



Leura Uniting Church  
20 December 2020  
Fourth Sunday of Advent  
William Emilsen

## The Gathering of the People of God

### CALL TO WORSHIP

We knew joy, but when we heard the laughter of children,  
joy was overflowing.  
We knew love, but when you reached out to us,  
love was overflowing.  
We knew God, but when God showed us grace—  
accepted us,  
loved us,  
forgave us—  
God's presence was very real.  
So, let us worship God together,  
remembering that God is here and we are never alone.  
We are among God's people.  
We are the body of Christ.  
Welcome.  
Welcome to this service of worship.

### GREETING

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,  
the love of God,  
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit  
be with you all.  
**And also with you.**

### PRAYER OF INVOCATION

Holy One,  
today we gather with hearts full of joy.  
Yet this season can also bring stress and anxiety.  
Many of us are busy making plans with family and friends  
while others struggle with loneliness.  
We ask that you help all of us to free our hearts and minds  
of the planning, worry, stress, and anxiety

that takes our focus away from the coming of Christ.  
During this time of worship  
let your Spirit flow through this place.  
May your Spirit empower us to open our hearts and minds  
so that we will hear your Word  
and know what you call us to do  
and who you want us to be. **Amen.**

**SONG:** 'O Holy One' (Music and lyrics by Richard Bruxvoort-Colligan; sung by Elizabeth and Andrew Elia with permission)

*Verse 1:*

O Holy One, we gather in your  
presence  
O Living One, we welcome all to  
Hope

*Refrain:*

You are our God (You are our God)  
We are Your people (We are Your  
people)  
You are our God (You are our God)  
We are Your people (We are Your  
people)

*Verse 2:*

O Holy One, the Covenant of History  
O Living One, we live and move in  
you.

*Refrain:*

You are our God (You are our God)  
We are Your people (We are Your  
people)  
You are our God (You are our God)  
We are Your people (We are Your  
people)

Amen (Amen)

**LIGHTING THE ADVENT CANDLE**

A: I dream of music that makes my heart swell.  
B: I dream of trees that take my breath away.  
A: I dream of sunrises that wrap me in light.  
B: I dream of family dinners that feel like home.  
A: I dream of church services that give me hope.  
B: I dream of love as the default.  
A: So today, as we draw near to Christmas day, we light the candle of love.

*Light candle.*

B: May this light burn bright as a reminder that God is here and God is love.  
A: We are not alone. Thanks be to God for a love like that. Amen.

## **PRAYER OF CONFESSION**

God of Good News,  
You say to us, 'You are highly favoured',  
but we struggle to understand how that could be.  
You say to us, 'Do not be afraid',  
but fear stalks us like a burglar.  
You say to us, 'Even the impossible is possible'  
but hope slips through our hands like wet soap.  
The impossible, we confess, still feels impossible.  
So today we pray:  
Teach us to sing like Mary,  
to laugh like Elizabeth.  
to trust like the angels  
and to witness to hope  
where pain and anxiety have taken root.

**SONG:** 'O Tender God' (Music and lyrics by Richard Bruxvoort-Colligan; sung by Elizabeth and Andrew Elia with permission)

O tender God, have mercy  
for you are for us.  
O living Christ, have mercy  
for you will heal us.  
O tender God, have mercy for you are for us,  
for you are for us.

## **ASSURANCE OF GRACE**

The good news in Christ is that when we face ourselves and God  
with the awareness of our need,  
we are given grace to grow,  
and courage to continue the journey.

Friends, believe the good news of the gospel.  
In Jesus Christ you are forgiven.  
**Thanks be to God.**

## **The Liturgy of the Word**

**PSALM:** 89:1–4

**GOSPEL:** Luke 1:46–55 (Michael Slinn)

**EPISTLE:** Romans 16:25–27 (Michael Slinn)

May your word live in us, O God.  
**And bear much fruit to your glory.**

## SERMON

### 'How Can We Keep From Singing?'

(Luke 1:46–55)

(Sing verse 1)

*My life flows on in endless song; above earth's lamentations,  
I hear the sweet though far off hymn that hails a new creation.  
Through all the tumult and the strife, I hear the music ringing.  
It finds an echo in my soul. How can I keep from singing?*

Some years ago I read a newspaper story about a bride who was planning to be married when only two weeks before her wedding she found out that her fiancé was having an affair with another woman.

The evidence was irrefutable; she called off the wedding.

But not the reception.

The bride and her mother found that while they could cancel the musicians, the florist, the photographer, the celebrant, they would still be responsible for the catering and a whopping bill for a four course dinner for 125 people.

