they set us an example of putting faith into action.

However, it is more likely that they were still on a journey toward faith; they had yet to be convinced of the truth of what they had heard. Nevertheless – they were willing to ***"go and see"*** for themselves what this baby was all about. In doing so, they set an example of honest search and enquiry!

Secondly, the shepherds did not delay their journey. They could have debated at length whether they should go; they could have spent time arguing about the significance of what they had just seen and heard. As it was, ***"they went with haste"*** to find the baby Jesus. In so doing they set an example to us again.

It is so easy to waste one's life away, forever talking about religion, but never actually taking the road to Bethlehem, never looking for Jesus himself, never getting round to finding out the truth about him.

Thirdly, the shepherds found ***"Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger."*** They'd found the child. Maybe this itself wasn't a big thing.

Bethlehem may have been crowded because of the census, but it was still a small place. Nonetheless the shepherds surely had to do some searching before they found the baby.

And I feel reminded of the words of God spoken through Jeremiah: ***“When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says the LORD...”***

The finding does depend on the searching! The shepherds found because they put their minds to the search.

And last but not least: the shepherds told others. They told others what they’d experienced – with the angels, with the

baby... and as a result “all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds had told them.”

In this respect, too, they set an example to us. They couldn’t keep quiet about their experience, and in particular they couldn’t keep quiet about Jesus.

What would we have done, I wonder, had we been in their place? Would we, as the shepherds did – return from our experience with God back to our everyday lives “glorifying and praising God”? I hope and pray we would!

The chance to do so - is now.

Merry Christmas!



20. Pastoral Prayer – Holding God

God of every nation and people,
from the beginning
you have made known your love
through the gift of your son.
You are with us.
In the fullness of time the Christ-child
came to be news of peace and joy
to all human kind.

Emmanuel, God with us,
you came to us as a vulnerable,
weak and dependant baby;
a God who hungered and thirsted,
a God who longed
for human touch and care;
a God who chose to be born
in darkness and poverty
to an insignificant young woman
with a dirty stable as a home
and a borrowed manger as a bed,
in a little town called Bethlehem.

God, you were born at a time and place
where few welcomed you
or even recognized you.
We want to welcome you tonight.
We want to see you, hold you,
love you and hug you,
when we see, hold and love those often
not seen in our world.

We want to be there for the
downtrodden, the oppressed,
the outcasts and the weak,
the defenceless and marginalized.
We pray that the gifts you bring –
joy, peace, justice, mercy, love –
will reach them.

Emmanuel, God with us,
you are the hope of all peoples,
the wisdom that teaches and guides us,
that encourages and consoles us,
that calms troubled minds
and restless souls.
With your light shine on those
who live in the shadows,
take away their fears and anxieties,
restore their hearts, enlighten their minds
and take away all bitterness.

Shine on those who live alone,
who are sick, and far away
from their loved ones.
Shine on those who suffer from war
and violence –
even tonight, even at Christmas.
Shine on all of us, God,
as we open ourselves to you,
desiring to walk your way of truth,
justice and peace.
Amen.

21. Blessing

The peace and joy of Christmas
fill your hearts and homes,
and change the world.
And the blessing of God be among you,
and remain with you
when things go well,

and when times are painful.
May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
and the love of God,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit
be with us all evermore.
Amen.

Christmas Day

22. Call to Worship

Christ is born!

Christ is born!

Because of this birth,
life is full of promise for you and for me.
Life is full of promise for our
community.

**We celebrate today the presence
of God's promise in our midst.**

The promise of a small child coming
into a crowded, hurting world,
and growing to be a liberator.

**It is the promise of you and me,
struggling and stumbling together,
growing and celebrating,
reaching out to make a difference
in our world.
Amen.**



23. Opening Prayer

This Christmas, Lord,
take a corner of my life
and steal in...

**invade the business of my doing
with the smallness of your coming.**

This Christmas, Lord,
take a corner of my mind
and steal in...

**illuminate the darkness of my
thinking
with the brightness of your seeing.**

This Christmas, Lord,
take a corner of my heart
and steal in...

**infuse the coldness of my loving
with the warmth of your being.**

This Christmas, Lord,
as at Bethlehem's stable,
come and steal in...

