

twelvebaskets



CHRISTMAS 2A

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

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Christmas 2 - Year A
1st January 2023



Order of Service

Call to worship

Hymn:

83 STF – Praise my soul, the King of heaven OR

28 STF – Jesus calls us here to meet him

Opening Prayers

The Lord's Prayer

All Age Talk

Hymn:

66 STF – The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases OR

431 STF – O, the love of my Lord is the essence of all that I love

Readings: Isaiah 63:7-9; Psalm 148; Hebrews 2:10-18; Matthew 2:13-23

Hymn:

238 STF – Lead us, heavenly Father, lead us OR

519 STF – Father, I place into your hands

Reflections on the readings

Hymn:

178 STF – Long ago, prophets knew Christ would come OR

218 STF – Unto us a boy is born!

Intercessions

Offering / collection

Blessing the offering

Hymn:

663 STF – I, the Lord of sea and sky OR

503 STF – Love divine all loves excelling

Blessing

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Call to worship

A few words from Psalm 148:

Praise the Lord from the heavens; praise him in the heights above.
Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his heavenly hosts.

Amen.

Hymn:

83 STF – Praise my soul, the King of heaven OR

28 STF – Jesus calls us here to meet him

Opening Prayers

Let us pray.

Resolution time.

Expectations for the year,

Optimism: Full.

Optimism vs.

War, Natural Disasters,

Greed, Hate, Poverty.

Against this darkness

What hope do we have to help

Build your kingdom here, Christ?

My hope is in you.

You share our sorrows, worries,

weep with and love all.

Born in a manger.

Taught peace, love, understanding.

Crucified on that cross.

Kyrie eleison.

What can I change,

I am only one person, yes?

Today, as I pray, help me to

Begin with loving friends.

Love one another.

Love as a community.

Support each other.

Build your Kingdom here Lord.

Help us to love as you would

Each and every day.

Amen.¹

¹ Opening prayers written by Tim Annan-Hood

We say together the Lord's Prayer

All Age Talk

Happy new year!

2023 is here. One of the things that we do when we go into a New Year is make New Year's resolutions. Who here has made a New Year resolution?

(Ask those in the congregation to give feedback to you)

(Maybe you can share your resolution if you have made one)

Making a new year's resolution is an ancient tradition stretching all the way back some 4000 years ago! For early Christians, the first day of the new year became the traditional occasion for thinking about one's past mistakes and resolving to do and be better in the future. In 1740, the English clergyman John Wesley, founder of Methodism, created the Covenant Renewal Service, most commonly held on New Year's Eve or New Year's Day, and now we usually find a way to ensure a Covenant Service happens in every Methodist church during the first few weeks of the year. You might like to think of your new year's resolutions as part of the process of Covenant – committing to following God and learning more of the ways of the divine.

So today, maybe we might alongside our own new year's resolutions make a commitment or a recommitment.

Will you say with me: *(you might want to get these words printed or show them on a screen, otherwise ask people to repeat each line back to you as you pray this commitment together)*

God, I love you

I want to do what you say

Please help me to be active for you and do good works

May my life be full of your love

Help me be grateful for what I have

And help those who have not

Use what I have to share your love in the world

From now on I choose to do all I can for you.

Amen.²

Hymn:

66 STF – The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases OR

431 STF – O, the love of my Lord is the essence of all that I love

Readings: Isaiah 63:7-9; Psalm 148; Hebrews 2:10-18; Matthew 2:13-23

² All Age Talk written by Matt Forsyth

Hymn:

238 STF – Lead us, heavenly Father, lead us OR

519 STF – Father, I place into your hands

Reflections on the readings

Happy New Year! You've probably heard those words many times already today and might continue to hear them for the next few weeks as you meet people for the first time in 2023. A new year sometimes feels a bit like a 'reset' button – we are glad to press it and receive the sense that we can start again – this year is going to be different; we'll lose weight, tidy the house, take more exercise, be kinder to people... If those thoughts, or others like them, are in your head, perhaps being kinder to ourselves is the best place to start!

