

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
WILLMAR, MN
December 27, 2020**



Prelude

Welcome to Worship

Friends, out of an abundance of caution, we have returned to online only services. We welcome all of you who are joining us on the internet. It is not the same as being together in our sanctuary for worship. But, for now, this online community is our sacred space. And God meets us wherever we are.

So, let us turn our hearts and minds to worship.

Call to Worship

One: Christ has been born, but the journey to find him continues.
We, who seek him, still follow a star. Journey with us,
and listen to these words from Ann Voskamp's The Greatest Christmas.

Two:

“Our God who breathes stars in the dark –
He breathes Bethlehem’s Star, then takes on
lungs and breathes in stable air.
We are saved from hopelessness, because God
came with infant fists and opened with His
hand to take the iron-sharp edge of our sins.
Our God who delivers the heavens –
He waits, patient, like an embryo in a womb
and delivers Himself to free you.

Our God who cradles whole galaxies
in the palm of his hand, whom
highest heavens cannot contain –
He folds Himself into our sin, and uncurls His
newborn fingers in a barn feeding trough –
and we are saved from ourselves.”

Hymn

“O Come All Ye Faithful”

arranged by Chris Tomlin and C. Frederick Oakley
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O come, all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant;
O come, ye, O come ye to Bethlehem!
Come and behold Him – born the King of angels!
O come, let us adore Him! O come, let us adore Him!
O come, let us adore Him – Christ, the Lord!

Sing, choirs of angels; sing in exultation;
O sing, all ye citizens of heav’n above!
Glory to God, all glory in the highest!
O come, let us adore Him! O come, let us adore Him!
O come, let us adore Him – Christ, the Lord!
Christ, the Lord! You are the Lord!

Yea, Lord, we greet Thee, born this happy morning;
Jesus to Thee be all glory giv’n:
Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing!
O come, let us adore Him! O come, let us adore Him!
O come, let us adore Him – Christ, the Lord!
You are the Lord! You are the Lord!
You are the Lord! Yeah!

We’ll prayer Your name forever, we’ll praise Your name forever,
we’ll praise You name forever; Christ the Lord!
Glory in the highest!
We’ll prayer Your name forever, we’ll praise Your name forever,
we’ll praise You name forever; Christ the Lord!

Scripture Lesson

Matthew 2:1-2

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men^[a] from the East came to Jerusalem, ² asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising,^[b] and have come to pay him homage.”

Message

This is Sunday we want to take a moment to recognize a journey that is, according to the church calendar, still taking place. We celebrated the birth of Jesus on Christmas; next week we will celebrate the arrival of the Magi on Epiphany. On this Sunday, we recognize that the Magi are still traveling. I would like to share a story with you that imagines some of what might have been going on in the in-between times, before the journey was complete.

“The Third Gift”

By Linda Sue Park

Illustrated by Bagram Ibatoulline

My father collects tears. That is what they are called: the pearls of sap that seep out of a tree when the bark is cut. Maybe they are called tears because it seems as if the tree is crying.

My father knows where the good trees are. I walk with him, the basket in one hand, the water-gourd slung over my shoulder. We walk a long way. Some of the trees are close together. But most of them are far apart. One tree here. Another tree there. Yet another far beyond. They are not beautiful trees. Their branches are stunted, knotted, spiny. Their leaves are a dull grayish green.

My father has to see *inside* each tree. Of course he can't *really* see inside. But he looks carefully at the trunk, and the branches. He tears off a leaf and sniffs it. He runs his hand along the bark. Sometimes he shakes his head. *No. Not this tree. Not now.* And we walk again, in the heat and the dust.

Other times, he nods his head and take up the ax. This is another thing he knows: how to cut through the bark twice, in the shape of an X. Not too deep. Not too shallow. And in exactly the right place. He makes the first cut, then the second. He steps back. Together, we watch. I hold my breath. A tear begins to emerge. A tear of sap, the blood of the tree. If my father has chosen well – and he always does, for he has been harvesting these tears all his

life – plenty of sap will bubble out from a pocket beneath the bark. It will form a fine big tear before the sap ceases flowing.

The outside of the tear will dry in the hot sun, until he can pick it off with his fingers. My father's tears are large, their rough dried shell protecting the treasure of resin within. Other collectors are not as skilled as he is. Their tears are small, all shell and no center.

My father sells the tears to the spice merchant in the marketplace. Because the tears take time and skill to harvest, they fetch good sums of money – and people must pay even more to buy them. The tears are used for many things. They can be ground up as medicine for headaches and stomachaches. They are used to flavor wine. Some people like to rub the resin on their skin, to soothe rashes. The best tears, the most expensive ones, are used for funerals. The tears are ground into powder, then steeped in oil. The oil is used to wash the body of the one who has died. Other tears are burned during the funeral, so their scent fills the air. It is a sharp smell, both bitter and sweet. When you smell the tears at a funeral, you know that someone truly beloved has died.

My father takes me with him to harvest the tears. He holds out a leaf for me to sniff. He tells me to run my hand over the bark of a tree. I do not yet know what I am supposed to smell, or feel. But one day I will. Until then, I carry the basket and the water-gourd. And I watch, and try to learn. My father checks the last of the good trees. He smiles. "Look," he says. I look, and see the biggest tear yet. As large as a hen's egg. Nearly as large as my fist! "Go ahead," he says, still smiling. I set the basket down and reach for the tear. I twist it off carefully but quickly, just as I have seen him do. I hold it in my palm, turn it over, sniff its sharp, bitter sweetness. Then I place it gently in the basket. On the way home, I look at it again and again.

