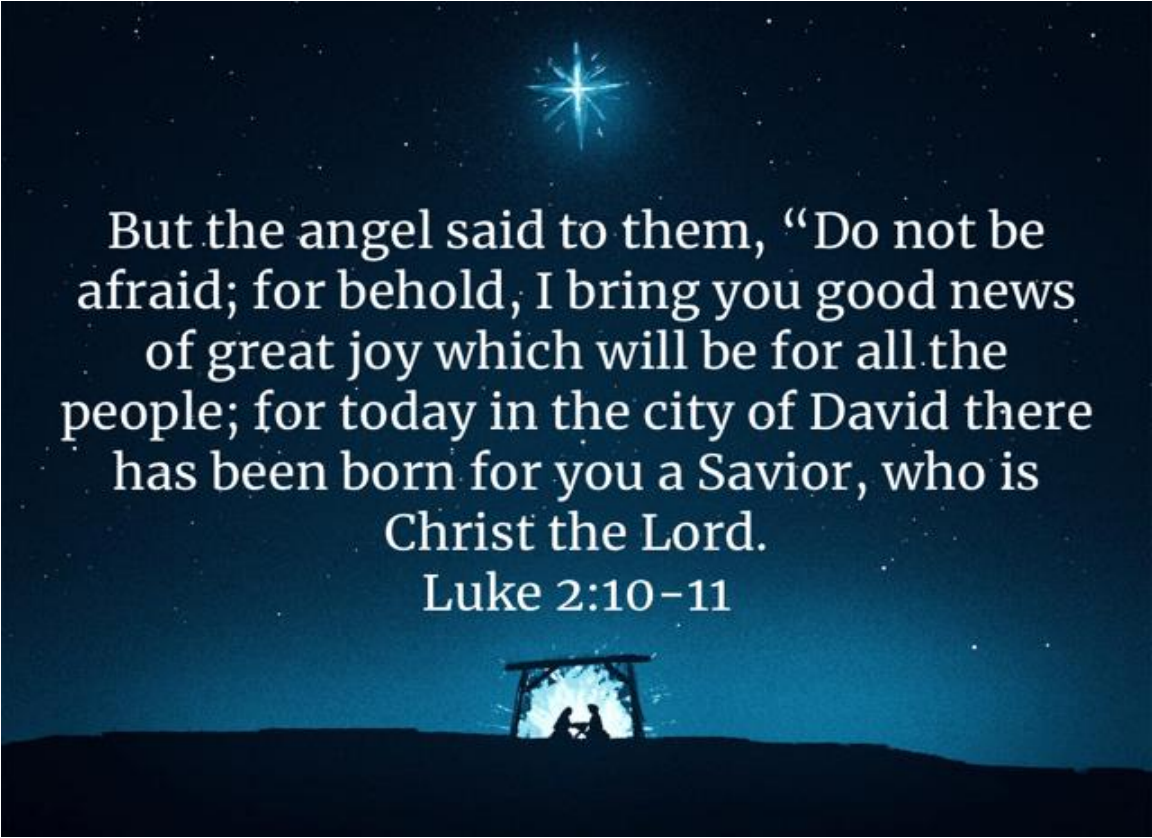


***The Lutheran Church of the Covenant***  
***“Reaching Out, Reflecting Christ, Renewing Lives”***



But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.  
Luke 2:10-11

*The Nativity of Our Lord*  
*Lessons & Carols*  
*December 24, 2020*



**Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**  
God's work. Our hands.

# The Nativity of Our Lord

## Lessons & Carols

*In winter's deepest night, we welcome the light of the Christ child. Isaiah declares that the light of the long-promised king will illumine the world and bring endless peace and justice. Paul reminds us that the grace of God through Jesus Christ brings salvation to all people. The angels declare that Jesus' birth is good and joyful news for everyone, including lowly shepherds. Filled with the light that shines in our lives, we go forth to share the light of Christ with the whole world.*

### Pre-service Music

*We Three Kings* (MARLATT)

Crooked River Brass

*I Saw Three Ships*

*While By My Sheep*

*Pat-a-pan*

*Lo, How a Rose*

*A Catalonian Carol*

*The Holly and the Ivy*

*Ding Dong Merrily on High*

*"Peace, Peace"* (POWELL, MCINTYRE)

Piano & Brass

### Call to Worship

Jesus, the bright eternal star, shines light in the world.