**take the unprepared places of my life
and make them fit for your dwelling.
Amen.**

24. Merry Christmas!

Christmas Day Sermon

Light in the darkness
and great joy
an end of burdens
and oppression
disarmament
and peace
justice
and righteousness

Sisters and brothers, we sing of it – every Christmas... We read it, we hear of it, we know the texts almost by heart... We are so used to it – stuff of our hopes and dreams... But what if it all comes true?

Imagine picking up the newspaper and reading this headline: “24 Hours without Bombing in Syria” ...after months and years of fierce fighting and killing. And we learn that this truce, this break from war, was not ordered from on high, but initiated by the fighting troops themselves, who actually put down their weapons and approached each other with gestures of peace. They put their mistrust aside and shared coffee, chocolates, and cigarettes. They looked at each other’s family photos... They played football... right there on the desert sand.

You wouldn’t believe what you’d be reading...

Nor could people believe it a bit over a century ago when such an event did happen in the midst of the bloodiest war ever at that time of human history: World War I.

It was in 1914 in German-occupied France. The invading army and the Allies were literally dug in trenches, sometimes just 20 feet apart. To raise your head above the sandbags was to risk having it blown off. The opposing soldiers could hear one another, and if they dared to, even look into each other’s eyes.

Separating the trenches was a small patch of earth called No Man’s Land... littered with shells, shrapnel, and the frozen bodies of the killed.

Such is the landscape in which “Merry Christmas” takes place. Nominated for an Oscar for the best Foreign Film, it is the true story of that Christmas cease-fire, when men on both sides really laid down weapons and “became friends”.

It seems like the stuff of an urban legend, but it is true. When watching the film it begins with three classrooms. Scottish, French and German schoolboys recite poems full of hate. They tell their classmates in rhyme form how the enemy must be wiped off the face of the earth so their own nation could prosper.

Moving ahead ten years, we see young men hurrying off to war; some as enthusiastic as going to a football match.

One of these men is the German Nikolaus Sprink, an opera singer whose solo at the Berlin opera is interrupted by a German army officer who has come up on stage to announce that war has begun. Sprink was drafted and had to

leave his singing partner and lover, the Danish Anna Sörenson.

With a permission of the Crown Prince, Emperor Wilhelm II's son, Anna joins Nikolaus at the front on Christmas Eve. The top militaries had decided that a Christmas concert would cheer up the soldiers, and ordered Anna and Nikolaus to sing.

Kaiser Wilhelm, the emperor, had also decided that it would be good to lift up the soldiers' spirits to send Christmas trees into the trenches.

Believe it or not, a forest of pine trees with matching decorations is sent out to the troops.

This is not a romantic film detail. It is recorded in hundreds of letters which the soldiers sent home from the front.

On that fateful Christmas night it is the Scottish bagpipers who take a first step. They begin to play a highly emotional Scottish folk song: "I am dreaming of home..." The Scottish soldiers hum along... some sing with the rusty voices of this awful war.



Remember, the troops are only 20 to 30 feet apart from each other...

So, when the Scottish finish their song, the German soldiers in their ditches spontaneously applaud.

Nikolaus Sprink takes a Christmas tree in full decoration and climbs up the rampart and sings – with his most beautiful opera voice – “Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht”...

The Scottish listen to the magic of the music... still their guns at the ready... and... the Scottish bagpipers join in playing “Silent Night”...

Now the Scottish applaud...

Then one of their bagpipers begins to play the first line of “O Come All Ye Faithful”... he stops for a bit... Sprink takes a moment... ..and sings ...accompanied by the Scottish bagpipers. (This cost me a tear or two when watching the film)

Still singing, Sprink takes the Christmas tree and walks over into No Man's Land, places the tree there and greets the Scottish soldiers, while the camera goes over to a French soldier quietly mouthing the words of the song in his ditch, tears streaming down his cheeks.

The German commander now comes to call Sprink back, but before he can do so the Scottish officer joins them at the Christmas tree. The French commander becomes aware of what he calls “a mess going on out there” and goes into the No Man's Land too.

It is the Scottish officer who suggests one night of peace. The German

commander agrees to it saying “No worries, it is just for one night.” And the French officer calls a soldier to bring the three a bottle of champagne which they share in battered tin cups. In each other’s languages they wish one another Frohe Weihnachten, Merry Christmas & Joyeux Noel.

