



**Call to Worship – Psalm 148:1-2** : Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord from the heavens; praise him in the heights! Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his host!

**Hymn STF202 - Hark! The herald angels sing**

Watch on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Bwn0k0k8xl>

Hark, the herald-angels sing  
glory to the new-born King,  
peace on earth, and mercy mild,  
God and sinners reconciled.  
Joyful, all ye nations, rise,  
join the triumph of the skies;  
with the angelic host proclaim,  
'Christ is born in Bethlehem.'  
Hark, the herald-angels sing  
glory to the new-born King.

Christ, by highest heaven adored,  
Christ, the everlasting Lord,  
late in time behold him come,  
offspring of a Virgin's womb.  
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see:  
hail, the incarnate Deity,  
pleased as man with men to dwell,  
Jesus, our Emmanuel.  
Hark, the herald-angels sing  
glory to the new-born King.

Hail, the heaven-born Prince of  
Peace:  
hail, the Sun of Righteousness.  
Light and life to all he brings,  
risen with healing in his wings.  
Mild he lays his glory by,  
born that man no more may die,  
born to raise the sons of earth,  
born to give them second birth.  
Hark, the herald-angels sing  
glory to the new-born King.

*Charles Wesley, (1707-1788),*

**Responsive Praise – Psalm 148 : Praise for God's Universal Glory**

Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord from the heavens; praise him in the heights! Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his host! **Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars! Praise him, you highest heavens, and you waters above the heavens!**

Let them praise the name of the Lord, for he commanded and they were created. He established them for ever and ever; he fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed. **Praise the Lord from the earth, you sea monsters and all deeps, fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind fulfilling his command!**

Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars! Wild animals and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds! **Kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all rulers of the earth! Young men and women alike, old and young together!**

Let them praise the name of the Lord, **for his name alone is exalted; his glory is above earth and heaven.**

He has raised up a horn for his people, praise for all his faithful, for the people of Israel who are close to him.  
**Praise the Lord! Amen.**

**Prayer :** *May our lives resound with praise in the intricate dance of life*

Gracious Creator, Eternal God We lift our voices in praise today. As the heavens declare your glory, And the earth rejoices in the work of your hands, We join the cosmic chorus and marvel at beauty surrounding us. Thank you for the intricate dance of life. May we be faithful stewards of this wondrous creation. In our praise, we remember those who suffer – The brokenness of our world, The cries of the marginalised, The wounds afflicted upon nature. Grant us wisdom to care for your masterpiece, To honour the dignity of all life. May our lives resound with praise, A harmonious echo of your love.

*Stephen Ansa-Addo ©The United Reformed Church*

Lord, we confess our sins. We have not always thought about how we blend with others, We are not always considerate towards the earth that carries us, Sometimes we brush off those who love us. You never ignore us, You watch us when we look the other way, You catch us when we look after we have leaped, We can rely on you, reliable God. As we repent, Give us the blessing of knowing that we are forgiven, Not because of merit, But because the child, the birth remembered this week, Is the child of our time, Is the child for us, Is your only child, Your gift of love. God, eternal one, We come with worship and we come rejoicing! Thank you for your Christmas gift to us; Life for evermore, wrapped in the clothes of a newborn.

*William Glasse*

**Lord's Prayer** : Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your Kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For the Kingdom, the power and the glory are yours. Now and forever Amen.

**Introduction to theme** : Today is an in between day. Christmas is behind us and New Year is ahead. Our gospel reading is a story of stopping and starting again while both Isaiah and the writer to the Hebrews talk about what God has done, does and what he will do.

**Hymn STF218 – Unto us a boy is born**

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

Unto us a boy is born!  
King of all creation,  
came he to a world forlorn,  
the Lord of every nation.

Cradled in a stall was he  
with sleepy cows and asses;  
but the very beasts could see

that he all men surpasses.

Herod then with fear was filled:  
'A prince', he said, 'in Jewry!'

All the little boys he killed  
at Bethl'em in his fury.

Now may Mary's son, who came

so long ago to love us,  
lead us all with hearts aflame  
unto the joys above us.

Omega and Alpha he!  
Let the organ thunder,  
while the choir with peals of glee  
doth rend the air asunder.

*Gradual Moosberg (1355/1360), Percy Dearmer (1867-1936), George Radcliffe Woodward (1848-1934)*

**Readings - Isaiah 63:7-9, Hebrews 2:10-18 and Matthew 2:13-23.**

**Hymn STF215 - See amid the winter's snow**

Watch on YouTube : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xlQTIN2HOAg>

See, amid the winter's snow,  
born for us on earth below,  
see, the Lamb of God appears,  
promised from eternal years!