So the bride decided, in her own words, 'to turn this into something positive'.

She rearranged the guest list ever-so slightly, removing all the men!

You can't blame her.

Then she turned this women's only party into a benefit for two charities, one to help poor children in her district and another to empower women in developing countries.

Instead of bringing wedding gifts, the guests wrote cheques.

And Mary said,  
'My soul magnifies the Lord,  
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,

...

He has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.  
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;  
He has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty.'

Yes, those wedding guests may have left with their purses a little emptier but I doubt that they left with empty hearts, for in their emptiness the hungry could be fed with good things. Yes, the bride didn't get to wear her wedding dress, didn't cut her wedding cake with her husband, didn't throw her bouquet, didn't get the beautiful photos, but she did go on a honeymoon to a Hawaii.

She took her Mum.

When I first read this story, the young bride reminded me of Mary who was also faced with a radical change of plan but was unwilling to be undone by it.

When the bride's situation might have overwhelmed her, she turned her attention to the poor and hungry and to a hurting world.

By turning disappointment into an occasion for generosity, the bride was a woman who could not keep from singing.

(Sing verse 2)

*What though my joys and comfort die? My Saviour still is living.  
What though the shadow gather round? A new son Christ is giving.  
No storm can shake my in-most calm, while to that Rock I'm clinging.  
Since Love commands both heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing?*

This beautiful hymn is called 'My Life Flows on in Endless Song', or 'How Can I keep From Singing'.

It is an American folk song that was originally composed in the 1860s as a Christian hymn and appeared in many 19<sup>th</sup> century hymnals, including Sankey's *Gospel Hymns*.

We don't know who wrote the original words.

We just know that it speaks to the power of the human spirit when it is centred on God.

But the one verse we do know something about is the third verse which came later.

It was written by Doris Penn in the 1950s when activist friends of hers were being imprisoned during the McCarthy era.

When tyrants tremble, sick with fear,  
And hear their death-knell ringing.  
When friends rejoice both far and near,  
How can I keep from singing?  
In prison cell and dungeon vile,  
Our thoughts to them go winging;  
When friends by shame are undefiled,  
How can I keep from singing?

The song fell out of use in the first half of the 20th century only to be revived in in the 1960s by Pete Seeger, Arlo Guthrie and other folk singers.

It was later adopted as a kind of anthem by the Quakers and the United Methodists published it in *The Faith We Sing* in 2000.

The McCarthy era was a low point in American history.

It operated on fear and suspicion.

The nation was divided.

Hate reigned.

People were persecuted for their beliefs.

You could say that America has recently found itself in a similar situation.

McCarthyism and Trumpism will sit alongside each other as low points in America's political history.

Here in Australia we can't be too smug.

There is concern that our democracy is under assault from within and without.

Some of our institutions, like the banks and the universities, have wobbled in recent times.

Our national broadcaster, the ABC, does less investigative journalism.

Australia need to be vigilant lest it finds itself in the same situation as the States.

*(Sing verse 3)*

*When tyrants tremble, sick with fear,  
And hear their death-knell ringing.  
When friends rejoice both far and near,  
How can I keep from singing?  
In prison cell and dungeon vile,  
Our thoughts to them go winging;  
When friends by shame are undefiled,  
How can I keep from singing?*

Mary, a young teenager, had almost nothing to her name except the security that came with being engaged.

Her fiancé Joseph had probably come into her life through the economic arrangements made between one poor working family and another.

Joseph gave Mary some security, for without a home ahead of her, she would be absolutely vulnerable in a society that still viewed women as property.

And so, to a young woman who had few choices, appeared an angel, who said, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour 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...'

Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?'

An angelic announcement was how Mary discovered she was pregnant.

An unwed, pregnant teenager, Mary was in a situation where now she had even fewer options.

Could she tell Joseph that she was pregnant with the child of God and appear to be insane? Or would it be better to offer another explanation that would mark her as unfaithful?

She decided to tell the truth, as strange as it was.

Mary betrothed, at least for now, and off to register in strange land, chose to do more than accept her fate.

She rejoiced in it.

In fact, we are told, she sang a song based upon the Jewish scriptures that had come before, a song we now call the 'Magnificat', which begins with the extraordinary words, 'My soul magnifies the Lord.'

You know how this story goes, and you know how it ends.

Mary tells Joseph the truth; he stands by her side, and her child is born and later threatened with death by Herod, a bloodthirsty king.

The little family flees to Egypt.

You know how this story goes and the hardships that follow, but you also know this: Mary was about to give birth to a force of love that would forever change the world.

So in her pain, her fear, and her lack of choices in life; In those strange and risky moments, Mary realised that she did have one choice.

