

## Order of Service for December 27, 2020 - Christmas 1

### **GATHERING**

#### **Gathering Song - 288, Good Christian Friends, Rejoice**

Good Christian friends, rejoice with heart and soul and voice;  
give ye heed to what we say: Jesus Christ is born today;  
ox and ass before him bow, and he is in the manger now.  
Christ is born today! Christ is born today!

Good Christian friends, rejoice with heart and soul and voice;  
now ye hear of endless bliss: Jesus Christ was born for this!  
He has opened heaven's door, and we are blest forevermore.  
Christ was born for this! Christ was born for this!

Good Christian friends, rejoice with heart and soul and voice;  
now ye need not fear the grave; Jesus Christ was born to save!  
Calls you one and calls you all to gain the everlasting hall.  
Christ was born to save! Christ was born to save!

*(Hymn lyrics printed under CCLI Licence # 11411292)*

#### **Greeting**

P - The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, be with you all.

C - And also with you.

#### **Litany**

P - In a world of poverty and despair,

C - Christ is come!

P - In a world of injustice and hunger,

C - Christ is come!

P - In a world of racism and exploitation,

C - Christ is come!

P - Even among us, in this time and place,

C - Christ is come! Alleluia!

#### **Prayer of the Day**

P - Let us pray. Almighty God, you wonderfully created the dignity of human nature and yet more wonderfully restored it. In your mercy, let us share the divine life of the one who came to share our humanity, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

C - Amen.

### **WORD**

#### **Christian Scriptures** Galatians 4:4-7

When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

## Sermon

We have told the stories of Christmas. We have lit the candles, we have sung some of the songs, we have *tried* to be in touch with family and friends, we have *tried* to eat the special meal, we have *tried* to celebrate as much as we could in these extraordinary times.

It has not necessarily been easy; it has certainly been different. But we have done what we could.

My prayer for you is that you have discovered the gift of the Christ child in new, and perhaps even more profound ways this year, precisely *because of* these extraordinary times. In spite of how challenging it has been, this Christmas season has been an opportunity to go deeper, to explore what's important about it, to examine *why* it's important, and to gain some different insights into what makes Christmas "tick." And maybe even gain some insights into what makes *us* "tick," as well!

So, instead of re-telling more of the story from Luke's gospel, instead of hearing again how Joseph and Mary took Jesus to the Temple in Jerusalem to dedicate him to God, and instead of hearing of the reception they received from patient old Simeon and crazy old Anna, I think today it might be good for us to pay a little more attention to what makes all of this "tick." Especially in these extraordinary times, we need to wrestle with what Christmas *means*.

And I think that Paul's letter to the church in Galatia can help us do that.

This letter of Paul was written to the church in the province of Galatia *precisely because* they had forgotten what the story of Jesus meant. They had allowed themselves to be distracted into looking at appearances, into putting on a great show of being dedicated, serious, committed Christians. It had become all about *them*, and *their* faithfulness, and *their* obedience. So Paul wrote to them to try to get them unstuck, to set them free from worrying about themselves, to set them free from demanding that other people do things their way.

So he starts by reminding his readers that we are all taking part... in a story.

*When the fullness of time had come,*

We need to remember that Paul was writing in ancient Greek. The words he uses here are important, because they tell us that *this is a story*. There is a scene, and then there is the next scene, and then there is the next scene. There is a progression of scenes, of encounters, of experiences within the story that move the story forward. There's a lot more going on than simply the "now." There was a "before." In fact, there were *lots* of "befores." And there will be a lot of "*afters*," too. This story did not begin with the Galatians, and it will not end with them. The story did not start with *us*, and it will not end with us, either. We, like them, are in the middle of this story.

*When the fullness of time had come God sent his Son, born of a woman,*

In this story that Paul is telling, there is a chapter, an event, an encounter, which we call Christmas: the birth of Jesus, the firstborn son of Mary. The story doesn't *start* there; no even close! But it is *part* of the story.

This is the only time Paul mentions Christmas. In all of the letters he wrote, this is the *one* occasion in which he mentions Jesus being born at all. And it's almost a passing reference! It's like, for Paul, Christmas is there, but it's not all that crucial; it's not all that critical. It's certainly not *central* to what Paul was about. In his telling of the story of God, he had much bigger fish to fry.