**By day and night he shines for all to see.**

Jesus was born in the midst of injustice and poverty

**that the world may see the justice and richness of God.**

God so loved the world that God sent the only Son,

**so that all may not perish but have eternal life.**

Jesus is the light of the world!

**Jesus is the light of our lives!**

Sing to God a new song!

**A song of hope, joy, and peace around the world!**

Hymn *O Come, All Ye Faithful*

#283



1 O come, all ye faith - ful, joy - ful and tri - um - phant! O  
2 The high - est, most ho - ly, light of light e - ter - nal,  
3 Sing, choirs of an - gels, sing in ex - ul - ta - tion,  
4 Yea, Lord, we greet thee, born this hap - py morn - ing;



come ye, O come ye to Beth - le - hem;  
born of a vir - gin, a mor - tal he comes;  
sing, all ye cit - i - zens of heav - en a - bove!  
Je - sus, to thee be . . . glo - ry giv'n!



come and be - hold him, born the king of an - gels:  
Son of the Fa - ther now in flesh ap - pear - ing!  
Glo - ry to God . . . in . . . the . . . high - est:  
Word of the Fa - ther, now in flesh ap - pear - ing:

*Refrain*



Ve - ni - te a - do - re - mus, ve - ni - te a - do - re - mus,  
O come, let us a - dore him, O come, let us a - dore him,



ve - ni - te a - do - re - mus Do - mi - num.  
O come, let us a - dore him, Christ the Lord!

Text: attr. John Francis Wade, 1711–1786; tr. Frederick Oakeley, 1802–1880, sts. 1, 3–4; tr. unknown, st. 2  
Music: ADESTE FIDELES, attr. John Francis Wade

## Prayer of the Day

Gracious God, of heaven and earth, you have thrown a lifeline to us in our struggle, a beam of light that shines through the Messiah. Though born in a manger, he is the firstborn of all creation. Though crucified on a cross, he is the Lord of life. Fill us with the wonder and joy of his presence in the world and in our hearts now and forever.

**Amen!**

First Lesson

Isaiah 9:2-7

<sup>2</sup>The people who walked in darkness  
have seen a great light;  
those who lived in a land of deep darkness —  
on them light has shined.

<sup>3</sup>You have multiplied the nation,  
you have increased its joy;  
they rejoice before you  
as with joy at the harvest,  
as people exult when dividing plunder.

<sup>4</sup>For the yoke of their burden,  
and the bar across their shoulders,  
the rod of their oppressor,  
you have broken as on the day of Midian.

<sup>5</sup>For all the boots of the tramping warriors  
and all the garments rolled in blood  
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.

<sup>6</sup>For a child has been born for us,  
a son given to us;  
authority rests upon his shoulders;  
and he is named  
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

<sup>7</sup>His authority shall grow continually,  
and there shall be endless peace  
for the throne of David and his kingdom.  
He will establish and uphold it  
with justice and with righteousness  
from this time onward and forevermore.  
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

Word of God, word of new life!

**Thanks be to God!**



1 Once in roy - al Da - vid's cit - y stood a low - ly cat - tle shed,  
2 He came down to earth from heav - en who is God and Lord of all,  
3 And our eyes at last shall see him, through his own re - deem - ing love;  
4 Not in that poor low - ly sta - ble, with the ox - en stand - ing by,



where a moth - er laid her ba - by in a man - ger for his bed:  
and his shel - ter was a sta - ble, and his cra - dle was a stall;  
for that child so dear and gen - tle is our Lord in heav'n a - bove;  
we shall see him; but in heav - en, set at God's right hand on high;



Mar - y was that moth - er mild, Je - sus Christ, her lit - tle child.  
with the poor and meek and low - ly, lived on earth our Sav - ior ho - ly.  
and he leads his chil - dren on to the place where he is gone.  
there his chil - dren gath - er round, bright like stars, with glo - ry crowned.

Text: Cecil Frances Alexander, 1818–1895  
Music: IRBY, Henry J. Gauntlett, 1805–1876

## Second Lesson

Micah 5:2-5a

<sup>2</sup> But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,  
who are one of the little clans of Judah,  
from you shall come forth for me  
one who is to rule in Israel,  
whose origin is from of old,  
from ancient days.