*Hail, the ever-blessèd morn!  
Hail, redemption's happy dawn!  
Sing through all Jerusalem:  
Christ is born in Bethlehem!*

*Edward Caswall (1814-1878)*

Lo, within a manger lies  
he who built the starry skies,  
he who, throned in height sublime,  
sits amid the cherubim!

*Chorus*

Say, you holy shepherds, say,  
what your joyful news today;  
why then have you left your sheep  
on the lonely mountain steep?

*Chorus*

'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.'

*Chorus*

Sacred infant, holy child,  
tender love so pure and mild,  
comes from heaven's highest bliss  
down to such a world as this!

*Chorus*

**Sermon - Looking both ways (Isaiah 63:9)** *In all their distress he too was distressed, and the angel of his presence saved them. In his love and mercy, he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.*

If you are one of those people who puts up Christmas decorations well before Advent by today you may be feeling that it is time to take them down. Too much of a good thing syndrome is tiring your capacity for fairy lights and tinsel.

I am in the group of people who like Christmas to begin on Christmas Eve and I really am not all that bothered about decorations and feeling 'Christmassy' before then. Decorations are important through until twelfth night. There are cultures and traditions that keep on with them right through Epiphany, or certainly well into it.

There are no correct answers except that we all coalesce around the day itself; the moment when we celebrate the birth of Jesus; God made flesh and living alongside us, 'full of grace and truth' as Saint John put it so succinctly. (John 1:14). As Isaiah put it, God, understanding our distress came to the rescue.

Today, this midpoint Sunday between Christmas and New Year sees us looking both ways. Reflecting we ask, 'what have I done'. In prospect we question, perhaps with trepidation, 'what will I do'. To be honest in response to both questions we need to be saying, 'where am I now.'

It may seem silly but emotionally, mentally, and spiritually, where are you now? Are you sure of yourself? Are you in distress?

The writer to the Hebrews said in our reading that the point of Jesus's role, as he dressed up in our flesh, was that of sharing with us. Living and feeling as we do. Jesus feels our sufferings but he also feels our good times. It was his own testing and suffering experiences that make him real for us, but his final gift of his life makes him larger than life and the sources of big new perspectives and broad horizons.

God's glory, the Psalmist reflected, is universal. Isaiah described one of its manifestations in his lifting and carrying of the people when they were suffering. God always grieves over this people's pain, even when it was self-inflicted as was often the case, not least in that of the Babylonian exile, brought about because of sinful disobedience.

Where am I today? In self-inflicted trouble or blessed beyond measure? God who sees will lift and carry as he has always lifted and carried. If we turn to the account of the visions that kept Mary, Joseph and Jesus safe after the three kings had left them, we see a picture that is not our picture and yet ours can be overlaid on it.

Christmas had been wonderful. It was challenging for the baby to be born in a stable but after all the initial anguish of there being nowhere to lie down, the pub owner came to the rescue with space in the garage – or that's the modern equivalent. Imagine if Jesus had been born on a heap of oily rags in an inspection pit normally used so engineers can work standing up underneath a vehicle. I digress!

After that, random visitors came with songs and presents. A lamb and some valuables but all in all there was a sense of good news, pulling together and generosity. Once it was over it was time to go home. This where God shows himself working as he does. Those of us who live near the East Suffolk railway line have enjoyed several weeks of level crossing closures while strengthening and other adaptation works were undertaken to ready the line for more freight trains destined for Sizewell. Signs have warned us to go a different way and ignoring the signs meant being faced by an impassable road – but at least the problem was of embarrassment not real danger.

I can think of times when, over the years, for an inexplicable reason I have left at a different time than planned to drive somewhere only to find I had missed being involved in an accident. Or doing some job or another when a nudge says that is risky, do it a different way. I firmly believe God works like the diversion signs which we can choose to ignore. That is what he did after the camels and their riders left the nativity scene. God warned Joseph in a dream of the danger of Herod and suggested a different road. Here is God deliberately averting distress and Joseph, unlike the people of another age, listening and altering plans.

Would you have listened? Looking back, be thankful for those warnings. As if it was needed, Matthew says that the dreadful massacre of infants by Herod as he tried to get Jesus was foretold by Jeremiah. It is never nice when a warning is validated, especially if the validation includes something bad happening but 'I told you so' is part of life's experience. From the embarrassment of a closed road to being badly hurt or worse by live wires, warnings come for a reason.

Look back and be thankful – look forward and plan to listen harder.

Eventually Herod died. The risk of his anger died with him and although there was a concern that his son Archelaus might be a risk too, God encouraged the family to think about reintegrating in the area where God planned that later Jesus would do much of his work...so they went to Nazareth. Safer than living next to the palace and in roughly the right area.

As we look forward now, have we engaged with God to ask what we should be getting involved with, or whether we should be living or travelling somewhere else in serving him?

Ministers regularly move; preachers and lay workers focus on churches and communities that they can support; other people move about with their work.

