



Contemporary Readings from the Message Bible.

St. Mark's Church
75 Cold Spring Road
Westford, MA
st-mark.org

Prelude

Call to Worship

Here in worship-

We pray together,

We stand together,

We sing together,

We listen together.

Here in worship-

We are not alone.

So when life gives you reason to grieve, to fear, or to worry,

Remember this moment.

We are not alone.

Let us worship our God.

Processional: Hymn 83 “O Come, All Ye Faithful” v 1-3

Lighting the Advent Wreath

May this be a day of Hope, of expectation, and relishing each moment as gift from God.

As we light the candle of Hope, we pray for those struggling to hold on to hope.

May this be a day of joy, of breaking free from the situations and thoughts that prevent us from experiencing the joy God wants for us.

As we light the candle of joy, we pray for those whose hearts are weighed down by sorrow or fear.

May this be a day of Peace, and healing, knowing our lives are always in the hands of God.

As we light the candle of Peace, we pray for those whose lives are threatened by violence, uncertainty, and injustice.

May this be a day of love and blessings, living as children of a living God.

As we light the candle of Love we pray for those who are lonely or feeling without love.

Holy God, be the light in our darkness that we might reflect your light into the dark corners of our world. AMEN

The First Lesson: Isaiah 11:1-10

A green Shoot will sprout from Jesse's stump,
from his roots a budding Branch.
The life-giving Spirit of God will hover over him,
the Spirit that brings wisdom and understanding,
The Spirit that gives direction and builds strength,
the Spirit that instills knowledge and Fear-of-God.

Fear-of-God

will be all his joy and delight.
He won't judge by appearances,
won't decide on the basis of hearsay.
He'll judge the needy by what is right,
render decisions on earth's poor with justice.
His words will bring everyone to awed attention.
A mere breath from his lips will topple the wicked.
Each morning he'll pull on sturdy work clothes and boots,
and build righteousness and faithfulness in the land.

The wolf will romp with the lamb,
the leopard sleep with the kid.

Calf and lion will eat from the same trough,
and a little child will tend them.

Cow and bear will graze the same pasture,
their calves and cubs grow up together,
and the lion eat straw like the ox.

The nursing child will crawl over rattlesnake dens,
the toddler stick his hand down the hole of a serpent.

Neither animal nor human will hurt or kill
on my holy mountain.

The whole earth will be brimming with knowing God-Alive,
a living knowledge of God ocean-deep, ocean-wide.

On that day, Jesse's Root will be raised high, posted as a rallying banner for the peoples.
The nations will all come to him. His headquarters will be glorious.

The nursing child will crawl over rattlesnake dens,
the toddler stick his hand down the hole of a serpent.

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Hymn 56 “O come, O come, Emmanuel” v 1-4

The Second Lesson: Isaiah 35

Wilderness and desert will sing joyously,
the badlands will celebrate and flower—
Like the crocus in spring, bursting into blossom,
a symphony of song and color.
Mountain glories of Lebanon—a gift.
Awesome Carmel, stunning Sharon—gifts.
God’s resplendent glory, fully on display.
God awesome, God majestic.

Energize the limp hands,
strengthen the rubbery knees.
Tell fearful souls,
“Courage! Take heart!
God is here, right here,
on his way to put things right
And redress all wrongs.
He’s on his way! He’ll save you!”

Blind eyes will be opened,
deaf ears unstopped,
Lame men and women will leap like deer,
the voiceless break into song.
Springs of water will burst out in the wilderness,
streams flow in the desert.
Hot sands will become a cool oasis,
thirsty ground a splashing fountain.
Even lowly jackals will have water to drink,
and barren grasslands flourish richly.
There will be a highway
called the Holy Road.
No one rude or rebellious
is permitted on this road.
It’s for God’s people exclusively—
impossible to get lost on this road.
Not even fools can get lost on it.
No lions on this road,
no dangerous wild animals—
Nothing and no one dangerous or threatening.
Only the redeemed will walk on it.

The people God has ransomed
will come back on this road.
They'll sing as they make their way home to Zion,
unfading halos of joy encircling their heads,
Welcomed home with gifts of joy and gladness
as all sorrows and sighs scurry into the night.

