



Opening Liturgy

Presents get wrapped with tape and glue, Tidy parcels neatly wrapped, Names on labels with “love from”, O hush the noise, **Let’s hear the angels sing.**

We’ve sorted gifts and who needs what, What will they like, what will be good? But are there more we need to include? O hush the noise, **Let’s hear the angels sing.**

What of those alone, adrift, forgotten and neglected? What of those whose life’s been hard? What gift of help needs wrapping too? O hush the noise, **Let’s hear the angels sing.**

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Hymn – We wait in hope

We wait in hope for hope to come:
promised of old; the righteous one.
Help us to watch, expect and pray
and then to greet Messiah’s day.

We hear the prophet’s voice ring clear:
‘changed hearts and lives are needed here’.
So, when the Spirit fires your Church,
make us a sign for all who search.

We read the story of your plan:
this world redeemed by heaven’s Son.
Grace breaks upon the present time;
mercy and hope through David’s line.

We go to share this great Good News:
heirs of the promise – we will choose
to live in hope that all may sing
praises to Christ, the infant king.

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Prayer

Dear God, we come to worship you as we prepare to celebrate your birth and, in some way, to greet you anew. We have that sense of expectation and rising panic that we may be about to miss a great event...as we gather now in this time of space and worship, give us calm to remember that this Christmas is still ten days away but you are already here among us – born in Bethlehem two thousand and more years ago, you are always here.

For that we bring our profoundest thanks and praise. Ever present God, not God of an annual appearance, we ask that you will be with us now.

William Glasse

Imagine a ministry of outside

Sitting in this all-but-empty space, Furnished with religious bric-a-brac from yesteryear, We wonder, living God, What is your purpose for us now?

And God says; ‘Why not take a look outside – The world still goes about its business, What might we offer to those who, let’s be honest, Are unlikely to chance to look inside?’

‘For instance: This corner, where the litter whirls and eddies, might become a colourful bed of flowers; this sunny wall might host a bench for weary passers-by, or those who need a quiet place to think and pray; can veg be grown to feed the hungry, or quirky post-it jokes and poems placed to cheer up those caught in despair?’

‘Outside, The world still goes about its business’, Says God, ‘I hope I soon can meet you there.’

Ian Fosten ©The United Reformed Church

We confess that we do not always look outside, Nor notice the time warp within. We confess that we do not always see who passes by, Nor if they see us here. We confess our disconnect from the world beyond, Yet that world is yours, and ours.

We repent of our disengagement, We regret how we can make over much of difference, And not notice your people, normal people, Interested in your work in here.

Forgive us those things that set us aloof, Forgive us when wedges are driven, Spreading wider the space between us and them.

Remind as we are called apart, Not to greater distance but to wholeness, Life in you which is all life.

May we be blessed as we worship, Blessed as we live And fulfilled in the life of everywhere, For Jesus's sake. Amen.

William Glasse

Lord's Prayer

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 trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever. **Amen.**

Hymn – 176 – Like a candle flame Watch on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=teZaQUKjx24>

Like a candle flame,
flick'ring small in our darkness.

Uncreated light
shines through infant eyes.

God is with us, alleluia,
God is with us, alleluia,
come to save us, alleluia,
come to save us,
alleluia!

Graham Kendrick (born 1950) © 1998 Make Way Music, PO Box 263, Croydon, Surrey, CR9 5AP, UK.

Stars and angels sing,
yet the earth sleeps in shadows;
can this tiny spark
set a world on fire?

Chorus

Yet His light shall shine
from our lives, Spirit blazing,
as we touch the flame
of His holy fire.

Chorus

Reading – Zephaniah 3:14-20

Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem!

The Lord has taken away the judgments against you; he has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more.

On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: "Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak. The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival."

I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it. I will deal with all your oppressors at that time.

And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth.

At that time I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the Lord.

Reading – Luke 3:7-18

John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Therefore, bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; therefore, every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."

And the crowds asked him, "What, then, should we do?"

In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none, and whoever has food must do likewise." Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

As the people were filled with expectation and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water, but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the strap of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

So, with many other exhortations he proclaimed the good news to the people.

Hymn - 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;
cleanse your heart and mind and soul.
Quitting all the sins you prized,
yield your life to God's control.'