What does that say to *us*, for whom Christmas *has* become pretty central, one of the most important days of the calendar? How might this help us, how might this challenge us, as we wrestle with what Christmas *means*, especially in these extraordinary times? Might there be more going on here than we thought?

*When the fullness of time had come God sent his Son, born of a woman, born **under the law**,*

Here's where we start to get into it. Paul says that the birth of Jesus, Christmas, was essentially an invasion. It was the Creator breaking all the rules, and actually coming **to** creation. And not only that, it was the One who is **free**, coming to those who are **not**. It was the One who was not subject to rules and regulations, not subject to "shoulds" and "oughts," coming to be with those whose existence is **defined** by "shoulds" and "oughts." It is the One who is without limits, coming to those whose lives consist of almost nothing **but** limitations and barriers. It is the One who **is** Life, coming to those whose who are surrounded by death.

*God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, **in order to redeem those** who were under the law,*

Christmas is an invasion, undertaken for the sake of those who are **being** invaded! The Creator comes **to** creation for the sake **of** creation. Christmas happens, Christmas takes place to point us to restoration, to healing, to hope. Christmas changes all the rules, and proclaims that our true context is not defined by "shoulds" and "oughts," is not defined by limitations, is not defined by death. Those things **are** real, and absolutely need to be acknowledged! But it is in the **middle** of all of those very real things that Christmas comes, in order to proclaim **in the middle** of those very real things, that the thing that **most** defines us... is love.

*God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, **so that** we might receive adoption as children.*

Christmas means we are no longer strangers. We are no longer outsiders. Jesus came, Jesus comes, to remind us that we are family. All of those things which try to tell us that we are **not** family, that we **are** outsiders, **are still there**. Jesus **was** born in a **stable**, with all of the smells that implies! But Christmas embraces all of those smells, all of those "shoulds," all of those limitations, even death itself, so that everything that makes us, **us**, might be adopted into God's extended family.

*And because you **are** children,*

It doesn't stop with belonging. It doesn't stop with a welcome party. It doesn't stop with a warm fuzzy hug, and a feeling of inclusion. Christmas moves us, takes us somewhere. Somewhere **else**.

*Because you **are** children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son*

God has gifted us with the spirit of Jesus, the spirit of that baby in the manger, the presence of the one who brings about our adoption, the presence of the one who taught and preached and fed and cried and pointed and relinquished life and embraced death and laid in a tomb and rose and promised and commissioned and sent his adopted sisters and brothers out to continue doing the same things.

God has gifted us with the spirit of Jesus, the presence of the one who is working (**still**) for the adoption of the whole creation, every last atom. Because the stable still smells, and the "shoulds" and "oughts" still surround, and the barriers still impede, and death is still used as the ultimate tool of power.

*God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!"*

In the **middle** of smelly stables, in the middle of "shoulds" and "oughts," in the middle of limitations and barriers, racism and fear, hunger and poverty, injustice and the destruction of the planet, even in the presence of death, the spirit of Jesus reminds us who we are, **whose** we are. The spirit of Jesus reminds us, as we struggle, as we stumble, as we fail, as we try again, as we try something else... the spirit of Jesus reminds us that, as we continue doing what Jesus did, we

belong to God: The God who invades, the Creator who breaks all the rules and comes to creation, the God who is free to adopt even us, and who does just that.

*So you are no longer a slave*

Slaves have to be obedient. They have to do what they are told. And if they behave, if they are “good,” maybe they might actually be freed. Someday. Eventually. But don’t count on it.

But that is not our situation. Our standing with God does not depend on our obedience. We are no longer slaves to the “shoulds” and the “oughts,” no longer bound to the limitations and barriers, no longer beholden to the power of death.

*You are no longer a slave but a child,*

We are now in the service of Life. We have been adopted. We have been brought in, and welcomed, and freed; freed to invade our world of “shoulds” and “oughts,” freed to welcome those who have had barriers and limitations imposed on them because of power games and fear and hatred, freed to free others, and to share with them the spirit of Jesus.

*You are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir,*

Our standing in the family of God is complete. We don’t just belong, we are also heirs. We’re not just invited to the occasional dinner; we’re in the will! We are promised the legacy of the baby in the manger.