Hymn 392 "Come, we that love the Lord"

The Third Lesson: Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to the Galilean village of Nazareth to a virgin engaged to be married to a man descended from David. His name was Joseph, and the virgin's name, Mary. Upon entering, Gabriel greeted her:

Good morning!
You're beautiful with God's beauty,
Beautiful inside and out!
God be with you

She was thoroughly shaken, wondering what was behind a greeting like that. But the angel assured her, "Mary, you have nothing to fear. God has a surprise for you: You will become pregnant and give birth to a son and call his name Jesus.

He will be great,
be called 'Son of the Highest.'
The Lord God will give him
the throne of his father David;
He will rule Jacob's house forever—
no end, ever, to his kingdom."
Mary said to the angel, "But how? I've never slept with a man."

The angel answered,
The Holy Spirit will come upon you,
the power of the Highest hover over you;
Therefore, the child you bring to birth
will be called Holy, Son of God.

"And did you know that your cousin Elizabeth conceived a son, old as she is? Everyone called her barren, and here she is six months pregnant! Nothing, you see, is impossible with God."

And Mary said,
Yes, I see it all now:
I'm the Lord's maid, ready to serve.
Let it be with me
just as you say.

Hymn 265 The Angel Gabriel from Heaven Came

The Fourth Lesson: Matthew 1:18-25

The birth of Jesus took place like this. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. Before they enjoyed their wedding night, Joseph discovered she was pregnant. (It was by the Holy Spirit, but he didn't know that.) Joseph, chagrined but noble, determined to take care of things quietly so Mary would not be disgraced.

While he was trying to figure a way out, he had a dream. God's angel spoke in the dream: "Joseph, son of David, don't hesitate to get married. Mary's pregnancy is Spirit-conceived. God's Holy Spirit has made her pregnant. She will bring a son to birth, and when she does, you, Joseph, will name him Jesus—'God saves'—because he will save his people from their sins." This would bring the prophet's embryonic revelation to full term:

Watch for this—a virgin will get pregnant and bear a son;
They will name him Immanuel (Hebrew for "God is with us").

Then Joseph woke up. He did exactly what God's angel commanded in the dream: He married Mary. But he did not consummate the marriage until she had the baby. He named the baby Jesus.

Hymn 66 "Come, Thou long expected Jesus"

The Fifth Lesson: Luke 1:39-58

Mary didn't waste a minute. She got up and traveled to a town in Judah in the hill country, straight to Zachariah's house, and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby in her womb leaped. She was filled with the Holy Spirit, and sang out exuberantly,

You're so blessed among women,
and the babe in your womb, also blessed!
And why am I so blessed that
the mother of my Lord visits me?
The moment the sound of your
greeting entered my ears,
The babe in my womb
skipped like a lamb for sheer joy.
Blessed woman, who believed what God said,
believed every word would come true!

And Mary said,

I'm bursting with God-news;
I'm dancing the song of my Savior God.
God took one good look at me, and look what happened—
I'm the most fortunate woman on earth!
What God has done for me will never be forgotten,
the God whose very name is holy, set apart from all others.
His mercy flows in wave after wave
on those who are in awe before him.

He bared his arm and showed his strength,
scattered the bluffing braggarts.
He knocked tyrants off their high horses,
pulled victims out of the mud.
The starving poor sat down to a banquet;
the callous rich were left out in the cold.
He embraced his chosen child, Israel;
he remembered and piled on the mercies, piled them high.
It's exactly what he promised,
beginning with Abraham and right up to now.
Mary stayed with Elizabeth for three months and then went back to her own home.
When Elizabeth was full-term in her pregnancy, she gave birth to a son. Her neighbors
and relatives, seeing that God had overwhelmed her with mercy, celebrated with her.

Hymn 438 "Tell Out My Soul the Greatness of the Lord"

The Sixth Lesson: Luke 2:1-7

About that time Caesar Augustus ordered a census to be taken throughout the Empire. This was the first census when Quirinius was governor of Syria. Everyone had to travel to his own ancestral hometown to be accounted for. So Joseph went from the Galilean town of Nazareth up to Bethlehem in Judah, David's town, for the census. As a descendant of David, he had to go there. He went with Mary, his fiancée, who was pregnant.