A few weeks later, we walk to the market. It is after midday when we arrive. The spice merchant waves and calls to us, "I have been waiting for you!" Inside his tent, there are three men drinking tea. They wear fine robes – red, gold, blue. I have never seen such robes before. The spice merchant says to his customers, "There is the man I was telling you about."

The man in red greets my father. "We are buying gifts," he says. "We have some already, but we wish to buy one more. Something special." My father nods at me. I give the basket to the merchant. With practiced fingers, he culls through the tears and places several of the largest on a cloth. In the center is *my* tear.

The three men examine the tears. They speak to one another in a strange language. Finally they look at the merchant and my father, and they nod. "We have a gold, and a gift of frankincense," says the man in red. "Now we will add to them a gift of myrrh."

As the spice merchant wraps the tears, he says, "May I ask who the gifts are for?" I am glad he asked, for I want to know too. The man in red does not speak for a moment. Then he says, "The gifts are for a baby." I frown a little. Myrrh is a strange gift to give a baby. But of course, I say nothing. And I am proud that my tear, the one I harvested, is to be part of the gift.

I watch the three men mount their camels. I watch them leave the marketplace. I watch as they ride into the desert. And I wonder about the baby.

The Magi are still traveling, and so are we. We are making a journey with Jesus through these days of Christmas, and will continue that journey through the days of Lent and right up through Holy Week, when we recognize that a gift of Myrrh is not such a strange gift after all for a child who will grow up to be Rabbi and Healer, for a child who will be the Messiah, the Savior of the people. Your Savior. My Savior. It was not an easy journey for the Magi, and it is not an easy journey for us. But on this day when we are still celebrating Christmas, I invite you to make room in your life to follow Jesus wherever the journey leads you.

Hymn

"Make Room"

words and music by Matt Maher and Mark Hall
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A fam'ly hiding from the storm found no place at the keeper's door.
It was for this a child was born: to save a world so cold an hollow.

A sleeping town, they did not know that lying in a manger low
a Savior king who had no home has come to heal our sorrows.

Is there room in your heart? Is there room in your heart?
Is there room in your heart for God to write His story?

Shepherds counting sheep at night. Do not fear the glory light.
You are precious in his sight. God has come to raise the lowly.

Is there room in your heart? Is there room in your heart?
Is there room in your heart for God to write His story?

You can come as you are. It may set you apart,
when you make room in your heart and trade your dreams for His glory.
Make room in your heart, make room in your heart.

A mother holds the promise tight. Ev'ry wrong will be made right,
the road is straight, the burden's light, for in His hands he holds tomorrow.

Is there room in your heart? Is there room in your heart?
Is there room in your heart for God to write His story?

You can come as you are. It may set you apart,
when you make room in your heart and trade your dreams for His glory.
Make room in your heart, make room in your heart.
Make room in your heart, make room in your heart.

Prayers of Intercession

Glorious are you, Mystery of Life,
essence of all creation.
You are the symphony of stars and planets.
You are the music of the atoms within us.
You are the dawn on mountain peaks,
the moonlight on evening seas.
Forest and farm, the rush of the city,
everything is embraced in your love.

We rejoice as we sing our gratitude.

Glorious are you, O Jesus Christ,
Cosmic love in human flesh.
You graced the smallness of time and place
to teach us to dance to the music.
You walk on our seas and heal in our streets.
You make your home in our lives,
revealing that cross and resurrection
are one on the road to freedom.

We rejoice as we sing our gratitude.

Glorious are you, O Spirit of Truth,
wisdom and breath of our being.
You are the wind that sweeps our senses.
You are the fire that burns in our hearts.

You are the needle of the inner compass,
always pointing to true North,
guiding us on the sacred dance
into the Mystery of Life.

We rejoice as we sing our gratitude.

In gratitude that you hear our prayers,
we come to you today
with cares and concerns on our hearts,
trusting that you will hear our prayers.

Hear our prayers for those in need of healing...
Hear our prayers for those who grieve...
Hear our prayers for the lonely, the lost, and the marginalized...
Hear our prayers for a world that needs your peace...
Hear our prayers for a church that needs the boldness to proclaim your grace...
Hear our prayers, the ones we speak out loud, and the ones we breathe out in silence...

And now, with the confidence of the children of God,
we pray the prayer which Jesus taught us:

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 debts as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

Invitation to the Offering

The deeper the darkness the brighter the light shines.
For love refuses to be extinguished by despair.
Resilience and hope cannot be quenched
while the light of love burns steadily, fueled by courage and compassion.
Look for the light and there you will find love.

The gifts you offer to God
participate in shining the light that illuminates love and compassion.
Thank you for continuing to give faithfully
during these challenging times.
Let us pray.

Offering Prayer

Holy God,
In this glad Christmastide
we are grateful for giving hearts made joyful
in the gift of your Son.
For you, O God, are generosity itself.
Bless these gifts we offer to the benefit of those in need.
Bless our lives in service of sharing your love in the world;
through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

Closing Hymn

“The First Noel”

Traditional English Carol

arranged by David Crowder, Jack Parker, Jeremy Bush, Mark Waldrop, Mike Dodson and Mike Hogan
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The first Noel, the angels did say,
was to certain poor shepherds in fields as they lay.
In fields where they lay keeping their sheep.
On a cold winter's night that was so deep.

Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel.
Born it the King of Israel.

They look-ed up and saw a star
shining in the east beyond them far.
And to the earth, it gave great light.
And so it continued both day and night.

Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel.
Born it the King of Israel.

Then let us all with one accord
sing praises to our heavenly Lord.
That hath made heav'n and earth of nought;
and with His blood mankind hath bought.

Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel.
Born it the King of Israel.
Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel.
Born it the King of Israel.

Charge and Benediction

Now may the true light shine on you.
May the Son sent by God be your guide and strength.
May you go in peace and live in hope,
in Jesus' name. Amen.