'Bear the fruit repentance shows:
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 (born 1944) © 1989 Hope Publishing Company. All rights reserved

Sermon - Where do we focus?

The Methodist Church suggests the theme of *Babel Sounds* for this week, together with the overarching advent strapline of *Hush the Noise*.

You may recognise the reference to the Old Testament story of the Tower of Babel. Before Babel, people spoke with a common language and were becoming overconfident God thought. Their languages were mixed up; cacophony followed.

I have never been a fan of large and noisy gatherings where it is hard to focus on a conversation. Older ears have worsened the problem. Noise is a vicious circle; as a room gets louder everyone speaks up to be heard and the clamour rises. Conversely, there is a temptation to hide in silence, to bottle up problems and use good order as front for ineffective emotional pain relief.

The opening liturgy reflected on wrapped up gifts and things being sorted, but asks the question, what about those for whom that is not true, not possible, not practical, not affordable? Where are they in the noise or the silence? Are we of their number? Are they welcome among us?

What am I trying to say?

We are part of a widely varied people. We all love or loathe silence, noise, order or chaos differently. That must be accepted but so too do we all need to work out our ways of focusing on what matters and seeing through to what is important.

When we pray for hush in the noise of the babel sounds, we are looking for strength to shut out distractions while letting in the things we need to engage with. There are times when we let in the wrong sounds and they can take over our lives without our realising it. The voices that lead us into wrong choices may be like that.

If a modern-day John the Baptist were to come to our churches, would we welcome his voice or consider the bluntness of his message to be harsh, distracting and counter-cultural? After all, John was blunt, demanding and controversial.

In the reading from the Gospel, as John launched himself on the world people wondered if he was the Messiah, but quickly he pointed them to a bigger vision amidst his calls to repent. His underlying message was disruptive, as disruptive as babel chaos.

- It could not be avoided by clinging to traditional faith in Abraham.
- It required a new way of facing up to need: sharing surplus, not over taxing if you were a tax collector, and not extorting money or accusing falsely if you were a soldier.

No doubt John's examples were illustrative. Plenty of other interpretations can be overlaid on the idea of fair treatment and support.

John the Baptist seems to have caused upheaval, a variation on babel activity and yet his aim was simple and unifying: focus on what matters, focus on what is coming, focus on God. Start by recognising that you are not perfect and must recognise and repent sin.

Zephaniah's prophesy addressed the restoration of Jerusalem – a time of relief after chaos – calm after Babel in a way. There are two approaches. Jerusalem is personified and that makes the relief seem more tangible when he goes on to reassure the people of being able to do again things that were denied.

I may be going too far, but I sense the parable of the prodigal son in these old words, or the illustration Jesus uses in Matthew 23 and Luke 13 of a mother hen gathering her chicks together under her for safety.

In this there is more than a futile attempt to hush a world that is beyond noisy; there is the sense of creating hush and restoring calm while the chaos rages. Yearning for hush is not about denial; it is about accepting confusion and developing techniques for focus.

All five of the hymns I have suggested do this in different ways.

In 'We wait in hope' we are stepping back slightly, listening and waiting for something to stand out and fire the church. That theme is picked up by Graham Kendrick in his 'Like a candle flame' which sees the transition from flickering to blazing and the change from just something in the darkness to the full blaze of God's love.

Carl Daw reminds us that the voice of a prophet is sometimes the lone voice in the desert. The desert may have chaos of its own in the vastness and emptiness; the shattering noise of silence can become its own sort of babel, even if only in the mind. The voice echoes but, Daw reflects the call to repentance may be unheard, or if heard, unheeded.

Henry Burton developed the same theme as Graham Kendrick, moving from small to large. There's a light upon the mountains hears the sound of distant music as it opens out into fuller swell; it turns out that the heart beats of love here are the drum beats of the army of God. This hymn has the same ebb and flow of earth and heaven, noise and resolution running through all its verses.

That, too, is the theme of the words of Edmund Sears that are the focus this year. It is of chords, sounds, chaos, resolving, not necessarily into quiet but into coherence which is helpful instead of a hindrance. The new single song of heaven soars over babel. We are back where we started, to one language. This time it is the language of God and not the arrogant pride of humans.

We are all made differently. We think differently. We behave differently.

Our question, as we reflect is, 'what will it take for us to focus outside ourselves and see the face of God, hear the voice of God and do the work of God this Christmas in his future to come?

