

First Sunday after Christmas – Year B

Sunday 31 December 2023

The Faith Action Programme would like to thank Rev Jenny M Adams, Minister of Duffus, Spynie and Hopeman Church, for the use of her archive material from 2020 on the first Sunday after Christmas. This material was written during the COVID-19 pandemic and was used in the context of Christmas during an extended period of lockdown.

Weekly Worship, based on the Revised Common Lectionary, is for everyone – in any capacity – who is involved in creating and leading worship.

It provides liturgical material that can be used for worship in all settings. Our writers are asked to share their approaches to creating and delivering this material to equip leaders with a greater confidence and ability to reflect on their own worship practice and experience and encourage them to consider how this material might be adapted for their own context.

We would encourage continual reflection on the changing patterns of worship and spiritual practice that are emerging from disruption and how this might help identify pathways towards development and worship renewal.

An archive of resources for daily worship can be found on the Sanctuary First website:

<https://www.sanctuaryfirst.org.uk/daily-worship>

We may not all be gathered in the same building, but at this time, when we need each other so much, we are invited to worship together, from where we are – knowing that God can hear us all and can blend even distant voices into one song of worship.

Introduction.....	3
Isaiah 61:10-62:3.....	4
Psalm 148	4
Galatians 4:4-7	5
Luke 2:22-40	6
Sermon ideas	7
Prayers	9
Musical suggestions	14
Reflecting on our worship practice	14
Useful links	16

Introduction

While this material was written in 2020, the effects of the pandemic and issues within the social and political climate are still as relevant as ever.

It's Christmas. Whatever shape it may have taken this year, that story should probably be foremost in our minds for this Sunday. However, these are materials offered for the last Sunday of 2020, a year that has brought Covid-19, lockdown, isolation, and devastating consequences for livelihoods, families and nations, and mental and physical health. It is a time to look back at 2020, which may include lament for losses and thanksgiving for mutual support. It's a time to look forward to 2021, which may bring hope for vaccines and treatment, it will bring Brexit and Scottish Parliamentary elections, and may bring the Olympics and the COP26 climate change conference. Many crises beyond coronavirus also need our urgent attention, including the refugee catastrophe, habitat destruction and species extinction, racism, and climate change. As with every year, this year and next will also include significant events in people's lives. There have also been challenges and new possibilities for churches, which will continue into 2021.

That timing shapes a theme of change, and change of era, running through these notes. The ups and downs are reflected in a theme of human life and messiness, which Jesus was born into. In all of these we have the reminder that God is with us, offering hope.

I would hope that whatever shape Advent and Christmas have taken, there will still be a wider engagement in church activities and materials, online or in church. That will normally include many for whom church language and culture may be less familiar or even totally alien. Hopefully it will include all ages. Therefore, it would seem hospitable and sensible to present materials with a light touch, aware of that diverse audience. Ideas are included that are visual and simple activities that could be done at home.

While I would assume that the main story to tell at this time of year is that of Jesus' birth, notes and suggestions are offered for all four lectionary texts. I have begun by reading the texts, noting my own reactions and questions, then used commentaries to open up other ways of looking at them. Here I offer a summary of main points, concluding with connections and thoughts I've had as I have explored the passages this year. The sermon notes find common threads with most texts, connected to the nativity, and some prayer suggestions grow from the Psalm.

[Isaiah 61:10-62:3](#)

This passage begins with a verse of personal praise for promises now fulfilled for the writer, which have seen God bring about a change in their life. The change is likened to someone being invested into a new office or getting married, symbolised by the clothing put on in those circumstances. The fulfilment and hope of God's promises are then broadened out beyond the individual, to be visible springing up before all the nations (61:11).

Chapter 62:1 offers one verse in the voice of God. While it can feel that God is silent and inactive in troubled times (including the exile, which is the probable context for this passage), God promises restoration and glorification of Jerusalem. In the wider culture that would also be seen as a sign of God's presence with God's people. In verses 2 and 3 the prophet then expands on God's word. Again the change of situation will be visible before the nations and their leaders – now visible as light, glory and crowns. The change for the people will also be signified by a change of name, as is so often the case in Old and New Testament stories.

The passage (in NRSV) uses religious terminology such as righteousness, salvation, vindication. It is helpful to remember that such language is strange for most people, particularly over the Christmas season when there may be a broader range of people engaging with the church.

