

Circuit Service: Sunday 2nd January 2022

The light shines in the darkness

Welcome to worship on this, the first Sunday of 2022. This service was written before Christmas, where there was still some uncertainty and possibility of the timing of more restrictions relating to Covid-19. Wherever you are this day and whatever restrictions are in place, may I take this opportunity to wish you a very Happy and blessed New Year as we trust in God for all that the present and the future holds.

Today, we focus on the theme of light and, as we are still in the season of Christmas, we will share in some Christmas carols together too. We remember how the sky lit up with angels on that first Christmas signing Glory to God in the highest and we glorify and praise God as we sing our first hymn – “It came upon the midnight clear.”

Hymn StF 205/ H and P 108: It came upon the midnight clear

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KtV477Cqni0>

<p>1 It came upon the midnight clear, that glorious song of old, from angels bending near the earth to touch their harps of gold : 'Peace on the earth, good will to men, from heaven's all-gracious King !' The world in solemn stillness lay to hear the angels sing.</p> <p>2 Still through the cloven skies they come, with peaceful wings unfurled ; and still their heavenly music floats o'er all the weary world ; above its sad and lowly plains they bend on hovering wing ; and ever o'er its Babel sounds the blessed angels sing.</p>	<p>3 Yet with the woes of sin and strife the world has suffered long ; beneath the angel strain have rolled two thousand years of wrong ; and man, at war with man, hears not the love-song which they bring. O hush the noise, ye men of strife, and hear the angels sing !</p> <p>4 For lo, the days are hastening on, to prophets shown of old, when with the ever-circling years shall come the time foretold, when the new heaven and earth shall own the Prince of Peace their King, and all the world repeat the song which now the angels sing.</p> <p>Edmund Hamilton Sears (1810–1876)</p>
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Prayers of Adoration and Confession

Almighty and ever-living God, we come before you this day, to worship and to praise you. We come to glorify you, to give you all the honour and the praise due your name. We praise you for you created all that is and you created us to be good stewards of your creation and to be a people for your praise.

As we worship at the start of this New Year, we are mindful of those times when we have not been good stewards of all that you have given to us and when our lives have not been lived in an attitude of worship, seeking to glorify you. We take a moment in quietness now to ask for your forgiveness.

Time of silence

Gracious God, in your great love for your world, you did not leave us in darkness but sent your only Son Jesus Christ – the light of the world – to be the Saviour of all. He promised forgiveness to all who truly repent. Trusting in that promise, may we enter this New Year, in hope and expectation, walking courageously in the power of your Holy Spirit and seeking always to shine with the light of Christ.

We make this prayer in the name of Jesus who taught us when we pray to say:
Our Father....

Reflection

I wonder whether you have a favourite Christmas decoration that comes out each year? Perhaps it is a gift from a friend, or a decoration bought in memory of a loved one. I've got several like that and I enjoy putting them up and thinking of the people associated with them. But whenever we decorate our Christmas tree (which is usually quite near to Christmas), my favourite moment is switching on the lights. Somehow even just a little bit of light makes a remarkable difference – and when we take down all the decorations, it's the lights I miss most.

Light, even just a little bit, makes a difference. Today, we are focusing on light that doesn't appear just for a short time and get put in a cupboard, or disappear when the batteries run out. No - the light we are focusing on, is Jesus, who John describes in his gospel as "The true light that gives light to everyone..." (John 1:9). Later in that same Gospel, Jesus describes himself as the "Light of the World." In the wonderful Advent hymn. "Hills of the north, rejoice", Charles Oakley writes of Jesus "...he brings a never-ending light, who triumphed o'er our darkest night."

As we journey through life, step by step, moment by moment, day by day, may we keep looking towards that light, fixing our eyes on Jesus. And may we remember that Jesus also refers to his followers as lights, calling us to "...let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16 (NIV)).

"Silent night, holy night: Son of God, O how bright love is smiling from your face..."
We reflect on the light of the world coming into the world as we sing our next hymn.

Hymn StF 217/H and P 112: Silent night, holy night

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iRZOv31n1sY>

<p>1 Silent night, holy night : sleeps the world ; hid from sight, Mary and Joseph in stable bare watch o'er the child belovèd and fair sleeping in heavenly rest.</p> <p>2 Silent night, holy night : shepherds first saw the light, heard resounding clear and long, far and near, the angel-song : 'Christ the Redeemer is here !'</p>	<p>3 Silent night, holy night : Son of God, O how bright love is smiling from your face ! Strikes for us now the hour of grace, Jesus, Lord at your birth.</p> <p>Joseph Mohr (1792–1848) <i>translated by</i> Stopford Augustus Brooke (1832– 1916)</p>
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Reading: John 1: 1-18

Sermon

For many years when I was living at home with my parents, there was a plate in our hallway on the wall by the front door. On it were written the opening lines of a poem by Minnie Louise Haskins, famously quoted by King George VI in his Christmas broadcast in 1939:

"And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year:

"Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown."

And he replied:

"Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the Hand of God

That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way."

Speaking to people in what we now know were just the early days of 6 years of war, King George VI sought to bring a message of hope in the midst of challenge.

