



Almighty God, the most holy Friend of all people, it is with overflowing gladness that I worship you today with the countless host of heaven and my sisters and brothers around the world.

That you launched this universe and shaped us in your own likeness, is a breath-taking wonder.

That you sent your eternal Word to become one of us, is staggeringly magnificent.

That you are with us by your Spirit, counselling and energising us, is stunningly gracious.

Help me to worship you with the best I have to offer, holding nothing back from so great a Lover of humankind. Through Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

Tune: St Anne StF 132

YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ssr-Ga3Mz6Q>

O God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Our shelter from the stormy blast,
And our eternal home:

Under the shadow of thy throne
Thy saints have dwelt secure;
Sufficient is thine arm alone,
And our defence is sure.

Before the hills in order stood
Or earth received her frame,
From everlasting thou art God,
To endless years the same.

A thousand ages in thy sight
Are like an evening gone,
Short as the watch that ends the night
Before the rising sun.

The busy tribes of flesh and blood,
With all their cares and fears,
Are carried downward by the flood,
And lost in following years.

Time, like an ever-rolling stream,
Bears all its sons away;
They fly forgotten, as a dream
Dies at the opening day.

O God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Be thou our guard while life shall last,
And our eternal home.

*Isaac Watts (1674-1748)
based on Psalm 90.1-5*

Eternal God, you call us to ventures, of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us all faith to go forward with courage, not knowing where we go but only that your hand is leading us, and your love supporting us.

Beloved Jesus, may I have the faith and insight of the Wise Men, who, when faced with an ancient hope of a foreign people and the appearance of a remarkable star, grasped the connection, and went and followed that star.

I stand now at the border of a new year, which is to me like an unknown country. I don't know what I will experience as I traverse it; I don't know what obstacles will lie across my path. Lead me, like the Wise Men, on a quest of faithfulness and worship, of hopefulness and giving, and always unto Yourself. Amen. *

Reading - Matthew 2:13-23

When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him." So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod.

And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: “Out of Egypt I called my son.” When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: “A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.” After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child’s life are dead.” So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets, that he would be called a Nazarene.

Sermon

Hello... and Happy New Year to you all. The word of the year for 2022 was announced recently: “Gaslighting”. Look-ups for the word on the online Webster dictionary in 2022 increased by 1740%. So, Gaslighting is the word of the year for 2022. Gaslighting refers to a corrosive human activity whereby a deliberate and sustained attempt is made to mislead, especially for the perpetrator’s advantage.

Christmas is the time of year when Gaslighting goes on big time! During the Festive Season we are overwhelmed by marketeers and influencers gaslighting us regarding Christmas. Nearly everyone from John Lewis to the Church is at it: misleading you regarding Christmas. The biggest perpetrator of all, of course, is probably Hallmark: that famous maker of Christmas cards. Every year, the Gaslighters expose you to a continual downpour of an overly-sentimental, fluffy, sugary, impotent Christmas story that bears little resemblance to the magnificent scandal that is the real Christmas based upon the NT accounts of the Incarnation.

Perhaps the most popular untruth of them all is the assertion that Jesus was born in stable. You will see lots of nativity scenes of the holy family receiving guests in a stable. This is an utterly facile misrepresentation of the gospel of Luke. A stable is never mentioned or implied by the writer of Luke’s Gospel. Furthermore, the so called three kings of the Orient do not even make an appearance in Luke’s Gospel. This is another facile misrepresentation of something that is actually part of Matthew’s Gospel. In Matthew’s Gospel there are no shepherds or singing hosts of angels. The holy family are visited only by ‘sorcerers – or Magi – from the East’. A major portion of Matthew’s Incarnation story NEVER even makes an appearance in the Gaslighters’ version of Christmas. Crucial to Matthew’s Incarnation story are the images of murdered toddlers and inconsolable mothers and refugees fleeing from a murdering death squad. The king at the time of Jesus’ birth is nasty piece of work called Herod. Herod is tipped off that a baby has been born in Bethlehem and that this baby is believed by some to be the one who will be the long-awaited Messiah.

Herod is under no illusions that the Messiah is some purely spiritual title. Herod knows perfectly well that if the masses start following a Messiah, they will stop bowing down to the ruling authorities. And so, Herod is not going to allow any upstart Messiah to start fracturing the unquestioning obedience that he currently enjoys from his fearful subjects. However, unable to identify the exact baby, Herod simply dispatches a death squad to kill all the boys under the age of two in the village of Bethlehem. This part of Matthew’s story is simple, brutal, chilling. But it is also part of people’s experience the world over. The population of Bethlehem at the time was probably no more than about two hundred. If twenty children had been murdered somewhere in England or some other developed western country this week, we’d have all heard about it for sure. But if twenty children were killed in Sudan or Syria or North Korea there is every likelihood that the news media would not have registered it as significant enough.

But such stories, however widely reported, raise some tough questions about God. How can God allow such atrocities? How can God stand by and allow innocent children to be butchered and forgotten? If God is supposed to be bringing about a reign of love and peace and justice, what on earth is God doing allowing murderous tyrants like Herod to do as they please unchecked and unpunished? The authentic Christmas stories begin to respond to these kind of questions. The Gospels start, and continue, by challenging what ‘we’ think: what do we think God should be doing?