Then... ..slowly ...the soldiers of the three armies leave their trenches ...and walk towards each other in the No Man’s Land.

They share what they have: coffee, tea, chocolates, champagne...

And then ...Anna appears. The soldiers look at the woman ...and begin to show each other photos of wives and children. They share each other’s stories and discover how much alike they all are. The French officer’s home quarter in Paris happens to be the beloved holiday place of the German commander, and so on... The soldiers make attempts speaking each other’s languages...

From a far away village church they can hear the bells ring... The Scottish army chaplain climbs a small hill and reads a mass. When he finishes his sermon, there is a moment of utter silence...

He looks at Anna ...nods ...and she stands up and sings the Ave Maria of her life.

The soldiers have a peace on their faces, as they may not have had since the war had begun. The threefold Amen ends, and there is the most awesome silence over the battlefield.

The Scottish minister speaks the peace, the officers wish each other Goodbye, and all return onto their sides.

By the end of the night the Christmas trees are taken down. The Scottish army chaplain and the officer agree on a minimum of report put into the army records of that night.

The next morning the soldiers are ordered to start the shooting again, but can’t.

Having seen their dead lying frozen in the No Man’s Land, the officers feel the urge to meet again. Over a cup of coffee they organise the burying of their dead in dignity and one more moment of peace. The bagpipers play while the alive bury the dead in the deep winter of 1914 there in the North of France.

A day later all three armies play football and cards in the No Man’s Land. And when they should fight with each other again, they realize that they can’t. Celebrating Christmas with each other had made enemies friends. And once they had shared food and drink and had sung with each other, they could not make war anymore.

The bagpipers play a last time. The film ends. The war goes on. A moment of humanity made history.

The soldiers and commanders get no praise for what they’ve done. Their divisions are dissolved, the officers and soldiers sent to other fronts.

World War I lasted four more years. It could have ended after Christmas 1914, had the lesson of this Christmas been learned by the leaders of the nations as well.

The Christmas message of a true event, of a beautiful film, and of this evening is:

Christmas Eve on a World War I battlefield changed the lives of these men forever. Without an enemy, they learned, there can be no war.

No Man's Land had become God's land.

Whatever land we live in today... let it be God's land. Not just for one night but forever.

Let the power of the magic of Christmas live in your hearts and minds tonight and every night.
Amen.

Let us now sing as the soldiers sang, and as all of Christianity sings today:

“O Come All Ye Faithful” (MH 234)

25. Christmas Prayer: God of Peace

God of Peace,
Thank you for your Christmas gift of peace, for the birth and life of the non-violent Jesus, and all the blessings of peace, hope and love he offers us all.

Year after year, we seem to reject those blessings and offerings of peace, but you keep giving them to us. Everywhere we look, we see violence, war, greed, guns, killings, injustice, nuclear weapons and catastrophic climate change. Even within us, we cling to violence and the old patterns of war. It seems we are unable to accept your life-giving invitations to peace.

Yet you keep coming into our lives and offering the gift of peace. You still invite us to the vision of peace on earth. You still point out the possibilities of disarmament in our hearts, our communities and among nations. You still call us to become, like Jesus, people of loving non-violence.

Thank you for being a peaceful, non-violent God. Thank you for blessing peacemakers, justice-seekers, the poor, the mournful, the meek, the pure of heart and the children. Thank you for all the ways you work to end war, hunger, poverty and injustice. Thank you for

making the sun rise on the good and the bad, and the rain to fall on the just and the unjust.

Thank you for showing us the way forward through the life, death and resurrection of the Jesus. As we celebrate his birth and life, give us new strength and energy to carry on his work of peace and non-violence, that we might become his faithful disciples, companions and friends, that we might grow up and act like your beloved sons and daughters.

Inspire us to lay down our weapons, put away our guns, dismantle our bombs, abolish our nuclear weapons, feed the hungry, care for the poor and sick, liberate the oppressed and welcome your good news. Help us to learn your wisdom of peace before it's too late. Break our hard hearts and give us compassion to one another. Move our spirits to change the world so more and more people might live with justice, peace and dignity.

This Christmas, we thank you for the hope you offer in Jesus. Through his example and inspiration, help us to welcome your Christmas gift of peace as we pray: Our father...
Amen.