Sometimes, even on New Year's Day there doesn't seem to be much to be happy about, and the words have a hollow ring to them – although we might still say them and still smile when others say them to us. Indeed it is a tribute to the human spirit that even when things are hard, we often make the effort on special days to find ways to celebrate and allow joy to have the upper hand. But if we are realistic, or if we listen to the news, we know that in many places there is not a lot of happiness around at the start of this new year of 2023.

- In Ukraine or Sudan,
- In homes where the cost of eating and heating is unaffordable,
- In hospitals and hospices around the world
- and in so many other situations, pain and suffering are larger realities than happiness.

Life is always a mixture of laughter and lament – and today our bible readings can speak into this. We don't need to pretend everything is okay – but at the same time there are things we can do to consolidate our faith and hope and perhaps our joy too as we step out into another year.

The Gospel passage for today may not be the sort of story we want to hear amidst parties and holidays. It's a fascinating but harrowing account, told only by Matthew in his gospel, of how God watched over the early years of the life of Jesus – and of how wrong humanity sometimes gets it, as shown by the jealous reaction of King Herod.

We're still in the season of Christmas now, when we recall the amazing love and humility shown by Jesus in coming amongst us as an infant, born in Bethlehem. We know well of the visitors to him there, including these strange characters from the East, referred to by Matthew as 'magi' – magicians? Astrologers? Certainly not Jews, but rather underlining the message that Jesus came for everyone. We remember how they made the unfortunate mistake of calling at the palace in Jerusalem and asking the current King if he knew anything about the birth of a new King... not their wisest move! Now they have slipped back off home without reporting to Herod, but an insecure and self-important king will have his spies everywhere and Herod learns where Jesus is living. God steps in, sending an angel to warn Joseph to flee and so he escapes the horrendous bloodshed which Herod lets loose, murdering all children in Bethlehem under the age of two; the prophet's words of wailing and loud lamentation are indeed horribly appropriate.

For so many families, this was the end of a part of their story, and we lament and wail with them – as we do when we hear of violence against children continuing today; as we do when we consider the statistics about baby loss here in the UK and recognise the many tidal waves of grief which are always lapping at our shores. Herod himself dies next and so God once again alerts Joseph to the possibility of return to Israel – although there is still a threat around, so Joseph heads to the north, to Nazareth in Galilee.

[This section could be omitted, depending on the setting: Matthew's little comment that this fulfils another prophecy, 'He will be called a Nazorean' has caused a few headaches to scholars over the years as it isn't easy to trace such a prophecy in the Hebrew Scriptures. A suggestion that the word translated as Nazarite or Nazorean should really be a similar Hebrew word (netzer), meaning 'shoot' or 'branch' might be helpful – Isaiah prophecies in chapter 11 of a shoot which will come from the stump of Jesse, David's family.]

There are so many emotions in this story – jealousy, fear, compassion, grief, desperation, paranoia. The apparent 'happy ending' comes with much pain and loss behind it, as happy endings often do. There are not many points in the story where we might want to say 'Happy New Year' to anyone at all.

Perhaps we haven't been caught up in a massacre ourselves – although tragically they still happen all too frequently – but almost all of us have known heartache and loss... and yet there is something within us which wants to be able to keep hoping in a 'Happy New Year'. Perhaps our two readings from the Hebrew scriptures explain why – and how. The prophecy of Isaiah covers a long time period which included much turbulence and dislocation in the Jewish nation; these later chapters begin to speak of hope and restoration, but without forgetting the past. God, we read in verses 8 and 9, 'became their Saviour in all their distress'. For that reason, the prophet claims that he will 'recount the gracious deeds of the Lord, the praiseworthy acts of the Lord, because of all that the Lord has done for us.' There is something of the tone of a New Year resolution here – a deliberate decision to focus on the good things God has done in the past, an intentional choice to 'count your blessings'. It is so easy when things are going wrong to forget the goodness of God – here the psalmist refuses to go down that path but makes a decision to remember and be thankful.

