

Call to worship (based on Luke 1:46-50)

Our souls magnify the Lord!
Our spirits rejoice in God our Saviour!
The mighty One has done great things for us!
Holy is God's name!
Let us worship God.
For God is our Maker and our Redeemer;
from generation to generation God gives mercy.

Hymn Hope is a candle

Hope is a candle once lit by the prophets
Never consumed though it burns through the years
Dim in the daylight of power and privilege
When they are gone hope will shine on

Peace is a candle to show us a pathway
Threatened by gusts from our rage and our greed
Friend feel no envy for those in the shadows
Violence and force their dead end course

Love is a candle whose light makes a circle
Where every face is the face of a friend
Widen the circle by sharing and giving
God's Holy dare love everywhere

Joy is a candle of mystery and laughter
Mystery of light that is born in the dark
Laughter at hearing the voice of an angel
Ever so near casting out fear

Christ is the light that the prophets awaited
Christ is the lion the lamb and the child
Christ is the love and the mystery and laughter
Candles make way Christ is the day

Richard Leah ©Selah Publishing

Today is the fourth Sunday in Advent so we come to the symbol of the woman and child which represents the marginalised, like Mary, Joseph and Jesus brought to the centre.

Today our service is all about Mary – the mother of Jesus and how she answered God's call and how happy she was that God had chosen her to do a great thing.

Advent Candle Lighting

As we come to light the advent candle, we hear from the prophet Isaiah:
'Get yourself up on a high mountain, O Zion, bearer of good news, lift up your voice mightily, O Jerusalem, bearer of good news; lift it up, do not fear. Say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!"' – the Advent God of joy.

The fourth candle is lit

As we light our fourth candle, we recall the words of Mary as she sang praises to God who 'looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant'. Mary's joy is not only that she has been chosen, but that in God's grace there is no marginalisation! Too often in our world, individuals and groups are pushed to the margins and not heard. May we work towards a society where those on the edges, and their voices are drawn into the centre.

Sing all of Like a candle flame Red folder 59 © Graham Kendrick
After which the children will leave for Sunday Club

Let us pray

We pray for a joyful world where the lowly are lifted high and the hungry are fed. We pray for our churches and communities that we may look towards the margins and not always to the centre. We commit ourselves to 'lift up our voices mightily' to challenge a worldview that pushes people to the edge of society. **Amen**

URC Prayer Handbook p77

Opening Prayer of Confession

God help us to change.

To change ourselves and to change our world.

To know the need for it. To deal with the pain of it.

To feel the joy of it.

To undertake the journey without understanding the destination.

The art of gentle revolution. Amen

Michael Leunig

If we say we are without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.

If we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just will forgive our sins.

Jesus said, 'your sins are forgiven.' Thanks be to God.

Hymn The Angel Gabriel R&S 139 OMIT v4

The angel Gabriel from heaven came,
his wings as drifted snow, his eyes as flame:
"All hail to thee, thou lowly maiden Mary,
most highly favoured lady." *Gloria!*

"For known a blessed mother thou shalt be,
all generations laud and honour thee;
thy son shall be Emmanuel, by seers foretold,
most highly favoured lady." *Gloria!*

Then gentle Mary meekly bowed her head;
"To me be as it pleaseth God," she said.
"my soul shall laud and magnify his holy name."
Most highly favoured lady." *Gloria!*

Today we hear two readings from Luke. The second reading, Mary's Magnificat is set as the alternative Psalm, but we read it second as it follows on directly from today's Gospel reading.

Bible readings: **Luke 1:39-45**
 Luke 1:46-55

Having learned from the angel that she will give birth to the Son of God, in our Gospel today we hear how Mary hurries to visit her pregnant relative Elizabeth. The intimate conversation that follows portrays Jesus as more important than John – which of course we already know, but Mary and Elizabeth didn't. It also shows God already at work to overturn the world's structures and expectations. The spotlight shines on Mary and Elizabeth, two lowly and shamed women through whom God has chosen to begin the transformation of the world. Women, so often overlooked or ignored both in society at large and in biblical stories, have the only speaking roles in this passage, although Mary says no words until after Elizabeth has spoken at some length. We are only told that Mary 'greeted' Elizabeth, but this unrecorded greeting, prompts an immediate, silent, response from Elizabeth's unborn child. John leaps in her womb, acknowledging both Mary's presence and the significance of the child she is carrying. Even before he is born, John points to the One who is to come.