The imagery may be more useful, particularly in online/visual presentations. The change in someone's situation is described as being re-clothed, or as getting dressed up to be married. Hope is pictured as springing up as shoots do in a garden. The transformation of Jerusalem is visible, like dawn, a burning torch or a crown. In midwinter the light and green shoots imagery may strike a particular chord (although being re-clothed in a good warm coat might do too). At a season normally filled with parties, nativity plays and pantomimes, where expectations are expressed in dressing up, clothing and crowns may also be expressive of hope for new beginnings. There may also be interesting contrasts to draw between the grand imagery of wedding outfits, robes and crowns, and a baby wrapped in strips of cloth and laid in a manger – transformation and hope may come looking very different.

[Psalm 148](#)

This psalm of praise is mostly a series of commands to everyone and everything that is not God – to praise their Creator. The list includes celestial bodies, waters, mountains and weather systems (v8 “fire and hail” probably refers to “lightning and hail”); as well as

'beings' – wild, domesticated and human. All people are invited and commanded to join the praise, irrespective of status, age or gender.

Verses 5 and 6 explain why – because God created and sustains all things. Verses 13 and 14 offer another reason for the praise of God alone – God is beyond earth and heaven, and is acting for God's people. The raising up of a horn may be a general symbol of strength, power or victory, but also has a parallel in Zechariah's song of praise in Luke 1:69, where it refers to a Saviour.

This psalm is shaped around a sense of order in creation. While we might not describe that order in the same terms as here, Genesis 1 or Job 38, scientific understanding of the universe is based on an assumption of order that allows theories and laws to be derived from observation. Such laws of nature may be the best interpretation of verse 6, as the bounds of the waters, and in verse 8 the winds obeying God's command. These recognise an overall boundedness of creation, without assuming God's direct control of winds, seas and nature, which would raise huge questions about God's care in natural disasters (e.g. the Boxing Day Tsunami in 2004).

The order of creation also poses challenges to humanity, as our behaviour increasingly damages ecosystems and all of the Earth's resources. At the turn of a year it may be a good time to consider changes we could make to care for the rest of God's creation. 2021 brings Glasgow's hosting of the COP26 conference on climate change, and massive changes are urgently needed at policy level as well as in lifestyle choices as we play our part in maintaining the wonder of God's diverse creation.

[Galatians 4:4-7](#)

Paul describes the birth of Jesus as coming at "the fullness of time." This recognises a crucial event that brings a change of era. It then brings a change of status for people; from enslavement to being heirs, a change shown by the presence of the Spirit in human lives (with parallels in Isaiah 61:10).

There is a great breadth of those for whom Jesus came. The translation is of those born under the law (not the 'Law') – the Greek text apparently doesn't imply the Jewish Law but general human life and laws. That fits with Paul's calling to bring the good news to Gentiles, and with much of the content of the letter to the Galatians.

In this passage, we receive from God. We are redeemed, we receive adoption as children, we receive the Spirit of God's Son into our hearts. The only person with any agency in this

text is the woman who bears God's Son, otherwise the activity is all by God. God sent God's Son, God redeemed humanity, God sent God's Spirit, God made us God's children and heirs. God acts for us.

That might emphasise power and control over us, but we are also reminded that the Spirit comes into our hearts crying "Abba! Father!" The Aramaic "Abba" is probably preserved because that is what Jesus called His heavenly Father in prayer (e.g., in Gethsemane, Mark 14:36). That reminds us that we turn to God as beloved children, enabled to cry out in that close and loving relationship.

It could be interesting to explore crying out to God: "Abba! Father!" at a time when we remember Jesus as a baby. Babies cry, so Jesus would have cried (despite what "Away in a manger" says!), and as a small child would have cried out to His dad Joseph. There are basic needs that God knows from the perspective of human vulnerability and helplessness.

[Luke 2:22-40](#)

It may be interesting to include verse 21, which sees Jesus circumcised on His eighth day, according to Jewish Law. He is also given His name, a version of Joshua – "one who saves," as instructed by the angel Gabriel.

This passage then continues with further observation of the Law. The writer known as Luke was probably not Jewish, so may not have been clear on the details – he appears to conflate two different rites, while emphasising everything was done "according to the law of the Lord."

The first rite was for Mary, as purification 40 days after the bleeding from the birth of a son (Leviticus 12:1-8). (While this raises many questions, Christmas may not be the time to explore periods, birth and stigma.) Mary comes with the offering of a pair of doves or pigeons, as required for those who can't afford a sheep. The second rite was the presentation of Jesus as a firstborn son. There are echoes of Hannah's dedication of Samuel in 1 Samuel 1, as there were in Elizabeth's story before Christmas.