She could cry, or she could sing God's word of hope.

And such was Mary's blessing to us: She couldn't keep from singing.

The Gospel was born amid shouts of praise.

Hallelujahs were everywhere: The announcement of the birth of John the Baptist called forth joy and gladness and rejoicing (Luke 1:14).

At Jesus' birth the angels could not refrain from praising (Luke 2:13).

Simeon and Anna were seized by the spirit of praise when they saw Jesus (Luke 2:25-28).

Those who have been touched by grace praise God no matter what the outward circumstances of their lives.

Praise is especially pleasing to God when it comes from the depths,

from the depths of the soul,

from the depths of near despair,

from the depths of pain and anguish.

In sickness and in health, praise God.

In weakness and in strength, praise God.

In death and dying, praise God.

Praise is the only safe place to be.

Paul calls it, being 'in Christ'.

How then can we keep from singing?

*(Sing Verse 4)*

*I life my eyes; the cloud grows thin; I see the blue above it.  
And day by day, this pathway smoothes, since first I learned to love it.  
The pace of Christ makes fresh my heart, a fountain ever springing.  
All things are mine, since I am Christ's—how can I keep from singing?*

## **PROFESSION OF FAITH**

**We believe in God,  
holy Source of all that is.  
We believe in God,  
who has spoken the eternal Word in Jesus Christ.  
We believe in God,  
ceaselessly breathing the Spirit into creation.**

**We trust in God's love and wisdom:  
fully revealed in the humanity of Jesus Christ,  
present to us through the Spirit's working  
in the Church and beyond.**

**We believe that God is calling the whole creation  
into a future of justice and peace.  
We share in Christ's risen life,  
and commit ourselves today to receive  
the coming reign of God.  
To the only God, Three yet One,  
be all honour and glory and praise  
now and for ever. Amen.**

## **ANNOUNCEMENTS** (John Cox)

### **OFFERING**

### **OFFERING PRAYER**

## **TAIZE SONG:** 'O Lord, hear my prayer' (TIS 741)

O Lord hear my pray'r,  
O Lord hear my pray'r:  
When I call answer me.  
O Lord hear my pray'r,  
O Lord hear my pray'r,  
Come and listen to me.

## **PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE** (Carolyn Craig-Emilsen)

Loving God,  
We come before you at the end of a long year  
and we hold before you the pain of our world:  
those suffering from COVID-19, those without food, water and shelter  
Yet we remember your signs of hope –  
new vaccines, dedicated frontline health workers  
and all who tirelessly work for justice and peace.  
Lord in your Mercy  
**Hear our prayer.**

Loving God,  
knowing your presence and rejoicing in the certainty of your love  
we pray with thanksgiving and confidence;  
on this green Summer day we give thanks for rain  
and though we pray for all facing dangerous downpours and rising rivers  
we remember the gift of your creation,  
its generous provision, shelter and magnificent beauty;  
may we treasure this gift and have the courage  
to protect it for generations to come.  
Lord in your Mercy.  
**Hear our prayer.**

Loving God,  
we pray for your church everywhere;  
in its struggles to be the people of God wherever it is.  
Especially we pray for wisdom for the Uniting Church in Australia  
As it seeks to do your will.,  
Lord in your Mercy.  
**Hear our prayer.**

Gracious God,  
during this season of Advent and eager expectation,  
we give thanks for the coming of the Rev. Myung Hwa Park as our Minister, for this  
generous community, for food and medical services,  
for the freedom to set aside time for celebration and refreshment;  
but we also pray for sensitive hearts and caring hands  
for those in our local community who may be suffering  
and for those in our own church who struggle with pain and declining health.  
Especially we pray for Shirley, Gwen, Gabrielle and others.  
You may wish to name others aloud or hold them in the silence of your heart.

*(a time of silence is held)*

Lord in your Mercy.  
**Hear our prayer.**

As we approach the beginning of a new year,  
give us discernment to focus on what truly matters,  
strength to carry out the task you call us to do,  
and joy to witness to the world.

Lord in your Mercy.  
**Hear our prayer.**

## **THE LORD'S PRAYER**

## The Sending Forth of the People of God

**HYMN:** 'Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord!' (TIS 161)

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!

CCLI Song # 2402653  
Timothy Dudley-Smith

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### **BLESSING**

May your souls magnify the Lord,  
may you go from this time of worship with uplifted spirits,  
embolden and challenged to serve the Lord,  
and may almighty God bless you +

### **DISMISSAL**

Our service is ended.  
Go, and with joy; prepare for the coming of the Christ.  
**Thanks be to God.**