<sup>3</sup> Therefore he shall give them up until the time  
when she who is in labor has brought forth;  
then the rest of his kindred shall return  
to the people of Israel.

<sup>4</sup> And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord,  
in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.  
And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great  
to the ends of the earth;

<sup>5</sup> and he shall be the one of peace.

Word of God, word of new life!

**Thanks be to God!**



O lit - tle town of Beth - le - hem, how still we see thee lie!  
 For Christ is born of Mar - y, and, gath - ered all a - bove  
 How si - lent - ly, how si - lent - ly the won - drous gift is giv'n!  
 O ho - ly child of Beth - le - hem, de - scend to us, we pray;



A - bove thy deep and dream-less sleep the si - lent stars go by;  
 while mor - tals sleep, the an - gels keep their watch of won - d'ring love.  
 So God im - parts to hu - man hearts the bless - ings of his heav'n.  
 cast out our sin, and en - ter in, be born in us to - day.



yet in thy dark streets shin - eth the ev - er - last - ing light.  
 O morn - ing stars, to - geth - er pro - claim the ho - ly birth,  
 No ear may hear his com - ing; but, in this world of sin,  
 We hear the Christ - mas an - gels the great glad tid - ings tell;



The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee to - night.  
 and prais - es sing to God the king, and peace to all the earth!  
 where meek souls will re - ceive him, still the dear Christ en - ters in.  
 oh, come to us, a - bide with us, our Lord Im - man - u - el!

Text: Phillips Brooks, 1835–1893

Music: ST. LOUIS, Lewis H. Redner, 1831–1908

### Third Lesson

Luke 1:26-35, 38

<sup>26</sup>In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, <sup>27</sup>to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. <sup>28</sup>And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." <sup>29</sup>But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. <sup>30</sup>The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.

<sup>31</sup>And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. <sup>32</sup>He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. <sup>33</sup>He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” <sup>34</sup>Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” <sup>35</sup>The angel said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. <sup>38</sup>Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her.

Word of God, word of new life!

Thanks be to God!

Carol *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*

Verses 1, 2

#270



1 Hark! The her - ald an - gels sing, “Glo - ry to the new - born king;  
 2 Christ, by high - est heav’n a - dored, Christ, the ev - er - last - ing Lord,  
 3 Hail the heav’n-born Prince of peace! Hail the Sun of righ - teous - ness!



peace on earth, and mer - cy mild, God and sin - ners rec - on - ciled.”  
 late in time be - hold him come, off - spring of a vir - gin’s womb.  
 Light and life to all he brings, ris’n with heal - ing in his wings.



Joy - ful, all you na - tions, rise; join the tri - umph of the skies;  
 Veiled in flesh the God - head see! Hail, in - car - nate de - i - ty!  
 Mild he lays his glo - ry by, born that we no more may die,



with an - gel - ic hosts pro - claim, “Christ is born in Beth - le - hem!”  
 Pleased as man with us to dwell, Je - sus, our Em - man - u - el!  
 born to raise each child of earth, born to give us sec - ond birth.



*Refrain*  
 Hark! The her - ald an - gels sing, “Glo - ry to the new-born king!”

## Fourth Lesson

Matthew 1:18-25

<sup>18</sup>Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. <sup>19</sup>Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. <sup>20</sup>But just when he had resolved to do 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 as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup>She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' <sup>22</sup>All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

<sup>23</sup> 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,  
and they shall name him Emmanuel',

which means, 'God is with us.' <sup>24</sup>When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, <sup>25</sup>but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Word of God, word of new life!

**Thanks be to God!**

Carol *Angels We Have Heard on High*

Verses 1, 3

#289





1 An - gels we have heard on high, sweet - ly sing - ing o'er the plains,  
2 Shep - herds, why this ju - bi - lee? Why your joy - ous strains pro - long?  
3 Come to Beth - le - hem and see him whose birth the an - gels sing;



and the moun - tains in re - ply, ech - o - ing their joy - ous strains.  
What the glad - some tid - ings be which in - spire your heav' n - ly song?  
come, a - dore on bend - ed knee Christ the Lord, the new - born king.



Glo

ri - a



in ex - cel - sis De - o; glo



- ri - a in ex - cel - sis De - o.

