



**Call to Worship** – Come quietly, come reverently, come expectantly, come; for God is waiting in the stillness of this moment, to bless us. **Amen.**

**Hymn - STF 175** – Light of the world

Watch on Youtube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z4A5tIA6 Tg>

Light of the world,  
you stepped down into darkness,  
opened my eyes, let me see  
beauty that made this heart adore you,  
hope of a life spent with you.

*So here I am to worship,  
here I am to bow down,  
here I am to say that you're my God,  
and you're altogether lovely,  
altogether worthy,  
altogether wonderful to me.*

King of all days  
oh so highly exalted,  
glorious in heaven above.  
Humbly you came

to the earth you created,  
all for love's sake became poor.

*So here I am to worship ...*

And I'll never know how much it cost  
to see my sin upon that cross.  
And I'll never know how much it cost  
to see my sin upon that cross.

*So here I am to worship ...*

Tim Hughes

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### **Prayer**

Close your eyes and remember a significant time or event. Imagine the sounds you might hear, the things you see; the colours, the texture, the smells. In the quietness of this moment give thanks for the beauty you have known, for special friends, and family; for food, and warmth, for laughter and companionship.

Patient God, when in the heat of the moment we have spoken words we now regret: **forgive us.**

When in the business of our day, we fail to see that someone is waiting for a word from us: **forgive us.**

When we miss the opportunity to speak out against injustice and hatred: **forgive us.**

When apathy and indifference close our eyes to those struggling in wilderness places: **forgive us.**

Forgive us and fill us with your compassion and energy to speak your word of love and hope to a world in need, for now is the time. **Amen.**

### **Scripture:** Luke 3: 1 - 6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene— during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet:

“A voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all people will see God’s salvation.’”

## Reflection - So, You Want to Go To Bethlehem, Do You?

Have you ever made a long trip "home"? It may be a long, tiring journey, but it was well worth everything you had to endure to get there, to be surrounded by the love of family members, some of whom you may not have seen for more years than you care to count. And when you come back, you were not the same people you were before the journey. Maybe you felt reassured that, even though "home" has changed a lot since we were growing up there, the love you expected to find was still there in abundance.

Each year, during the season of Advent, the church sets off on a journey. We begin to prepare our hearts and our minds for the coming of the Christ-child, so that this time he will have a proper place to be born. And we think we know the way to Bethlehem. We can find it on the map. It's not that far from Jerusalem, by today's standards; shouldn't be a problem.

But the problem is that so much has changed since our last visit. A whole year has passed, a year that brought many changes in our lives, some of them good, some of them not so good, some of them heartbreaking. The geographic map of life has changed, and even old familiar places don't seem the same any more. So maybe we could use a little help in finding our way back to Bethlehem this year. That is, if you still want to go.

If we were to ask any of the writers of the gospels how to get to Bethlehem, I think we might be surprised by their answer.

"So, you want to go to Bethlehem, do you? Tell you what to do: go on out to the desert, outside of the relatively safe confines of Jerusalem. Keep going till you get to the Jordan River. You'll know it when you see it. It's the only river around these parts. You'll find a man there – strange looking old coot – standing knee-deep in the water, just baptizing folks left and right, as fast as he can. That'll be John the Baptist. You ask him how to get to Bethlehem. If you want to get to Bethlehem, you have to start there at the Jordan with John. He's the only one who can help you get there."

They all say the same thing, all four of them – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. They all say that if you really want to go to Bethlehem, first you have to encounter John the Baptist.

The season of Advent belongs, not to Jesus, but to old weird John, munching on grasshoppers, dressed in his camel's hair shirt. He's there in every account of the story, out there in the desert, standing knee-deep in the River Jordan, preaching his one and only sermon, pointing the way to Bethlehem.

Now, I don't know about you, but I'm not real anxious to go out there in the desert again. I already know what that weirdo in the camel's hair shirt is going to say. He says the same thing every year, like a broken record, over and over. What kind of preacher only has one sermon? No wonder he's out there in the desert. The Superintendent probably sent him there because none of the churches would have him! You know what his sermon is, don't you? "Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand." That's it. No cute illustrations, no three point sermons and a story, no worn-out, pious clichés. He just stands there, roaring his one-line sermon like a lion. You could probably hear him long before you could catch sight of him. You could hear "REPENT!" echoing off the barren desert landscape. And I don't want to hear that, especially now, at this time of the year. Don't you just want to shout at him, "Lighten up, John! You crusty old party-poopers! It's Christmas, for Pete's sake! Can't you see we're trying to have fun here?"

But, you see, John is a prophet. Now, some folks think that a prophet is someone who can foretell the future. That's probably because the word "prophecy," in its current usage, refers to predicting future events. And that may be part of what prophets do. But that's the part that's easy to take. We can grade them on their accuracy later. What's hard to take about prophets is what they say about the PRESENT. And what they say about the present is almost always, "You've got it all wrong! You'd better repent!" Prophets rarely disclose anything new or earth-shattering about the present. They simply tell us what we already knew but didn't want to be reminded of—that we need to change. And change is almost always painful.