As you look back at 2022, although there will have been tears, I hope it wasn't an unmitigated disaster. Where might you join with the prophet in not just calling to mind, but 'recounting', talking about, telling others about, God's goodness? It is a surprisingly powerful antidote to the kind of low feelings which sometimes hit after the excitement of Christmas is over and the series of sugar-rushes tails off... God's love and pity are not to be doubted, God seeks to lift and carry us all in the same way as the people of Israel were carried and held throughout their life of disaster and triumph.

The psalm set for today, psalm 148, is full of invitations to praise God – angels and heavenly bodies are included, as are all the elements of weather, the mountains and plants, animals and birds... Every part of God's creation is encouraged to offer praise, including human beings, old and young and all genders. Why? Because God's glory is 'above earth and heaven' – in other words, there is stuff going on at a level we can't imagine or see, but it is going on. God's goodness is not in doubt, however misty our mirror may be today. Can we join in with that symphony of praise and discover how a decision to find something to praise God for every day might be the very best New Year's resolution we can make?

Some questions for reflection [*and/or discussion in small groups, depending on your context and timings*]:

1. How do you feel about the coming year – for you, your family, the world?
2. Does the way in which God protects Jesus from the massacre disturb you? How do you respond to this part of the story?
3. Is there any value in making a decision to ‘recount the goodness of the Lord’? Can you do that now?
4. Think a little more about what God’s glory means in relation to our life here and now. Is the idea that ‘there is stuff going on at a level we can’t imagine or see’ helpful or not?³

Hymn:

178 STF – Long ago, prophets knew Christ would come OR

218 STF – Unto us a boy is born!

Prayers of intercession

God of new beginnings, thank you for this new year with all its opportunities and challenges. Draw close to us now we ask, as we bring our prayers for the world, knowing that you always listen:

We pray for the leaders of nations, for those whose jealousy and fear blind them to making good choices. We pray for those who seek to control and suppress, who refuse to listen to other voices or to collaborate with new ideas. Give courage to all who need to break out of old systems in this new year.

We pray for all affected by violence, for those whose lives, or the lives of their children, are threatened by war and conflict, remembering especially the people of Ukraine, Russia, Sudan... at this time. We pray for decision-makers and strategists. Give humility to all who need to turn from old grievances in this new year.

We pray for all who have experienced loss in the past year; especially those whose children have died at any stage of their lives and development. We pray they may find support and understanding in their need to lament and to weep. Give strength to all who are scarred by the old year, as they enter each day of this new year.

We pray for all who are ill at this time, pausing to name in our hearts (or aloud) those for whom we particularly pray today... Give healing to all who are in pain in body, mind and spirit as they look with hope to this new year.

We pray for the church, for this congregation and other Christians in this neighbourhood... As we give thanks for all your goodness to us over past years, lead us away from dead ends and guide us by your Spirit into this new year.

We pray for ourselves, bringing before you the times of laughter and the times of lament which we have known in 2022... as you have acted throughout history to save and bless your people, so come to us today and save and bless us that we might receive hope and, in turn, offer life to all around in this new year.

Amen.⁴

³ Reflection written by Jill Baker

⁴ Prayers of intercession written by Jill Baker

We will now take up the offering.

God of all grace, thank you for all you are doing in our lives,
And here in this church.

We thank you for these gifts, which we know are the result of your grace at work in our lives.

Help us to put them to good use, to build your Kingdom of love here on earth.

Amen.⁵

Hymn:

663 STF – I, the Lord of sea and sky OR

503 STF – Love divine all loves excelling

Blessing

We are the people of Christmas, living the incarnation story in our day to day lives,
We are guardians of the story of God come to be amongst us,
As we step out into this week, God of the incarnation,
Show us how to be people who live that story, share that story, make that story real for
each and every one of us,

In Jesus' name,

Amen.⁶

⁵ Additional prayers by Tim Baker

⁶ Additional prayers by Tim Baker