And John, the Gospel writer does the same. He reminds his first hearers and readers and reminds you and I today of the promise of light, of the presence of light and of the persistence, the constancy of light.

Hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus, we read in Isaiah's prophecy: "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned" (Isaiah 9:2) . Perhaps it's helpful to notice the small but significant words in this text – "have" and "has". Some translations record "will see a great light.... a light will dawn". "Have", "has", "will" – all words of certainty - the promised light will come. I'm always pleased when December 21st (the shortest day) comes as there is the promise of lengthening days, the promise of more light and we read more of the promise of light in John's Gospel as he records John the Baptist's role as a "witness to the light" (John 1:8).

John then moves on in this amazing prologue to write about the presence of the light – the fulfilment of - the embodiment of - the promise.

“The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world...The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” (John 1: 9, 14).

Let’s just sit with those words a moment. “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” Perhaps that still fills you with awe and wonder. Perhaps you have heard it so many times that you don’t feel the awe in the way you once did. Those words bear sitting with for some time. The God of all that is, seen and unseen, the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, did not leave people in fear and uncertainty but sent the Son who made his dwelling among us.” The Greek verb that is translated as “made his dwelling” or “lived” is “*skenoo*” which means “pitched his tent.” As the Israelites travelled in the wilderness God was present with them in the ‘tent of meeting’; now the tent is pitched among us as God comes to dwell in fully human, yet fully divine form in the Word made flesh – the light of the world.

The promise of light is fulfilled in the presence of the Light of the World – a light that will never fade. John shares early in his prologue: “The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1:5). In these days of uncertainty, I pray that these words will be a wonderful encouragement to you. For Jesus came, lived and died and rose again, conquering even death itself that we might live as people of hope, as people Jesus and holding the Christ-light for others as they hold it for us also.

When King George VI quoted Minnie Louise Haskins’ poem he continued:

So I went forth, and finding the Hand of God, trod gladly into the night.
And He led me towards the hills and the breaking of day in the lone East”

As we enter this new year may we take hold of the hand of God and tread with gladness, with hope, and with expectation, held in God’s love. AMEN.

We sing of more ‘wondrous light’ now as we sing our third carol.

Hymn StF 215/H and P 117: See, amid the winter’s snow

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0eLibkJSiVc>

<p>1 See, amid the winter's snow, born for us on earth below, see, the Lamb of God appears, promised from eternal years ! <i>Hail, the ever-blessèd morn ! Hail, redemption's happy dawn ! Sing through all Jerusalem : Christ is born in Bethlehem !</i></p> <p>2 Lo, within a manger lies he who built the starry skies, he who, throned in height sublime, sits amid the cherubim !</p> <p>3 Say, you holy shepherds, say, what your joyful news today ; why then have you left your sheep on the lonely mountain steep ?</p>	<p>4 'As we watched at dead of night, lo, we saw a wondrous light : angels, singing "Peace on earth," told us of the Saviour's birth.'</p> <p>5 Sacred infant, holy child, tender love so pure and mild comes from heaven's highest bliss down to such a world as this !</p> <p>Edward Caswall (1814–1878)</p>
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Prayers of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Take a few moments in quietness to bring before God the people and situations you want to thank God for.

Bring before God in prayer:

God's world, especially challenging situations in the world at this time.

God's church, throughout the world that we may witness to the Light of the World

All who are in need at this time – all known to God and loved by God

Yourself – bringing before God your own needs at this time.

You may wish to conclude your prayer with the following: "Thank you Lord, that the light shines in the darkness. May I continue to trust in you for the journey".

AMEN.

In love, God sent Jesus. We recommit ourselves in his service as we sing "In the bleak mid-winter" which contains the wonderful words "Yet, what I can I give him; give my heart."

Hymn StF 204/H and P 107: In the bleak midwinter

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pTzqMi2AQF8>

<p>1 In the bleak midwinter frosty wind made moan, earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone ; snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow, in the bleak midwinter, long ago.</p> <p>2 Heaven cannot hold him, nor the earth sustain ; heav'n and earth shall flee away when he comes to reign. In the bleak midwinter a stable-place sufficed God, the Lord Almighty, Jesus Christ.</p>	<p>3 Angels and archangels may have gathered there, cherubim and seraphim throughè the air — but his mother only, in her maiden bliss, worshipped the Belovèd with a kiss.</p> <p>4 What can I give him, poor as I am ? If I were a shepherd I would bring a lamb ; if I were a wise man I would do my part ; yet what I can I give him — give my heart.</p> <p>Christina Georgina Rossetti (1830–1894)</p>
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Blessing

When I was planning this service, I had a specific prayer in mind for the conclusion. Then I read the Circuit Service for Christmas Day and found that David Shaw had both included and adapted it. So we share again David's adapted version of Howard Thurman's prayer as our service of worship together draws to a close.

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky has gone
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:

To find the lost,
to heal those broken in spirit,
to feed the hungry,
to release the oppressed,
to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among all peoples,
And to radiate the Light of Christ,
every day, in every way, in all that we do and all that we say.
Then the work of Christmas begins.