Text: French carol; tr. H. F. Hemy, *The Crown of Jesus Music*, 1864  
Music: GLORIA, French carol

## Fifth Lesson

Luke 2:8-20

<sup>8</sup>In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. <sup>9</sup>Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. <sup>10</sup>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: <sup>11</sup>to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. <sup>12</sup>This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.’ <sup>13</sup>And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, <sup>14</sup>‘Glory to God in the highest heaven,

and on earth peace among those whom he favors!’

<sup>15</sup>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.’ <sup>16</sup>So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger.

<sup>17</sup>When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child;  
<sup>18</sup>and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. <sup>19</sup>But Mary treasured  
all these words and pondered them in her heart. <sup>20</sup>The shepherds returned, glorifying and  
praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Word of God, word of new life!

**Thanks be to God!**

Anthem *Holy Child Within the Manger* (HAUGEN)

Choir

1 Ho - ly Child with - in the man - ger, long a -  
2 Once a - gain we tell the sto - ry— how your  
3 Ho - ly Child with - in the man - ger, lead us  
go yet ev - er near; come as friend to ev - 'ry  
love for us was shown, when the im - age of your  
ev - er in your way, so we see in ev - 'ry  
stran - ger, come as hope for ev - 'ry fear.  
glo - ry wore an im - age like our own.  
stran - ger how you come to us to - day.  
As you lived to heal the bro - ken, greet the  
Come, en - light - en with your wis - dom, come and  
In our lives and in our liv - ing give us  
out - cast, free the bound, as you taught us love un -  
fill us with your grace. May the fire of your com -  
strength to live as you, that our hearts might be for -  
spo - ken, teach us now where you are found.  
pas - sion kin - dle ev - 'ry land and race.  
giv - ing and our spir - its strong and true.

Text: Marty Haugen, b. 1950

Music: JOYOUS LIGHT, Marty Haugen, b. 1950

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Sermon

Hymn of the Day *Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming* Verses 1, 4

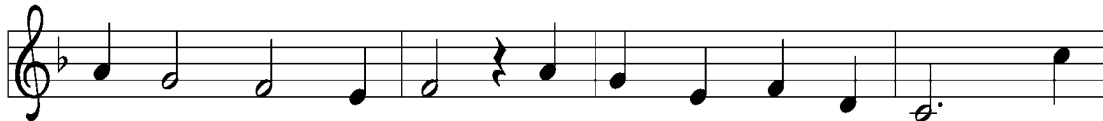
#272



1 Lo, how a rose e'er bloom - ing from ten - der stem hath  
2 I - sai - ah had fore - told it, the rose I have in  
3 This flow'r, whose fra - grance ten - der with sweet-ness fills the  
4 O Sav - ior, child of Mar - y, who felt our hu - man



sprung! Of Jes - se's lin - eage com - ing as  
mind; with Mar - y we be - hold it, the  
air, dis - pels with glo - rious splen - dor the  
woe; O Sav - ior, king of glo - ry, who



seers of old have sung, it came, a flow'r so bright, a -  
vir - gin moth - er kind. To show God's love a - right, she  
dark-ness ev - 'ry - where. True man, yet ver - y God, from  
dost our weak - ness know: bring us at length, we pray, to



mid the cold of win - ter, when half - spent was the night.  
bore to us a Sav - ior, when half - spent was the night.  
sin and death he saves us and light - ens ev - 'ry load.  
the bright courts of heav - en and in - to end - less day.

## Prayers of Intercession

Wonderful Counselor, increase our joy as your church gathers in distant places throughout the world in adoring our dear Savior's birth. May the story of your most beautiful hope live in the hearts of all who ponder your wonders with the beloved Mary. God of grace, **hear our prayer.**

Mighty God, you have shattered the yoke of sin's burden on all your precious children through the birth of your Son. Comfort those whose burdens disturb them from the deeper peace of this holy night and grant them a restful mind. God of peace, **hear our prayer.**

Everlasting Father, uphold all who are in sorrow or need of your divine goodness and mercy. We, also, remember with thanksgiving those who have died and now rest in your steadfast care. God of love, **hear our prayer.**

Gracious God, fill us, as always, in the light of your Word made flesh, Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen!**

## Lord's Prayer

**Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name,  
your kingdom come,  
your will be done,  
on earth as in heaven.  
Give us today our daily bread.  
Forgive us our sins  
as we forgive those  
who sin against us.  
Save us from the time of trial  
and deliver us from evil.  
For the kingdom, the power,  
and the glory are yours,  
now and forever. Amen.**



1 What child is this, who, laid to rest, on Mar - y's lap is sleep - ing?  
2 Why lies he in such mean es - tate where ox and ass are feed - ing?  
3 So bring him in - cense, gold, and myrrh; come, peas - ant, king, to own him.