26. Christmas Text: Love and Danger

Christmas Day:
angels and stars,
shepherds and travellers,
a new born child.

An old story
full of love and danger,
laying bare the beauty
of an amazing God.



27. Christmas Responses



A child is born
A child to save us
We share the news with great joy

A child is born
A child to challenge us
We share the news with great joy

A child is born
A child for the world
We share the news with great joy.

28. Blessing

Rejoice!
Rejoice in Bethlehem,
two thousand years ago.
Rejoice in the life
that was conceived,
lived and given for us.

Go in peace
to love and serve the world.
And may your waiting be in hope,
each day be lived in faith
and the love in Christmas be moving
toward you.
Amen.



After Christmas Day

29. Jesus, Refugees, and a Retelling of the Christmas Narrative

When you ask people to retell the Christmas story, no matter which people you do this with, you usually get the more commonly known elements: the inn and its lack of room, angels, shepherds, wise men and a brilliant star.

Most people understandably neglect the unhappy and problematic parts of the Christmas story. But it is full of challenges. Having to be on the road pregnant with a child to be born any day is not a walk in a rose garden. Being homeless in the cold of the night is not nice and easy either. Being visited by the outcasts of that time, the shepherds, wasn't much fun either. So, even the so-called easy parts of the Christmas story, are challenges to people then and now.

Of course, there are the kings, and their visit with baby Jesus, but even their story is politically challenging and asks for some discernment in responding to or ignoring a despot king. It is this king who initiated the murder of the children in Bethlehem, - a genocide we would call it today – it is the despotism and dictatorship in the story that we do not really talk about at Christmas.



We seem to have a collective desire to minimize atrocity. We make an unsound division between the Bible stories and the ones we read in the newspapers, because otherwise we would see the closeness of the infanticide in Bethlehem and the more than 1 million Syrian child refugees fleeing from war and killing in their home country.

It is perhaps easier and safer to avoid drawing a direct connection between one of the most celebrated biblical narratives to today's realities, but I think we ought to do it...

Another of those challenging and highly political Christmas stories is that of Jesus and his family's journey to Egypt.

Matthew 2:13-15:

When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him." So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son."

From an exegetical and historical point of view this may never have happened the way we just read it. But that is not the question. The important thing to ask here is why did Matthew have an interest in describing Jesus and his parents as refugees? People on the run? People

without a home? People exposed to the mercy of strangers in a strange land? And why let them live through such danger and hardship? What was Matthew trying to say to the world?

Let's take the story as we find it in our Bible and discover how it gives us food for thought, especially for our thoughts this Christmas. Let us try to ask the right questions and draw some unusual conclusions. Let us be willing to be both: surprised and challenged by what we find... And let us not be scared of the many unclear points in our story.

Let us begin with a first question... How long did the "holy family" stay in Egypt? The Bible is unclear but it is safe to say that Matthew wants us to assume that the first few years of Jesus' life were spent in Africa.

Where did they go when they arrived in Egypt? The text is unclear but there was a sizable Jewish immigrant population in Alexandria so perhaps they relocated to northern Egypt.

How did Joseph and Mary feed Jesus and recreate their home in a new country? Again, the text is unclear but two assumptions are probable. First, there were surely individuals who helped them along the way and so entertained unaware the Son of God. Second, it is possible that Joseph and Mary used the gifts from the wise men to help them in this difficult process.

What is clear is that the holy family had to flee for their lives from a deranged governmental system and they found safety and security in the arms of Africa.

It is not possible to know the kinds of interactions, if any, Jesus had with

people around him while an infant in Egypt. But it is reasonable to assume that Alexandria was filled with business interactions and cultural exchanges between the immigrant Jewish population, local Egyptians, people from the broader Roman world and Sub-Saharan Africans navigating the Nile, the life blood of the region.

Certainly this impacted the development of Joseph and Mary who may have later recounted to Jesus how they were saved and lived at that time. We cannot know the influence of Africa on Joseph, Mary and Jesus but it is reasonable to assume that we are meant to imagine how Jesus and his family were significantly shaped by the Egypt experience.