The text doesn't focus on the rituals that brought the family to the Temple. Instead they encounter older people, filled and led by the Spirit. As so often in Luke's Gospel, there is a pairing of a woman and a man: Luke's birth narratives also begin with an older couple, in Elizabeth and Zechariah.

Simeon's reaction reflects both personal and universal hopes. The Spirit enables him to see the promise of the Messiah for all peoples fulfilled in this baby now – long before Jesus has done anything. That also fulfils a personal revelation, that Simeon would see this. His song has parallels with Mary's in 1:46-55 and Zechariah's in 1:68-79. His words to Mary include threads found in the Magnificat (1:46-55) and throughout Luke's gospel – that Jesus' life will lift some up while others are brought low. The blessing also looks to the personal pain to come for the mother of the Messiah. Anna, a prophet who worships God 24/7, is also led by God to this baby. She also sees God's promises fulfilled, and shares her excitement with others.

The passage then concludes with the family's return home to Nazareth in Galilee. They leave behind the formality and status of Jerusalem for an area seen as distant, but actually en route for much of the wider world. Jesus' upbringing is then summarised in an idealised sentence, as John's had been in 1:80.

In normal times, there is a familiarity in the story of a new baby being welcomed and blessed by others – who'll often want a cuddle too. Coronavirus is limiting the contact new parents and babies can have with others – those who can help or simply share blessings – and is making celebrations and rituals for important life events harder. This passage may therefore both lift up and bring sorrow.

The Wild Goose Worship Group book [Cloth for the Cradle](#) has a short script "Anna and Simeon", which offers a reflection in their voices.

Sermon ideas

Change of times

This is the last Sunday of 2020 – a change of year.

Many of these texts are about change. Isaiah 61 has the (very visual) symbols of change for individuals in new clothing; and for the people in new shoots, a new name, and light shining out (see ideas in notes). Galatians recognises Jesus' birth as coming "in the fullness of time," bringing a change of status from enslaved to heirs. Simeon and Anna both recognised God acting to fulfil promises, changing things for all peoples. Mary and Joseph's lives definitely changed. All these signs of change are visible, for those paying attention through God's Spirit.

That opens up questions of what change people are hoping for, for themselves, families, communities, the Church? What hopes do we have for the world? Perhaps people could

create stars to represent their hopes, to offer to God and hang at home. The simple lighting of a candle can rekindle hope.

Tools of prayer and discernment could be shared, opening ourselves to God's Spirit, recognising where God is at work and joining in. A printable sheet or online chat function might offer space to record hopes, and to note God's nudges to act. Colouring pages or shared images on screen can create space to pay attention to God e.g. the word 'hope', local maps, images of Earth, images from the Christmas story. Finger labyrinths can allow a process of carrying 2020 to the centre to leave with God, then moving out into 2021 – see www.relax4life.com/labyrinth-resources for examples.

Christian Aid and Tearfund will have appeals and campaigns that allow hopeful action to be taken, as will many local community groups.

Human messiness

While all the readings offer testimony to divine promises fulfilled, those come through a very human story.

Summed up by Paul's "born of a woman, born under the law," it's best expressed in the Luke passage. God is born in the bloody messiness of birth that requires Mary to be "purified." Mary, Joseph and Jesus come to the Temple in enough poverty to only offer pigeons. They meet old folk, in the multi-generational worshipping community. The old man takes a cuddle of their baby, and shares emotional words of hope and warning. They are told that there will be pain and struggle to come. They return to their town, to working life bringing up a child – a child who will have cried to His mum and dad, before crying out "Abba!" to God.

It's a very human story of God coming into a world when the time was right. The Roman occupation made communication and travel simpler when there was news to be shared, and also kept Jewish expectations for a Messiah active.

It's a human story, amongst the realities of politics, religion and poverty. It's the story of a baby being blessed. It's a story that can be recognised by all people – and it's meant for all people. There is a lot about today that will have parallels – in maternity services, political leadership, struggles and cries, poverty and need, multi-generational communities. The story can be told in the language of your community and this time.

The reality of Jesus' humanity, and the messiness of Jesus' birth, could be demonstrated in the example of Scotland's Baby Box, or by gathering stuff new babies and parents need

(which could be donated to your nearest baby bank afterwards.) God was born small and helpless, crying, needing fed, needing nappies changed.