Whom an - gels greet with an - thems sweet while shep - herds watch are keep - ing?  
Good Chris - tian, fear; for sin - ners here the si - lent Word is plead - ing.  
The King of kings sal - va - tion brings; let lov - ing hearts en - throne him.



This, this is Christ the king, whom shep - herds guard and an - gels sing;  
Nails, spear shall pierce him through, the cross be borne for me, for you;  
Raise, raise the song on high, the vir - gin sings her lul - la - by;



haste, haste to bring him laud, the babe, the son of Mar - y!  
hail, hail the Word made flesh, the babe, the son of Mar - y!  
joy, joy, for Christ is born, the babe, the son of Mar - y!

Text: William C. Dix, 1837–1898

Music: GREENSLEEVES, English ballad, 16th cent.

## Proclamation of the Birth of Christ

Candlelight Hymn *Silent Night, Holy Night*

#281



*Stil - le Nacht, hei - li - ge Nacht! Al - les schläft,*  
1 Si - lent night, ho - ly night! All is calm,  
2 Si - lent night, ho - ly night! Shep - herds quake  
3 Si - lent night, ho - ly night! Son of God,



*ein - sam wacht nur das trau - te, hoch - hei - li - ge Paar.*  
all is bright round yon vir - gin moth - er and child.  
at the sight; glo - ries stream from heav - en a - far,  
love's pure light ra - diant beams from your ho - ly face,



*Hold - er Kna - be im lok - ki - gen Haar, schlaf in himm - li - scher*  
Ho - ly In - fant, so ten - der and mild, sleep in heav - en - ly  
heav'n - ly hosts . . . sing, al - le - lu - ia! Christ, the Sav - ior, is  
with the dawn of re - deem - ing grace, Je - sus, Lord, at your



*Ruh, schlaf in himm - li - scher Ruh.*  
peace, sleep in heav - en - ly peace.  
born! Christ, the Sav - ior, is born!  
birth, Je - sus, Lord, at your birth.

Text: Joseph Mohr, 1792–1849; tr. John F. Young, 1820–1885  
Music: STILLE NACHT, Franz Gruber, 1787–1863

## Blessing

Almighty God,  
who sent the Holy Spirit to Mary,  
proclaimed joy through the angels,  
sent the shepherds with good news,  
and led the magi by a star,  
bless you this day † through the Word made flesh.

**Amen!**

Sending Hymn *Go Tell It on the Mountain*

#290

*Refrain*



Go tell it on the moun - tain, o-ver the hills and ev - 'ry - where;



go tell it on the moun - tain that Je - sus Christ is born!



- 1 While shep-herds kept their watch-ing o'er si - lent flocks by night,
- 2 The shep-herds feared and trem-bled when, lo, a - bove the earth
- 3 Down in a lone - ly man - ger the hum-ble Christ was born;

*Refrain*



be - hold, through-out the heav-ens there shone a ho - ly light.  
rang out the an - gel cho - rus that hailed our Sav - ior's birth.  
and God sent us sal - va - tion that bless-ed Christ-mas morn.

Text: African American spiritual, refrain: John W. Work Jr., 1872–1925, stanzas, alt.

Music: GO TELL IT, African American spiritual

Dismissal

Go in peace.

Share the gift of the Messiah with the world!

