



The
United
Reformed
Church

The United Reformed Church in Lion Walk
Christ Church United Reformed Church
The United Reformed Church at Chappel

Sunday 19th December 2021

Call to Worship:

The glory of the Lord shall be revealed
and all mankind together shall see it, for the Lord himself has spoken:
Shout aloud and rejoice,
I am coming and I will make my dwelling among you, says the Lord.

Spirit of Life, shed your light where there is darkness;
illuminate the dark corners of the world.
Bring your freedom to defeat oppression;
shine into the hearts of the powerful.
Let your peace overcome all conflict
so that the people of earth may live as the people of God

Prayer/Meditation:

Loving God, we remember today how the way was prepared for your coming.

To your servant Abraham you promised blessing for all the world through his offspring.

To your prophets you spoke your word promising the Messiah would come, bringing peace,
justice and deliverance for all your people.

To Elizabeth and Zechariah you promised a son who would prepare the way of the Lord, making
his way straight in the wilderness.

To Mary you promised a child who would be called Immanuel, God with us, born to save his
people.

And through John the Baptist you announced the fulfillment of those prophecies in the person of
Jesus, the light of the world shining in the darkness.

You promise that Christ will come: prepare our hearts for his coming.

Loving God, you spoke your word to so many, yet when the time came and Jesus was born so few
were ready to receive him. He was the Word, but was accused of blasphemy; he offered life to
the world, but was put to death on the cross; he came to his own people and they would not
receive him.

You promise that Christ will come: prepare our hearts for his coming.

Loving God, help us as we remember his birth, life, death and resurrection, to be ready to
receive him every day into every part of our lives. Help us to read your word with new insight,
to offer you our living worship, and to turn from all that is wrong and faithless in our lives.

Help us to focus on what is central to this season and not on the trappings with which we
surround it. Help us to open our hearts and minds to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and to
respond to the Spirit's prompting. Help us to follow in the way of Christ, loving him as he loved.

You promise that Christ will come: prepare our hearts for his coming.

The Lord's Prayer:

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 for ever. Amen

Reading: Micah 5:2-4

Hymn 141

Make way, make way, for Christ the King
in splendour arrives.
Fling wide the gates and welcome him
into your lives.

Chorus

Make way! Make way!
for the King of kings, King of kings!
Make way! Make way!
and let his kingdom in.

He comes the broken hearts to heal,
the prisoners to free;
the deaf shall hear, the lame shall dance,
the blind shall see.

Chorus

And those who mourn with heavy hearts,
who weep and sigh,
with laughter, joy and royal crown
he'll beautify.

Chorus

We call you now to worship him
as Lord of all,
to have no other gods but him;
their thrones must fall.

Chorus

Reading: Luke 1:39-55

Reflection:

On this Sunday we continue in the spirit of Advent, the spirit of expectation; we are waiting for something significant to happen.

We are blessed to celebrate this Advent season, the remembrance of darkness before the coming of the Light.

We live in a difficult and dangerous world, and there is darkness around us. In this darkness, it is a relief to gather as church and to feel again anticipation, one of the most cherished human experiences. It is a relief to be able to consciously wait for the light to come.

We welcome the hymns and the scripture readings on this last Sunday in Advent. Micah tells us of the care and tenderness of the good shepherd.

But the most tender and courageous images come from Luke's Gospel. Two women meet on a hill. They are women without importance in the eyes of the world. Elizabeth, the older one, is the wife of a priest, but she has been unable to bear a child until now, a shameful condition in that place and time. The younger one, Mary, is a poor girl from Nazareth, pregnant but not yet married to her betrothed. She needs time to think, to get away from the tongues of those who know her, maybe even from Joseph, her betrothed.

When they meet and Elizabeth recognizes in Mary something beyond the ordinary, something revealed to her through the Holy Spirit, she calls Mary "the mother of my Lord." She blesses Mary for believing in God's promises, in the fulfillment of "what was spoken to her by the Lord." It is a time of ecstasy for both of them.

After Elizabeth's inspired greeting, Mary breaks forth into a song.

They are two related women who are filled with the Holy Spirit and are delighted at the reality of the children they carry. In her hymn of praise to God, Mary focuses on what matters to her, a poor young woman who is obedient to God and who recognizes her humble origins. She senses that in her, in the promise of her child, in the words of God's messenger, something good is happening--not only to her but to other human beings.

- It is the humble who are being raised.
- It is those who feel awe before God their maker that are shown mercy.
- The powerful are brought down.
- The lowly are lifted up.
- And the hungry are fed.

But this quote isn't from the Magnificat. It's not even from the gospels. It's from the Book of Samuel. It's sung by another pregnant woman, Hannah the mother of Samuel, the great priest and prophet.

For a long time Hannah had been unable to have children. In time, however, she does conceive and when she dedicates her son to the temple, to become a priest she sings a song. Luke uses this song as a model for Mary's song.

In both the mighty are laid low, and the lowly are raised up. God is active and acting in the world. And so these women sing, "My heart exults in the Lord!" "My soul magnifies the Lord." That's an interesting phrase: My soul magnifies the Lord. **MY** soul magnifies the Lord. This is sometimes translated as "my soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord," which means sort of the same thing. But there's something more profound in saying "my soul magnifies the Lord." The more traditional version of the Magnificat has yet another translation that opens up an even deeper level.

It reads, "My soul doth magnify the Lord," and then a little later it says, "For he that is mighty hath magnified me." I magnify the Lord, but the Lord also magnifies me.