There are basically only two forms of religious experience – priestly and prophetic. Priestly religion seeks to uphold the status quo. "Gods in His Heaven, all is right with the world. This is the way we've always done it, and we don't see any reason to do it any other way. It's always worked for us in the past. Oh, sure, our numbers are fewer as we gather on Sunday morning, but we can't help it if today's generation refuses to do things our way. They'll learn, sooner or later. And when they do, we'll be here to say 'I told you so.'"

Priestly religion sees God as the guardian of society, the keeper of the status quo. It reduces religion to rules, rites, rituals, and ceremonies. Do what is required by the norms of society (and the preacher will tell you what those are), live up to your family's expectations, and keep the rules of the religious establishment and you're going to be okay, in this world and the next. No wonder cheap grace is so popular. It's easy! It doesn't require any deep level of commitment. Just memorize the rules and try not break any of them and be truly contrite if you do accidentally break one or two along the way.

Prophetic religion, on the other hand, sees things not as they are, but as they could be, if we truly seek the will of God for our lives. Prophetic religion demands repentance and change. It takes chances, gives up the security blanket, hates moral compromise. Prophetic religion demands and expects a higher level of commitment to seeking first the kingdom of God. The message of the prophet is not, "I'm okay, you're okay," but, "I'm not okay, you're not okay, neither is anybody else, and something has to be done about it."

Priestly religion comforts the afflicted. Prophetic religion afflicts the comfortable. As I travel on my own faith journey, I've come to the conclusion that there is a time to comfort, and a time to be comforted; a time to afflict and a time to be afflicted. I believe we are living in a time that calls for all the above. There are tens of thousands of people in this country alone who are in need of the basic comforts of life: food, shelter, clothing, meaningful work, stable families, dependable friends, and caring life partners. It is a time for us to comfort the comfortless.

We live in a time of confusion and great danger. Many parts of the world are in danger of sinking into total chaos with many nations teetering on the edge of anarchy. The ecology of the whole insane planet seems to be hanging by a thread. The world is a scary place these days.

It is a time for you and me to seek comfort in the place where comfort may truly be found – not in possessions, or wealth, or drugs, or momentary distractions. Neither can comfort be found in overflowing appointment books or endless self-examination. Advent is the time to renew our connection with the only One who can truly comfort us – the God who says, according to the prophet Isaiah, "I have seen their ways, but I will heal them; I will guide them and restore comfort to them" (Isaiah 57:18). Advent is a time to set aside the myth that each of us can live however we want to live with no consideration of the consequences of our actions. It's a time to realize that "independence" is NOT the ideal we should encourage our children to pursue, but "INTER dependence," the reality that our lives are inseparably connected with all God's children everywhere on this planet. It's a time to understand that we live in a world that is governed by one simple moral premise: "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good people to do nothing."

There is a time to comfort, a time to be comforted, a time to afflict, and a time to be afflicted. Advent is an "all-of-these" kind of season. And it belongs to John the Baptist, who helps us to understand that what happened on that first Christmas 2,000 years ago HAS to make a difference in what happens today. That the world HAS to change. And change can only begin with the person who stares back at you from the mirror.

So, do you want to go to Bethlehem? I think it's only fair that I should warn you, before we set off for the desert to get our directions from John, understand that no one who makes this journey to Bethlehem comes back the same person as they were before. So, if you still want to go, let us go together and be changed together. Amen

## Prayers of Intercession

In the desert John spoke his words of judgement, challenging people to change, to repent, to be baptised with water.

We remember today:

those who hear only words of judgement;  
those struggling in a desert of despair;  
those who are afraid for their future;  
those who feel worthless and unloved;  
those who are isolated and lonely.

By the lake and in the marketplace Jesus spoke his words of invitation,  
challenging people to follow him,  
transforming them with his spirit of love.

We remember today:

those who speak words of encouragement;  
those who walk with the despairing;  
those who give hope to the fearful;  
those who offer friendship to the unloved;  
those who stand alongside the lonely.

We pray for those who find it difficult to say sorry,  
and those who find forgiveness too difficult.

We give thanks for John the Baptist  
who prepared the way for something new to happen,  
bridging the gap between old and new,  
judgement and forgiveness. **Amen.**

***The Lords Prayer** : Our Father, who art in heaven .....*

**STF 189** - Wild and lone the prophet's voice

Watch on Youtube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mtTEGi2tbCA>

Wild and lone the prophet's voice  
echoes through the desert still,  
calling us to make a choice,  
bidding us to do God's will :  
'Turn from sin and be baptised ;  
cleansing your heart and mind and soul.  
Quitting all the sin you prized,  
yield your life to God's control.'

'Bear the fruit repentance sows :  
lives of justice, truth, and love.  
Trust no other claim than those ;  
set your heart on things above.  
Soon the Lord will come in power,  
burning clean the threshing floor :

then will flames the chaff devour ;  
wheat alone shall fill God's store.'

With such preaching stark and bold  
John proclaimed salvation near,  
and his timeless warnings hold  
words of hope to all who hear.  
So we dare to journey on,  
led by faith through ways untrod,  
till we come at last like John  
to behold the Lamb of God.

Carl P. Daw, Jr (b. 1944)

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## Blessing

May the road you travel be smooth and straight; every ditch filled in, every bump and rut smoothed out;  
any diversion easy to navigate and may good companions share your journey.

The blessing of Almighty God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit be with you and those you love, this day  
and for ever more. **Amen**