**Thanks be to God!**

Postlude *Angel Carols* (HAUGEN)

Piano & Brass

## *Our Worship Leaders*

### Ministers

Presiding Minister  
Organ & Piano  
Crooked River Brass

### Vocalists

Flute  
Guitar  
Proclamation of the Birth of Christ  
Worship Recording

All People  
The Rev. Bradley Ross  
Robin Crawford  
Debbie Haviland (horn)  
James McIntyre (tuba)  
Rich Lindemeyer (trumpet)  
James Fry (trumpet)  
Donald Kaser (trombone)  
Megan Thompson (mezzo)  
Maria Didonato (soprano)  
David Munnell (tenor)  
Preston Masters (bass)  
Ann Droste  
Benjamin Al-Doory  
Steve Dobush  
Jennifer Lasher-Dobush

*Thank  
you*

We wish to offer our deepest gratitude to all the musicians who have made this worship all the more special, including Robin Crawford who brought it all together, so that we may even more beautifully praise God from all different places, but still as one family in Christ! We also greatly appreciate Jennifer Lasher-Dobush for recording the worship and uploading it so that we have this precious opportunity to share together!

*From all of us at the Lutheran Church of the Covenant, we wish you and yours:*





## *Living in Mary's Time*

Timing is everything, but often the truth of this adage is seen only in hindsight. While we're in the moment, the purpose of the time in which we find ourselves is hard to adjust into view.

Time has taken on a different kind of meaning these past 11 months. Months seem like years and days like minutes. We can't tell one day from the next, as the boundaries that mark hours are blurred by homebound life and the upheaval of our rhythms.

Everything we have counted on to give life purpose and meaning—the rituals of life and death, the ways we go about relationships and maintain community, the security of jobs and the satisfaction of outside pursuits—has been taken away by something we can't even see and by a reality we didn't want to see. Add a hard-to-swallow dose of political machinations and it's enough to believe that we've been thrust into a different time zone altogether.

We know all of this, but that doesn't make it easier to accept, especially when we face yet one more holiday that won't be as it once was. We long for that "once was" time—the pre-pandemic way of life...Nostalgia is hard to let go of, particularly when the transitions are abrupt and leave us feeling out of control. And denial is hard to give up when it has worked so well for so many years.

The time in which we find ourselves—as individuals, communities, a nation, a world and a church—is much more than unprecedented. It's unnerving, unsettling. Upending and upheaving—suspended in that in-between space caused by pandemic and protest, by disbelief and dystopia, by resistance and revolution.

But as Christians, we know this time well—the time between the *already* and the *not yet* of the kingdom of heaven. The time between *God so loved the world* and waiting for it to come true. The kind of time that Mary understood. The kind of time coiled with the tension between "How can this be?" and "Nothing will be impossible with God" (Luke 1:34, 37). This time can feel interminable.

Mary reminds us of this kind of time, gives voice to this kind of time. We have just forgotten it as Christianity became mainstream and even popular, as it became a kind of tame, feel-good spirituality, regularized by denominational affiliations and marked by doctrinal warring. Somewhere along the line we lost sight of the kind of time we are called to keep.

## **For such a time as this**

Such a time as this is the kind of time we are supposed to keep this Christmas—the kind of time between “How can this be?” and “Nothing will be impossible with God.” It’s the kind of time Mary felt in her very body.

You see, it’s a laboring time, one that hovers somewhere in the middle of questions and confidence, lived between fear and love, between doubt and hope. It’s a laboring time born out of a certain kind of love that is known in extraordinary effort and yet palpable apprehension. A love that is bloody and bold. A love that is resilient and fierce.

A love that makes you feel as if you’re dying and yet is life-giving.

For Mary, Christmastime is but a microcosm of the time she will be asked to keep her whole life. In John 2:5, she pushes Jesus out the door (“Do whatever he tells you”), knowing who he is and what he has to do. And then she finds herself at the foot of the cross. She births the savior of the world, whose breath will be smothered by the world.

And so, Mary’s hope is an honest one. She hopes in the endless possibility of God, but she knew the truth of the cross long before we did—that empire silences the protesters, speaks lies for its own gain and crushes those who stand in the way of its privilege.

Maybe that’s why she asked “How can this be?” as she pondered the forces that stifle love with hate. Of course, we know the story Mary did not—where this Jesus movement would go. When the church is at its best, it embodies the Jesus movement by truly contesting for the kingdom of God. At its worst, the church settles into complacency and complicity, a kind of denominational satisfaction or competition.

We need Mary’s reminder that we don’t know the whole story either. We cling to that honest hope. To do so is to lean into a kind of trust we haven’t had to count on in a long time. The kind of trust that is able to utter, “Nothing will be impossible with God.”