We delight in singing about the mighty works of God this time of year. We find it easy and comforting to sing about what God brings about in the world. We sing about God bringing joy and peace. Mary's song invites us to consider not only the what, but also the how.

"My soul magnifies the Lord," means that through me, through you, through us others can see the Lord more clearly. Through me and through you, through the way we choose to live our lives and practice our faith in the world people can catch a sustained glimpse of that peaceful kingdom. They can experience the righteous reign of God's justice and peace. They can share in God's dream of shalom.

Through each of us, through our words and our actions, through all that we do, we magnify God. We magnify God's love and give it hands and feet and hearts and minds. We collaborate with God in the divine actions of lifting up of the lowly, feeding the hungry. A good question to meditate on in the remaining time before Christmas might be: how do I magnify the Lord?

That's a big question. It's easy to think that it's too big for any one of us to handle. But another important lesson the Magnificat teaches is that you are enough. Whoever you are, whatever you have or haven't done, you are enough. The song of Mary reminds us that all of the scripture points to the little, the lowly, as the agents of God.

Bethlehem is nothing special. Hannah is a long-suffering, put upon other wife who endures the incessant teasing of the wife who *is* able to bear children. Elizabeth was also thought to be unable to bear a child, and endured disgrace because of it.

And Mary is no one. A young woman from a nowhere town - Nazareth - engaged to someone we're told is from the house of David but that doesn't really make Joseph all that special; a lot of people were distantly related to David.

All throughout scripture whenever God wants to do something it's the little, the ordinary, the unexceptional that God uses. When God wants to create God reaches into the mud. When God wants to raise up a king for Israel, God chooses the youngest of many children, the one sent out to watch the flocks.

It is through human beings, through human flesh, through this fragile and easily broken humanity, through *us* that God works. Through us that God is magnified.

So now we who hear these words 2000 years later discover that they make good sense to us also. They remind us of what matters to God, what God requires of us.

The prophet Micah reminds us of God's loving care.

The writer of the Gospel bring before us a cherished story of the early Christian community that remembers two remarkable women who knew that *strength* and *mercy* and *compassion for the poor* sprang from God the Creator, a God of good promises.

Let us then fill this season with compassion. Let us remember that God is not looking for external sacrifices from us but for obedience. And let us remember the lowly and the poor and the oppressed as Mary's hymn reminds us to do. Amen.

HYMN 740

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord!
Unnumbered blessings, give my spirit voice;
tender to me the promise of his word;
in God my Saviour shall my heart rejoice.

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his Name!
Make known his might, the deeds his arm has done;
his mercy sure, from age to age the same;
his holy name - the Lord, the Mighty One.

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his might!
Powers and dominions lay their glory by.
Proud hearts and stubborn wills are put to flight,
the hungry fed, the humble lifted high.

Tell out, my soul, the glories of his word!
Firm is his promise, and his mercy sure.
Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord
to children's children and for evermore!

Prayer:

At this season we hear again the good news of Jesus Christ, the glad tidings of his coming and the voice of the angel saying 'I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people for to you is born this day in the city of David a saviour who is the Messiah, ' ; we rejoice in the wonder of this season.

But we pray now for those for whom it brings no joy, but only reminds them of their pain.

For the poor, the hungry, the homeless - those for whom this Christmas will simply be another day in the struggle for survival; for those caught up in war, violence and persecution - those for whom this Christmas might be their last; for the unloved, the lonely, the homeless - those for whom Christmas only increases their sense of isolation.

For the anxious, the troubled and the fearful - those for whom Christmas will be swamped by worries; for the sick, the suffering, the broken in body and mind - those for whom this Christmas means only another day of pain; for the bereaved, the divorced, the estranged - those for whom Christmas brings home the memory of happier times.

Yes we have heard again the good news of Jesus Christ and rejoiced at the glad tidings of his birth; yet we know that the message is not just for us but for everyone; it is a message of love for all the world, a message of concern for all people. May we therefore go out with joy in our hearts to share the love that we have known here.

Through the words we say and the deeds we do, the love we share and the compassion we show, the faith we proclaim and the people we are, may his light shine afresh in the world, bringing hope, healing, joy and renewal. May our hearts be open to receive the Christ-child and through our telling the story and living in the way of Jesus, may our lives be the example that can bring others to faith.

I invite you now to spend a few moments with your own prayer, in words or in silence; or simply in reflecting upon the stories we have read and the words we have heard in our worship today.

Hear our prayer, which we offer in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

Hymn 137

Hark, the glad sound! The Saviour comes,
the Saviour promised long:
let every heart prepare a throne,
and every voice a song.

He comes, the prisoners to release
in Satan's bondage held;
the gates of brass before him burst,
the iron fetters yield.

He comes, from ignorance and doubt
to clear the inward sight;
and on the darkness of the blind
to pour celestial light.

He comes, the broken heart to bind,
the wounded soul to cure,
and with the treasures of his grace
to enrich the humble poor.

Our glad hosannas, Prince of Peace,
thy welcome shall proclaim;
and heaven's eternal arches ring
with thy beloved name.

Benediction

With love and compassion,
come, Lord Jesus.

With judgement and mercy,
come, Lord Jesus.

In power and glory,
come, Lord Jesus.

In wisdom and truth,
come, Lord Jesus.

And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit
go with each one of us, and with all those we love, today and for ever more.

Amen