Moreover, part of the reason why this text is compelling is because it so clearly states that Jesus was at one point a refugee. At Christmas we celebrate many titles for Jesus – Messiah, Immanuel, Christ, Prince of Peace, Son of God – and these are all powerful and true names. But Jesus is also the refugee, the one forced to flee his home, the politically betrayed and abandoned one, scared and fleeing in the night, nervous at the border, wondering how life will go on. Jesus, Joseph and Mary were all refugees.

We do not often celebrate Jesus the refugee. What would it mean this Christmas for churches to affirm that Jesus was a refugee protected by Africa?

Reflecting on this passage the Africa Bible Commentary notes:

The fact that Jesus was a refugee on African soil should teach us many lessons. God was not ashamed to let his son become a refugee. By sharing the plight of stateless refugees, Jesus

honoured all those who suffer homelessness on account of war, famine, persecution or some other disaster. There are millions of refugees on the African continent and many of them have a terrible life... The sad thing is that far too many Christians are either unconcerned or believe the lie that every refugee is a troublemaker. Yet the Bible is full of men and women who knew what it meant to be a refugee.

Jesus as refugee is good news to many this Christmas season. We can turn to those experiencing true difficulty and say, "God has not abandoned you." Jesus is one who understands as one without home, without wealth, at one point even without a country. The Gospel is good news to the broken and the suffering in this world.

Jesus as refugee is also a challenge to Christians this Christmas season. If Jesus was a refugee today would the church welcome him or miss him altogether? If Jesus was a refugee, might we find the Spirit of God still at work in refugees today? If Jesus was a refugee, might we also have a responsibility to help others who find themselves in such a situation?

If the church is unwilling to help refugees then who will? If the church is unwilling to step into this difficult kind of situation and offer the love of Jesus then where is the hope of the Christmas season? We must be willing to step into the most difficult, most broken, most challenging spaces because the light of Jesus shines brightest in the darkest of contexts. We must be aware of this biblical mandate...

According to recent statistics from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees there are approximately 60

million refugees worldwide today. Jesus was a refugee. **41% of the refugees are children. Jesus was a refugee child.**

Each Christmas we worship, though we may not always state it clearly, the refugee Jesus. This season let us also pray, minister and befriend those with whom Jesus specifically identified: refugees.

Activity

Stand up and place pieces of luggage in the aisle towards the altar and the Christmas tree.



God looks different from the dusty roads of Galilee than from the safety of the temple in Jerusalem. Today God looks different from the roadsides and ditches of the Balkan countries than from the offices and headquarters of the rich and the powerful.

God's people have always been on the road. People are always on the road. Some travel for pleasure, others travel for work or education, and many travel to find a new job and a better life. And even those who don't physically travel far are somehow always on the move in our modern world...

Life is a journey on many different roads. Sometimes it is a joy, always an adventure, often a burden, lives on the road can be at risk, many don't survive...

The pieces of luggage here in the church stand for people's journeys – journeys with much or little luggage, journeys with a bundle only, or those with two suitcases and a brief case...

We would like to offer all of us a moment of remembering life journeys – the fun ones and the dangerous ones, and while we do that in silence some of you are invited to take one of these small

candles on the altar, light it there, and place it near one of the various pieces of luggage. Let us set a sign this Christmas, a prayerful sign that our thoughts and prayers are with the people on the move... - on the run... - on the journey, because it is God himself who is in there with all of them...

Activity

Light a candle at each piece of luggage

30. Christmas prayers of praise and confession

We praise you, O loving God,
who gave your very self in human form,
your majesty born into our poverty,
your love lying in an out-house.
We thank you that, amidst Bethlehem's
noisy rush, we find in you
a focus for our activity,
a hope for your humanity,
a love for all eternity.

But we confess that
Christ's birth has gone unnoticed.
Now, as then, we have not made room
in our day to day lives.
Now, as then, we have mislaid
your message of reconciling love.
Now, as then, we have ignored
the stillness of your presence.

Gift-giving God, forgive us.
Free us from our self-centeredness.
Help us to accept your love
so freely given
that we may live
as you have called us to live.
Amen.



31. The work of Christmas begins...

When the song of the angels is stilled
when the star in the sky is gone
when the kings and princes are home
when the shepherds are back
with their flocks
the work of Christmas begins:

to find the lost
to heal the broken
to feed the hungry
to release the prisoner
to rebuild the nations
to bring peace among the people
to make music in the heart.