Amen.

Hymn - 188 - There's a light upon the mountains

Watch on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AOCqAIA9m04>

There's a light upon the mountains, and the day is at the spring,
When our eyes shall see the beauty and the glory of the King;
Weary was our heart with waiting, and the night-watch seemed so long;
But his triumph-day is breaking, and we hail it with a song.

There's a hush of expectation, and a quiet in the air;
And the breath of God is moving in the fervent breath of prayer:
For the suffering, dying Jesus is the Christ upon the throne,

And the travail of our spirit is the travail of his own.

He is breaking down the barriers, he is casting up the way;
He is calling for his angels to build up the gates of day;
But his angels here are human, not the shining hosts above;
For the drum-beats of his army are the heart-beats of our love.

Hark! We hear a distant music, and it comes with fuller swell;
'Tis the triumph-song of Jesus, of our King, Immanuel:
Zion, go ye forth to meet him; and, my soul, be swift to bring
All thy finest and thy noblest for the triumph of our King!

Henry Burton (1840-1930)

Dedication of offering

We bring our gifts in this season of giving knowing that whether we give a little or much, if we give all we can we are blessed and the work we do will be a blessing. Receive our gifts, giving God, for Jesus Christ's sake. Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

[Day 15 in The Methodist Church Prayer Handbook, Praise and Protest, is a day for praying for Christians in the Middle East and Britain.](#)

'God, who came and lived among us, born in Bethlehem, we pray for the land of your birth. As Herod slaughtered the innocents of Bethlehem in fear and hatred, so today many children have died again in the land of your birth. As Rachel wept, so we weep at the loss of innocent lives. Yet even in the darkness, your light of love shines on in the actions of medics and peacemakers who reach out even while others despair. We give thanks for the volunteers of the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Israel and Palestine and pray for their safety amidst settler violence and army intimidation. We pray for those who work for political change to avoid future conflict, that the political arrangements may be found to give peace and security to all those who live in the land we call Holy.

John Howard, former Mission partner, Israel and Palestine and former EAPPI volunteer.

Lord, here I am, to be your warrior here on earth, To fight hatred with love, To battle ignorance and inequality with kindness and patience, To tear out seeds of injustice before they take root. My weapons are my heart, wit and empathy, My arrows, words of love; My sword, acts of kindness; My battle cry, that of the voiceless; My armour, my faith in your promise, in your word and footsteps beside me; My shield, your love and my brothers and sisters in faith. Give me resilience not to appease injustice for politeness' sake, the courage not to flee difficult situations. Strengthen my resolve never to look away from injustice and cruelty. Until love rules the world, may I forever be your warrior of love.

Louise Whitelegg, local preacher and Isle of Man Christian Aid representative.

Lord, send us out, Send us out from our buildings, full of history, and comfort and meaning, and lead us into lead us into your world as your disciples where the story is still being written. Send us out with our hearts full of love and concern and fear and hope, and lead us into your heart for this blessed and beautiful world where the story is still being written. Continue to bless places for lonely people to gather; soup lunches and warm spaces; Moves and renovations; missions and prayer gatherings; and all the ways we seek to move from where we are to where you want us to be. Lord, send us out. And remind us – remind me – that the story is still being written.

Sean Turner, MOCC, Isle of Man.

We pray for the people of the community around us where we are, for our witness among them and what they see in us this Christmas. We pray that we be givers and not takers, free responders and not coerced people in the work of your kingdom.

Let us consider in our hearts all those we know of who are ill, or worried; Those pressured by life and those whose lives are full of pain or who are dependent on others for their welfare.

We pray for any facing difficult decisions concerning their health and those for whom no decisions are left save that to wait. Be with those who wait and those who watch with them that they may know true peace and serenity that are your gifts.

And we pray in all sympathy for those who are newly bereaved, who face this Christmas alone or without someone close and whom they loved.

God, grant you blessing on all; hear our prayers as we bring them, in and for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

William Glasse

Hymn - 205 - It came upon the midnight clear Watch on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SiG2tPdWVwU>

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.

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 blessèd angels sing.

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!

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.

Edmund H Sears (1810-1876)

Blessing

The angels are still singing. Prophets are still speaking. Hush the noise, hear them sing, repeat the song, bring harmony. And the blessing of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, be ours, now and always. **Amen.**