## **Christmastime**

We have to read ahead in Luke to Mary’s song, for it’s here that she sings of the trust on which she drew to move herself from “How can this be?” to “Nothing will be impossible with God.”

We hear Mary’s version of God, who looks with favor upon the lowly; who regards those we would overlook; who calls her blessed; who scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts, who brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; who has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty. Her God, who has helped servant Israel, in remembrance of mercy, because God keeps God’s promises (Luke 1:46-55).

And because God keeps God's promises—and all of the promises Mary names—she can lean into God's possibility while not fully understanding what it means for her, her son or the world. That the birth of her son would upend the world—but not before it made sure to silence him. That the joy of parenting would also mean the suffering of watching her son die. That sometimes favor and regard will also call us to love fervently and relentlessly.

Maybe what will be born from these times in which we find ourselves are new possibilities for how we imagine God's presence—a presence that we made too predictable by ecclesial practices and expectations, by denominational smugness and theological sparring. Without our usual places for living out our faith this past year, we're having to reimagine the spaces God might choose to reveal God's self—in barns and mangers that, over the centuries, we replaced with buildings and best practices, rubrics and rest-assured structures.

As a result, one unspoken aspect of grief in this time of protest, pandemic and partisanship is that the ways we've come to know God and embody belief have been taken. We find ourselves asking, "Is what I believe about God still true anymore? Is my faith strong enough to find other ways of expression?"

In times like these, theology is no longer a given, if it ever was. We are constructing and reconstructing, deliberating and dialoguing about meaning. For Christians, finding meaning always involves asking, "What is God up to in all this?"

The usual reason for Mary's question "How can this be?" is her incredulity about being pregnant. "How can I possibly be carrying a child when I am a virgin?" But what if, behind her question, lurked a list of additional questions: "What am I supposed to tell my family?" Or "Who is going to be there during labor?" Or "How am I supposed to raise a baby by myself?" Or "Who am I for God to choose me?"

The angel Gabriel anticipates her layered fear: "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end" (Luke 1:30-33).

Because Christmas is not just a day but a way of being.

### **Time for new**

Every single year, the birth of Jesus upends the world as we know it, especially when the world needs it the most and specifically when the world persists in pretending that the status quo can continue.

What if, this Christmas, we sang Mary's song? A song to sing instead of talking of indifference and intolerance. A song to sing instead of speaking words of hate and fear. A song to sing instead of closing our mouths, unwilling to speak up for or speak out against.

Mary's song would make our world a different place, a better place, a place where we might even catch a glimpse of the kingdom of God. It's a song that trusts in God's future, and it's sung to insist on making God's future present for all people.

How can we sing this song that both comforts the lowly and topples empires, that gives hope to the hopeless and speaks truth to unchecked power? Mary gets from "How can this be?" to "Nothing will be impossible with God" through the promise of the Spirit. We sing because the same Spirit has been promised to us.

That Spirit has been showing up week in and week out, no matter how or where we worship. No matter if it's by Zoom or in a parking lot... We might not yet be able to say "Nothing will be impossible with God," and that's OK. We may need to occupy that in-between place a little longer—and we may have to.

There is no going back to normal. Mary knew that as well. She realized this truth as she found herself between who she thought God was and who God needed her to be. But isn't this the very heart of the gospel?

There was no going back to normal when the women found the tomb empty. There was no going back to normal when Jesus sent his disciples into all the nations. And there was no going back to normal once the Word became flesh.

Maybe this was God's intent all along, why God chose to become one of us—to upend our normal. And maybe this is why Christmas has to come every year—to remind us, once again, that the normal we create isn't the normal God wishes for us.

Christmas is this very promise and perhaps one that can be easy to forget. Before Christmas became presents and pageants, dinners and decorations, Jesus' birth was a threat to those in power. It was a threat to those who, in no uncertain terms, wouldn't allow their privilege to be taken away and to those who had become gods of their own making. Christmas was, if you will, unprecedented.

This Christmas won't be normal for any of us. But it just might be like that first Christmas, and we might find ourselves not at the inn but in the barn, sitting by the manger next to Mary. Waiting for her world, our world, to be changed, even to be reborn. Indeed, it's time for new.

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