Though John is prompted to move by the Spirit, it is Elizabeth, his mother, who takes on the role of prophet by speaking the prophetic words in this scene: she is filled with the Holy Spirit and proclaims what Mary has not yet told her, and what is not yet visible to the eye: Mary is pregnant. And even more exciting - through the Spirit she knows who Mary's child will be, for she calls Mary 'the mother of my Lord.'

Elizabeth not only prophesies but she blesses. By declaring both Mary and the fruit of Mary's womb 'blessed' she begins a series of blessings that weave through Luke's birth narrative and intensify its tone of joy, delight, and praise. Mary, Zechariah, and Simeon will all add their blessings to the chain, praising God for what God is doing at this moment in history and recognizing that those who are privileged to be instruments of God's saving work have been richly blessed.

Mary is blessed not only for her status as the mother of the Lord, but also for her trust in God's promise. Elizabeth uses more than one word for 'blessed'. When she says that Mary is blessed among women and proclaims that the fruit of Mary's womb is also blessed, she uses the Greek word *eulogemene*, which emphasizes that both present and future generations will praise and speak well of her and her child. The word means blessing, praise or gift, and is the root of our word eulogy, when we 'praise' someone who has died. But when Elizabeth says, "Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord", she uses the word *makaria*, which means blessed, or happy and is the same term that Jesus uses to bless people in the Beatitudes. We might well translate Elizabeth's words as "Happy is she who believed..." Mary is blessed, because despite all expectations, her social status has been reversed: she will be honoured rather than shamed for bearing this child. But she has also been blessed with divine joy because she has believed that God is able to do what God promises to do, unlike Elizabeth's husband Zechariah.

When Elizabeth says, "Blessed is she who," she contrasts Mary's trust in God's power and promise with her own husband's doubt. Zechariah, if you remember from two weeks ago, questioned the angel and asked for proof that the angel's words were true, for which he was struck dumb. Mary only asked for an explanation of *how* what God was going to do would happen, and then gave her willing consent. Zechariah the religious professional doubted God, but Mary the peasant girl believed, and her trust in God's word opened the door for God to bless her and to bless the whole world through her. Elizabeth celebrates Mary's willingness to say "yes" to God. And after Elizabeth has celebrated, Mary does too, praising God with her whole soul; her spirit rejoicing in God.

By greeting Mary with honour, Elizabeth overturns social expectations. Mary is an unmarried pregnant woman. She might expect social judgment, shame, even ostracism from her older kinswoman. Yet Elizabeth knows from her own experience the cost of being shamed and excluded. In her culture a woman's primary purpose in life was to bear children, so as an elderly, childless wife, she had endured a lifetime of being treated as a failure. Her response to her miraculous pregnancy emphasizes that God's grace has reversed her social status. She said God had looked favourably on her and taken away the disgrace she had endured. At long last, in her old age, she is an honourable married woman, pregnant with her husband's son.

Elizabeth continues the pattern of social reversal by opening her arms and her home to a relative whom her neighbours would expect her to reject. Instead of shaming Mary, she welcomes, blesses, and celebrates her, treating her as more honourable than herself. In fact, Mary stays with her for three months, before returning home. That would mean she left just before Elizabeth gave birth, which makes me wonder why she didn't stay and help? Stay and find out what giving birth was like? We'll never know, as Luke chose not to tell us. The pregnancy that might have brought Mary shame brings joy instead. When Elizabeth welcomes Mary, she practices the same kind of inclusive love that Jesus will show to prostitutes and tax collectors. She sees beyond the shameful nature of Mary's situation to the reality of God's love at work even among those whom society rejects and excludes. Elizabeth's words and actions invite us to reflect on our own openness to the ways that God chooses to act in our world. What is God doing through unexpected people in our society today? Where is God at work through people whom our neighbours and fellow Christians often exclude or treat as shameful? Will we listen to the Spirit's prompting when the bearers of God's new reality show up on our doorstep?

May we, like Elizabeth and Mary, trust that God is coming to save and free us. May we, like them, give thanks to God and respond to God's love by welcoming the shameful and excluded. May we, like them, become a community that supports each other as we hope and wait. May we like Mary say 'yes' to God's call and magnify the Lord in all we do.

Hymn Behold the great Creator makes (from Church Hymnary 4, 3 verses only, Tune *Antioch* - 'Joy to the world', R&S 135 2nd tune – sing the last line of each verse 3 times)

Behold the great Creator makes,
himself a house of clay,
in human flesh, our form he takes
which he will bear alway.

Hark, how the wise eternal Word
as a weak infant cries!
In form of servant is the Lord,
and God in cradle lies.