Prayers

A helpful resource for significant times is the 'Prayer in six directions', which comes from North American First Nations, recognising beginnings, endings, and hopes. People could be invited to do that together in a building or wherever they are watching (with appropriate guiding images).

Approach to God

You might have been using advent candles throughout the season, in which case your approach to God may continue the practices you've used for lighting all five candles. These words use Advent candle meanings, looking back and forward at the turn of the year, and recognising Jesus as Emmanuel, God with us.

One: In our looking into the coming year,

All: may the God of hope be with us.

One: In our lamenting the losses of the year past,

All: may the God of peace be with us.

One: In our celebrations of Christmas,

All: may the God of joy be with us.

One: In our caring for the world,

All: may the God of love be with us.

One: In our living of life in all its fullness,

All: may we know that God is with us.

Thanksgiving

Our prayer of thanksgiving is inspired by Psalm 148, which invites praise from all of creation, including visible and invisible, animate and inanimate, weather and waters; and from all people. This version includes items from the Christmas story and the recent context, and is offered as a starter for your own preferences and ideas.

Praise the Lord!
Praise God in the heavens,
praise God in the guiding stars.
Praise God, you choirs of angels,
praise God, you souls welcomed home.
Praise God, sun and moon,
praise God, ozone and atmosphere.
Praise God, you seas and ice sheets,
praise God, rivers and glaciers.

Let them praise the Creator,
who gives and sustains life,
shaping the laws of physics,
sparking life in all its fullness.

Praise God from the earth,
islands and mountains, fields and caves.
Praise God, you sea monsters and all deeps,
cod and haddock, dolphins and plankton.

Praise God, you inns and mangers,
sheep and goats, little donkeys,
camels and songbirds,
creeping things and flying insects.

Praise God, viruses and vaccines,
steroids and sanitisers.
Praise God, ventilators and face coverings,
volunteer lists and blessing boxes.

Praise God, wise and foolish ones,
rich and poor, welcomed and excluded.
Praise God, old and young,
faithful and uncertain ones.

Let them praise the God of all,
God with us,
revealed to us in surprising places
and familiar stories.

Let us praise God,
with thanks for creation
whose praise we join;
with thanks for life
whose fullness we live;
with thanks for love
whose story we hear at Christmas.

Let us praise God with thanks.
Praise the Lord!
Amen

Confession

At this time of year,
Christmas itself can distract us from its purpose and its source in God.
At a time of looking back we will have regrets.
In looking forward we may find it hard to see God at work.
It can be hard to be faithful as Simeon and Anna were,
year after year.

This is also written with the option of following on from the prayer of thanksgiving.

God of all,
all creation is invited to praise You,
giving thanks to our Creator.
Yet we struggle to be grateful,
when we see loss, fear and destruction in the world.
We struggle to praise,
when we are afraid to look at ourselves before You.
We struggle to turn to You,
when we are distracted by this season.

God with us,
all peoples are invited to come close,
welcoming You into our lives.
Yet we struggle to walk with You,
day after day, in the mess of our lives.
We struggle to welcome You

when You come in those different from us.
We struggle to look ahead with You,
into another year of uncertainty.

God of all,
You know all of this, and still You love us.
God with us,
You know all of this, and still You come,
inviting us to come close.
So, set us free from our fears and struggles.
Heal us of our hopelessness.
Forgive us our mistakes.
And open our hearts to know that You are with us,
Your Spirit filling us and Your love guiding us,
this day and in the days to come,
through Jesus, Your Son,
Amen

Intercession

What is offered is a framework with space for the leader to include specific concerns or to leave open for people to offer God their own prayers.

God with us,
You know Your world,
and we open our hearts and minds to You,
sharing our concerns
and listening to Your concerns and Your calls to act.

With a baby laid in a manger,
we pray for all mothers and babies
and those who support them...

With a father learning a new role,
we pray for all at new beginnings
and living with uncertainty...

With Simeon and Anna,
we pray for all who wait
in hope or fear, for life or death...

With seekers and worshippers,
we pray for Your Spirit to work
in hearts, minds and faith communities...

With those who speak up,
we pray for Your will to be done
and Your kingdom to come on earth...

With those in poverty,
we pray for transformation of systems
and an end to exploitation...

With all of creation,
we pray for climate justice
and an awakening to our responsibilities...