But Paul concludes this sentence with a reminder: all this is *through God*. **All** of this: the welcome, the adoption, the freedom, the empowering, the sending, the promise; **all** of this is gift, given by the one who was born in that smelly stable, who walks among us here, and who has promised us the ultimate bequest.

My prayer continues to be that we will continue to discover what the gift of the Christ child *means*, so that we will be able to tell the story in deeper and more profound ways, for the sake of the world. Which, even in these extraordinary times, is what it’s always been about.

Merry Christmas.

Amen.

## **RESPONSE TO THE WORD**

### **Hymn of the Day - 272, Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming**

Lo, how a rose e'er blooming from tender stem hath sprung!  
Of Jesse's lineage coming as seers of old have sung,  
it came, a flow'r so bright, amid the cold of winter,  
when half-spent was the night.

Isaiah had foretold it, the rose I have in mind;  
with Mary we behold it, the virgin mother kind.  
To show God's love aright, she bore to us a Saviour,  
when half-spent was the night.

This flow'r, whose fragrance tender with sweetness fills the air,  
dispels with glorious splendour the darkness ev'rywhere.  
True man, yet very God, from sin and death he saves us  
and lightens ev'ry load.

O Saviour, child of Mary, who felt our human woe;  
O Saviour, king of glory, who dost our weakness know:

bring us at length, we pray, to the bright courts of heaven  
and into endless day.

*(Hymn lyrics printed under CCLI Licence # 11411292)*

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### **Prayers of the People**

A - Joining our voices to the song of the angels, we pray for God's creation, the church, and all in any need.

*[Short pause]*

A - Gift of God, babe in the manger, you came in the most ordinary of times, in the most ordinary of circumstances. Open our eyes to your coming in **our** times, in **our** circumstances. God who has come,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - Gift of God, babe in the manger, your birth among us changes our perspective, alters our understanding. Remind us that your presence goes with us as we explore deeper meanings. God who has come,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - Gift of God, babe in the manger, you have embraced all of life. Use our Christmas celebration to call us back when we forget, when we are distracted, when we get focussed on ourselves. God who has come,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - Gift of God, babe in the manger, increase the faith of your church to live the promise of Christmas. May we trust your presence in the ordinary, even in extraordinary times. God who has come,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - Gift of God, babe in the manger, we ask your blessing on all who face challenging times, who confront limitations, who face endings. We especially remember today the congregation of St. Matthews Lutheran Church in Rose Bay as they worship together for the last time. Sustain them, give hope, and give us all a sense of new beginnings. God who has come,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - Gift of God, babe in the manger, your presence promises healing and restoration to creation. Use your people to extend your healing touch to those who face illness, brokenness, isolation and death. We especially remember those whom we name before you.

*[Long silence]*

God who has come,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - Gift of God, babe in the manger, we give thanks for the meaning you bring to our lives. Increase our willingness to share what you give. God who has come,

C - Hear our prayer.

P - We ask all this in the name of the one who came, who comes, and who is to come, Christ Jesus, our Lord, who taught us to pray,

## **Lord's Prayer**

C - Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.

## **SENDING**

### **Benediction**

P - Almighty God,  
who sent the Holy Spirit to Mary,  
proclaimed joy through the angels,  
and sent the shepherds with good news for all,  
bless you this day (†) through the Word made flesh.

C - Amen.

### **Sending Song - 296, What Child Is This**

What child is this, who, laid to rest, on Mary's lap is sleeping?  
Whom angels greet with anthems sweet while shepherds watch are keeping?  
This, this is Christ the king, whom shepherds guard and angels sing;  
haste, haste to bring him laud, the babe, the son of Mary!

Why lies he in such mean estate where ox and ass are feeding?  
Good Christian, fear; for sinners here the silent Word is pleading.  
Nails, spear shall pierce him through, the cross be borne for me, for you;  
hail, hail the Word made flesh, the babe, the son of Mary!

So bring him incense, gold, and myrrh; come, peasant king, to own him.  
The King of kings salvation brings; let loving hearts enthrone him.  
Raise, raise the song on high, the virgin sings her lullaby;  
joy, joy, for Christ is born, the babe, the son of Mary!

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### **Dismissal**

P - Go in peace. Christ is come.

C - Thanks be to God!

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