Join then, all hearts that are not stone,
to sing with choirs above
and celebrate this holy One,
the God of peace and love.

Thomas Pestel

Lord's Supper

Love is born
With a dark and troubled face
When hope is dead
And in the most unlikely place
Love is born:
Love is always born. Michael Leunig

Come follow the light that shines for you and leads you towards a stable with a manger and a child.
Lord, we have followed the light

Come listen for the voice that calls you to find new life in the broken corners of the world.
Lord, we have heard the voice

Come, rich and poor, neighbour or stranger, gather round and share a celebration with the Prince of Peace. **Lord, we have gathered to meet with you.**

Come, like wealthy kings with priceless gifts or poor shepherds with only themselves to bring, for the Spirit has led you to this place where you are offered the promise of new life.
Lord, fill us with new life.

The peace of the Lord be always with you.
And also with you.

From being a child in a manger dependent on his mother's milk for food, Jesus grew to be the Living Word made Flesh offering everyone the bread of life. He travelled from the manger to the cross where his body was broken, his love poured out, but God held him like a mother and nursed him back to life. Lord, may we see the guiding light,
May we find you in a stable
May we follow you to the cross.
May we find new life through you.
As we gather round the table to celebrate the beginning of a journey from the manger to the cross and back to life again.

Holy Spirit, come among us and bless this bread and wine as we remember how Christ's body was broken and God's love was poured out for us.

On the night when our Lord Jesus was betrayed, he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body which is broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

So, draw near with faith. Be strengthened by the life of our Lord Jesus Christ, who was born in a stable to be the living bread and died on a cross having poured out his love so we may drink from God's cup of forgiveness. Eat and drink. Take Jesus into your hearts.

Sharing of bread

As you take the bread, hold it in prayer and remember how the body of Jesus was born, lived and was broken for you, and then we will eat together, united in the one body.

Sharing of wine

As you take the wine, hold it in prayer and remember how Jesus poured out his love for you and meets your needs when he lives in your heart.

Prayer after communion

Thank you for bread and wine through which we have remembered your life and love. Lord build a stable in our bodies, place a manger in our hearts and fill it with your love as if it were a new-born child. Amen

Prayers of intercession

In the hushed anticipation of your coming, O Lord, remind us that you are always with us. Let us be like Mary, emphatic in our 'yes' to your will.

Into our troubles and weaknesses, into the barren places of our souls, Come Lord,
Come among us and make us whole.

Into the war torn and the refugee, into those who live in conflict, Come Lord,
Come among us and make us whole.

Into the homeless and the unemployed, into those who feel abandoned, Come Lord,
Come among us and make us whole.

Into the sick and the disabled, into those undergoing treatment and those who are grieving,
Come, Lord **Come among us and make us whole.**

Into those with the new Covid variant, NHS with increased work to deliver vaccinations, and those
who are worried that they may have to spend Christmas alone again. Come Lord
Come among us and make us whole.

Into the poor and the starving, into those who are oppressed or abused, Come Lord
Come among us and make us whole.

Into the lives of loved ones, into those from whom we are estranged, Come Lord,
Come among us and make us whole.

Into our joys and celebrations, into our work and our achievements, Come, Lord
Come among us and make us whole.

In the remaining week before Christmas help us to be patient with our loved ones, and find time to reflect on the real meaning of Christmas amidst the business of preparation and gift buying. In our time of joy and plenty, help us to pray for those who have no homes to celebrate in, no festive food to eat, no family or friends to share the holidays with. And guide us to be generous to those who have little or nothing this Christmas. In the name of your Son, who came to live among us, to bring light to the darkness, we pray. **Amen**

Lord's Prayer

Hymn Tell out my soul R&S 740

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord!
Unnumbered blessings give my spirit voice;
tender to me the promise of his word;
in God my Saviour shall my heart rejoice.

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his name!
Make known his might, the deeds his arm has done;
his mercy sure, from age to age to same;
his holy Name--the Lord, the Mighty One.

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his might!
Powers and dominions lay their glory by.
Proud hearts and stubborn wills are put to flight,
the hungry fed, the humble lifted high.

Tell out, my soul, the glories of his word!
Firm is his promise, and his mercy sure.
Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord
to children's children and for evermore!

Timothy Dudley-Smith

Advent Blessing

Follow where the Spirit of Hope leads us
Listen as the Child of Peace cries for us
Rejoice as the Love of God embraces us
And let us go with Hope, Peace and Love in our hearts,
And the blessing of Creator, Child and Spirit for ever within us. Amen

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