What is God saying as 2026 comes around the corner?

Look back and give thanks for warnings and guidance and especially for being carried when it was hard.  
Look ahead and ask what is right for the foreseeable future.

Review the moment. Jesus is here, dressed as we dress to be our strength and guide us just as in ancient times God lifted and carried the people when they were at their weakest and in their worst distress.

I trust that you have had a peaceful Christmas and I wish you a blessed new year. **Amen.**

**Hymn STF723 - Who can sound the depths of sorrow needed** Graham Kendrick (born 1950) © 1988 Make Way Music

Watch on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nG8CBot9vFA>

Who can sound the depths of sorrow  
in the Father heart of God,  
for the children we've rejected,  
for the lives so deeply scarred?  
And each light that we've extinguished  
has brought darkness to our land:  
upon our nation, upon our nation  
have mercy Lord!

We have scorned the truth You gave  
us,  
we have bowed to other lords,

we have sacrificed the children  
on the altars of our gods.  
O let truth again shine on us,  
let Your holy fear descend;  
upon our nation, upon our nation  
have mercy Lord!

Who can stand before Your anger;  
who can face Your piercing eyes?  
For You love the weak and helpless,  
and You hear the victims' cries.  
Yes, You are a God of justice,

and Your judgement surely comes:  
upon our nation, upon our nation  
have mercy Lord!

Who will stand against the violence?  
Who will comfort those who mourn?  
In an age of cruel rejection,  
who will build for love a home?  
Come and shake us into action,  
come and melt our hearts of stone:  
upon Your people, upon Your people,  
have mercy Lord!

**Dedication of Offering :** At this time when gifts are given and received, we bring our offerings, large and small. We give them with our love and commitment to the work of your Church, for Jesus Christ's sake. Amen.

**Prayers of Intercession :** A prayer that God may put songs in our hearts

You, Lord, as the author of the story of all of creation, down to each individual walking on Earth, sing so gently over us, pouring your adoration, peace and assurance into our hearts and minds. Lord, may the stories and songs of our circumstances, locations, relationship with you and with others find crescendo and ultimately, resolution. Lord, put songs in our hearts that are meant for being shared and alternate melodies to draw us into greater communion, fellowship and relationship with others. In the ultimate storyteller's name we ask and sing, Amen. *Rareş Călugăr, Superintendent, UMC Romania*

Lord, as we have read your word and had our thoughts, we pray for our communities, looking back to where we have come from, and looking ahead to tomorrow's day. You have guided us and protected us, You have nurtured us and upheld us, You have inspired us and blessed us. Be our guide in the year ahead of us, Keep us from harm's way. Energise us and help us overcome natural reticence and timidity. May we be people of light and joy, May we breathe hope where it is needed And always share your love. We pray for our own families, For our friends and the people we know and meet, And if we have no one, be very close. We pray for this church and our family here, For the work we do and the care we know, For the lives we touch and which touch ours.

-- Pray in silence letting God see into your heart -- Add the news for today that requires our prayer -- *William Glasse*

God who encourages, In your strength, You make us stronger. Remind us, every day, when we get dressed, To make sure we wrap ourselves in your truth, Envelop righteousness within our chosen garments, Store faith securely in our pockets, Wear shoes that take us on the path of peace and Don a hat to show that Christ is our saviour. May we carry your word openly, to allow your spirit to work in us wherever we go. In that way we take you with us, Secure and strong. All day long.  
Thank you. *Jill Nugent ©The United Reformed Church*

God of glory, your splendour shines from a manger in Bethlehem, where the Light of the world is humbly born into the darkness of human night. Open our eyes to Christ's presence in the shadows of our world, so that we, like him, may become beacons of your justice, and defenders of all for whom there is no room. Amen.

**Hymn STF222 - Who would think that what was needed** John L Bell (born 1949) and Graham Maule (1958-2019) © 1987, 2002 WGRG

Watch on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PvR6we1DmrM>

Who would think that what was  
needed, to transform and save the  
earth might not be a plan or army,  
proud in purpose proved in worth?  
Who would think despite derision,  
that a child might lead the way?  
God surprises earth with heaven,  
coming here on Christmas Day.

Shepherds watch and wise men  
wonder, monarchs scorn and angels  
sing; such a place as none would  
reckon, hosts a holy, helpless thing;  
stable beasts and by-passed strangers.  
watch a baby laid in hay:  
God surprises earth with heaven,  
coming here on Christmas Day.

Centuries of skill and science  
span the past from which we move,  
yet experience questions whether,  
with such progress we improve.  
While the human lot we ponder,  
lest our hopes and humour fray,  
God surprises earth with heaven,  
coming here on Christmas Day.

**The Grace**

The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Love of God and the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all, evermore. Amen.