In Matthew's incarnation account there are some very deliberate parallels between this story and the story of Moses and the Exodus from slavery in Egypt. Matthew makes this explicit by quoting the prophet saying, "Out of Egypt I have called my son." In the popular Exodus stories that every Israelite kid was raised on, the oppressor was the king of Egypt... and the one who struck down the first-born children was God. Thus, in the Exodus story we have the image of a god who meets violence with violence. So now, when the roles are reversed and it is the oppressive king who kills the children, our instinct is, again, to look for God to meet violence with violence – a celestial peace-keeper, armed to the teeth to guarantee the security of the fearful people.

So right from the start of the authentic Jesus stories we are hearing a NEW message, a message that challenges our desires for a powerful avenging God who overcomes violence by even greater violence and imposes peace with an iron fist. So, if what you are wanting is a God of extreme force who will smash the bad guys and guarantee that nothing harmful will ever reach you, this Messiah – Jesus – is going to disappoint you. That is not the God who Jesus makes known to us. Even the loveliest of Christians suffer the cruelties of life. Anyway, just look at Jesus himself – hunted at birth and humiliated at death.

What sort of peace do we really want anyway? If you've ever travelled in a war torn or heavily militarised country where there are armed soldiers constantly patrolling the streets "for your protection", you will know that their presence gives only a tenuous sort of feeling of safety. The sort of peace and security that are based on the present balance of power being tilted our way... and constantly exhibited by the show of weapons in the street... is not actually the vision of harmonious peace with justice that we all long for. And it is not the sort of peace that God intended when he stepped into his own creation as a vulnerable new-born baby. Right at the beginning of the authentic stories God in Jesus faces the violence and oppression of the world in vulnerability and humility. Jesus is identified with his brothers and sisters in suffering the brutality of the world's murderous power-brokers. While he himself slips through the fingers of death on this 'Christmas' occasion, it is only as a refugee, and it is only a matter of time before the world's murderous power-brokers catch up with him and nail him like a rat to a barn door.

So, thus begins the salvation of the world. God enters the world, needy and naked, hunted, and humiliated, homeless, and fleeing. Not really a good Hallmark theme, is it? But in Jesus, God begins the real work of overcoming violence and oppression and hostility by standing before them and taking their full force in his own body that they might no longer be reciprocated in a constant murderous cycle of "what goes around comes around". Those who live in places where the death squads and lynch mobs are only held back by the even more terrifying force of the armed soldiers on every street corner... know only too well that the "peace" that is so secured still leaves their lives firmly "held in slavery by the fear of death." But the work of salvation has begun. It continues today (on this first day of a new year). The truth of Christmas has not changed, in spite of all the efforts of the Gaslighters. God, in love and solidarity, in mercy and in the abundance of grace, has come among us, flesh and blood, to unmask the violence and oppression and to bear it in his own body all the way to the cross, that we might be free, and that peace might truly come.

Intercessions

With my sisters and brothers everywhere, I pray that we may hold lovingly in our thoughts those who suffer from tyranny, subjection, cruelty, and injustice, and work every day towards the alleviation of their suffering.

May we recognize
our solidarity with the stranger, outcast, downtrodden, abused, and deprived,
that no human being should ever be treated as "other,"
that our common humanity weaves us together in one fabric of mutuality, and one garment of destiny.

May we pursue the Biblical prophet's vision of peace,
that we might live harmoniously with each other
and side by side, respecting differences, cherishing diversity,
with no one exploiting the weak,
each living without fear of the other,
each revering Divinity in every human soul.

May we
struggle against institutional injustice,
free those from oppression and contempt,
act with purity of heart and mind,
despising none, defrauding none, hating none,
cherishing all, honouring every child of God,
every creature of the earth.

May we and all peoples know peace in this New Year,
And may we nurture kindness and love everywhere. Amen. **

Tune: *Benson H&P 769* **YouTube:** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6FkXpVSribU>

God is working his purpose out, as year succeeds to year;
God is working his purpose out, and the time is drawing near;
Nearer and nearer draws the time, the time that shall surely be,
When the earth shall be filled with the glory of God, as the waters cover the sea.

What can we do to work God's work, to prosper and increase
The harmony of all the world, the reign of the Prince of Peace?
What can we do to hasten the time, the time that shall surely be,
When the earth shall be filled with the glory of God, as the waters cover the sea?

March we forth in the strength of God, with the banner of God unfurled,
That the light of the glorious gospel of truth may shine throughout the world;
Fight we the fight with sorrow and sin, to set their captives free,
That the earth may be filled with the glory of God, as the waters cover the sea.

All we can do is nothing worth, unless God blesses the deed;
Vainly we hope for the harvest-tide, till God gives life to the seed.
Yet nearer and nearer draws the time, the time that shall surely be,
When the earth shall be filled with the glory of God, as the waters cover the sea.

Arthur Campbell Ainger

God of all ages, release us from fear. Lead us forward, even as you have led us forward from an empty cross and tomb through twenty centuries. Be our companion as we walk unexplored paths into an unknown future. Open us to new possibilities. Renew our hope. Grant us faith to move ahead. Be our companion until Jesus comes again. In his name we pray. Amen.

On this certainty I move on from the close of this of worship:
The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit
will be with us all, come what may, forever. **Amen.**

* written by Jeanie Gushee (1962–), in [Yours Is the Day, Lord, Yours Is the Night: A Morning and Evening Prayer Book](#). Posted on [Prayers & Creeds](#)

** from the ReformJudaism.org website. <http://www.reformjudaism.org/practice/prayers-blessings/prayer-jewish-new-year> (Edited slightly)