While they were there, the time came for her to give birth. She gave birth to a son, her firstborn. She wrapped him in a blanket and laid him in a manger, because there was no room in the hostel.

Hymn 78 "Little Town of Bethlehem" v. 1-3

The Seventh Lesson: Luke 2:8-20

There were shepherds camping in the neighborhood. They had set night watches over their sheep. Suddenly, God's angel stood among them and God's glory blazed around them. They were terrified. The angel said, "Don't be afraid. I'm here to announce a

great and joyful event that is meant for everybody, worldwide: A Savior has just been born in David's town, a Savior who is Messiah and Master. This is what you're to look for: a baby wrapped in a blanket and lying in a manger."

At once the angel was joined by a huge angelic choir singing God's praises:

Glory to God in the heavenly heights,

Peace to all men and women on earth who please him.

As the angel choir withdrew into heaven, the shepherds talked it over. "Let's get over to Bethlehem as fast as we can and see for ourselves what God has revealed to us." They left, running, and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. Seeing was believing. They told everyone they met what the angels had said about this child. All who heard the shepherds were impressed.

Mary kept all these things to herself, holding them dear, deep within herself. The shepherds returned and let loose, glorifying and praising God for everything they had heard and seen. It turned out exactly the way they'd been told!

Hymn 96 "Angels We Have Heard on High"

The Eighth Lesson: Matthew 2:1-12

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem village, Judah territory—this was during Herod's kingship—a band of scholars arrived in Jerusalem from the East. They asked around, "Where can we find and pay homage to the newborn King of the Jews? We observed a star in the eastern sky that signaled his birth. We're on pilgrimage to worship him."

When word of their inquiry got to Herod, he was terrified—and not Herod alone, but most of Jerusalem as well. Herod lost no time. He gathered all the high priests and religion scholars in the city together and asked, "Where is the Messiah supposed to be born?"

They told him, "Bethlehem, Judah territory. The prophet Micah wrote it plainly:

It's you, Bethlehem, in Judah's land,
no longer bringing up the rear.
From you will come the leader
who will shepherd-rule my people, my Israel."

Herod then arranged a secret meeting with the scholars from the East. Pretending to be as devout as they were, he got them to tell him exactly when the birth-announcement star appeared. Then he told them the prophecy about Bethlehem, and said, "Go find this child. Leave no stone unturned. As soon as you find him, send word and I'll join you at once in your worship."

Instructed by the king, they set off. Then the star appeared again, the same star they had seen in the eastern skies. It led them on until it hovered over the place of the child.

They could hardly contain themselves: They were in the right place! They had arrived at the right time!

In a dream, they were warned not to report back to Herod. So they worked out another route, left the territory without being seen, and returned to their own country

Hymn 124 “We Three Kings”

At this time the collection plate will be passed.

Announcements

An Advent Affirmation of Faith

We are an Advent people, a people of hope.

For us, Advent is a time of waiting, and so we wait.

We wait for the coming of the One

who is the fulfillment of God’s promise,

the fulfillment of hope,

the declaration that we have been redeemed.

Even so, we are not a naïve people.

We know that the world in which we live

will continue to be filled with pain and sorrow.

We know that hatred and violence will continue to exist.

We know that death and separation will continue to be a part of our lives.

But because we are an Advent people,

we know that none of these things will win in the end.

The Holy One is coming,

to make holy once again

all that was, is, and ever will be.

And in our waiting and our hoping,

we work and worship,

pray and play,

in all things hoping that peace, love and joy will reign

in our lives and in our world,

now and forever.

Submitted by Rev. Rebecca F. Harrison

Recessional Hymn 99 “Go Tell it on the Mountain”

Benediction:

May you be filled with the wonder of Mary, the obedience of Joseph, the joy of the angels, the eagerness of the shepherds, the determination and generosity of the magi, and the peace of the Christ child. Almighty God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit bless you now and forever. **Amen**