God with us,
send Your Spirit to transform and guide us,
and so to change Your world in Your ways.
Amen

Blessing

May we go,
ready to see God at work in the world,
open to hope for God's ways in the world,
and holding God's love in our lives.

And the blessing of God,
loving Father, newborn Son, and living Spirit,
go with us, and to all those we are given to love,
this day, into this year, and always,
Amen

Musical suggestions

Our [online music resource](#) is on the Church of Scotland website; you can listen to samples of every song in the Church Hymnary 4th edition (CH4) and download a selection of recordings for use in worship. You will also find playlists for this week and liturgical seasons and themes on the *Weekly Worship* and *Inspire Me* tabs.

A suggested [playlist of songs for Christmas](#) can be found on the Church of Scotland website.

You can find further musical suggestions for this week in a range of styles on the [Songs for Sunday blog](#) from Trinity College Glasgow.

It's Christmas, so the main appetite will be for Christmas hymns and songs, particularly if there have been fewer opportunities to sing favourites. Here are some with particular relevance to today's texts.

- CH4 286 – “Tell out, my soul” – a setting of the Magnificat, this includes the raising up and bringing down that Simeon's blessing includes, always offering hope
- CH4 295 – “Who would think that what was needed” – the thread of transformation and time for change is picked up here, as is the messiness of the human lot that Jesus comes into
- CH4 303 – “It came upon the midnight clear” – at the end of a year that has seen the world suffering long and needing hope, this brings hope for a change of times for all the earth
- CH4 320 – “Joy to the world” – this echoes Psalm 148's praise from all of creation
- CH4 332 – “When Mary brought her treasure” – this tells of Mary's encounter with Simeon

Reflecting on our worship practice

Since the start of the pandemic in 2020, the way we worship has changed and we need to reflect on the changing or newly established patterns that emerged and continue to emerge as a result of the disruption.

We can facilitate worship for all by exploring imaginative approaches to inclusion, participation and our use of technologies in ways that suit our contexts. This is not an exhaustive list, but some things we could consider are:

- Framing various parts of the worship service in accessible language to help worshippers understand the character and purpose of each part. This is essential for creating worship for all (intergenerational worship) that reflects your community of faith.
- Holding spaces for reflection and encouraging prayer to be articulated in verbal and non-verbal ways, individually and in online breakout rooms.
- In online formats the effective use of the chat function and microphone settings encourages active participation in prayer, e.g. saying the Lord's Prayer together unmuted, in a moment of 'holy chaos'.
- If singing in our congregations is restricted, we can worship corporately by using antiphonal psalm readings, creeds and participative prayers.
- Using music and the arts as part of the worship encourages the use of imagination in place of sung or spoken words.
- Use of silence, sensory and kinaesthetic practices allow for experience and expression beyond regular audio and visual mediums.

The following questions might help you develop a habit of reflecting on how we create and deliver content and its effectiveness and impact, and then applying what we learn to develop our practice.

- How inclusive was the worship?
Could the worship delivery and content be described as worship for all/
intergenerational? Was it sensitive to different "Spiritual Styles"?
- How was the balance between passive and active participation?
- How were people empowered to connect with or encounter God?
What helped this? What hindered this?
- How cohesive was the worship?
Did it function well as a whole?
How effective was each of the individual elements in fulfilling its purpose?
- How balanced was the worship?
What themes/topics/doctrines/areas of Christian life were included?
- How did the worship connect with your context/contemporary issues?

Was it relevant in the everyday lives of those attending and in the wider parish/
community?

How well did the worship connect with local and national issues?

How well did the worship connect with world events/issues?

- What have I learned that can help me next time I plan and deliver worship?

Useful links

Up to date information for churches around Covid-19 can be found [here](#)

You can listen to samples of every song in the Church Hymnary 4th edition (CH4) and
download a selection of recordings for use in worship [here](#)

You can find an introduction to spiritual styles online [here](#)

You are free to download, project, print and circulate multiple copies of any of this material for use in worship services, bible studies, parish magazines, etc. If you would like to reproduce this material for commercial purposes, please contact the copyright holders, the Faith Action Programme, for permission: faithaction@churchofscotland.org.uk

Please note that the views expressed in these materials are those of the individual writer and not necessarily the official view of the Church of Scotland, which can be laid down only by the General Assembly.

©Faith Action Programme

Scottish Charity Number: SC011353

www.churchofscotland.org.uk