

Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence...



First Congregational Church of Anoka
United Church of Christ
an Open and Affirming Congregation

Advent 2023

December 10, 2023 - Second Sunday of Advent

This bulletin is designed to assist you as you watch our livestreamed worship service, whether you follow along live or view it at a later time. The stream can be found on our YouTube channel at this location:

<https://www.youtube.com/@AnokaUCC>

Welcome & Announcements

Centering Music

Koki Sato

Lighting an Advent Candle

One: For God alone, my soul waits in silence; from God comes salvation.

Many: For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from God.

Singing:

“Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence”
Hymn #345 v.2, but with *Pilgrim Hymnal* lyrics.

**King of kings yet born of Mary, as of old on earth he stood,
Lord of lords, in hu--man vesture, in the body and the blood,
he will give to all the faith---ful his own self for heavenly food.**

Silence

Sound and Light

Silence

A Time for Children (10:30)

*ADVISORY: The livestream of the service continues during the Children's Time;
if your child sits facing the Pastor their face shouldn't appear on camera.*

Prayer of Preparation

“O Come, Emmanuel” #116 (vv. 2, 6)

**O come, O Wisdom from on high, and order all things far and nigh;
to us the path of knowledge show, and help us in that way to go.**

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to you, O Israel!

**O come, O Dayspring, come and cheer our spirits by your advent here;
love stir within the womb of night, and death's own shadows put to flight.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to you, O Israel!**

Special Music

“There’s Still My Joy”
Kari Johnson, Solo

Melissa Manchester

*I brought my tree down to the shore, The garland and the silver star,
To find my peace and grieve no more, To heal this place inside my heart.
On every branch, I laid some bread, And hungry birds filled up the sky.
They rang like bells around my head, They sang my spirit back to life.*

*One tiny Child can change the world; One shining Light can show the way.
Through all my tears for what I've lost, There's still my joy, there's still my joy for Christmas Day.*

*The snow comes down on empty sand, There's tinsel moonlight on the waves.
My soul was lost, but here I am, So this must be amazing grace.*

*One tiny Child can change the world; One shining Light can show the way.
Beyond these tears for what I've lost,
There's still my joy, there's still my joy for Christmas Day,
There's still my joy for Christmas Day.*

Scripture Reading – Matthew 1:18-23

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰ But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." ²² All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ²³ "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us."

One: Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

Many: Thanks be to God.

Hymn

“Gentle Joseph, Joseph Dear” #105

“Gentle Joseph, Joseph dear, stay with me, for the baby’s near;
God will surely your goodness hear,
as you will love this newborn child,” says Mary.

“Gladly Mary, Mary mine. I will cradle the child divine;
here will heaven and earth combine,
for you will bear God’s child, O dearest Mary.”

“Peace to all and God’s good-will,” heaven and earth with this song fulfill;
soon will God, in the evening still,
be born in Bethlehem, the child of Mary.

Sermon

Rev. Chris McArdle

Hymn

“Mary, Woman of the Promise” #123 (vv. 1-3)


Mary, woman of the promise; vessel of your people’s dreams:
through your open, willing spirit waters of God’s goodness streamed.

Mary, song of holy wisdom sung before the world began:
faithful to the Word within you, as you bore God’s wondrous plan.

Mary, morning star of justice; mirror of the Radiant Light:
in the shadows of life’s journey, be a bea-con for our sight.

Prayers of the People

Sung Prayer



Hear our prayer, O God, hear our prayer, O God; in -
cline your ear to us, and grant us your peace.

Prayer of Our Savior (unison)

*The Prayer has many versions; pray whichever you desire (debts, sins, trespasses, etc.).
We affirm that God has many names, so use one of the suggested or another of your choosing.*

Our Father/Mother/Creator, 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 debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

Offering

Text-to-Give: **844-334-1477**

*Thank you for your gifts to our ministries!
If you are watching from home (live or later), please consider adding to the Offering by sending your gifts by mail, text, or online (uccanoka.org/donate).
You can support the church further through the RaiseRight program:
www.raiseright.com. Our unique church ID is 9WKLGX8TRZCN.*

Offertory

Koki Sato

* Doxology

All Praise Be Yours, My God, This Night #100 (v.4)

**Praise God who gives all blessings birth;
praise God all creatures on the earth;
praise God, who makes, sustains, sets free:
one holy God in persons three**

* Benediction

* Congregational Blessing

“O How Shall I Receive You” #102 (v.2 *alt.*)

**Love caused your incarnation; love brought you unto me;
your thirst for my salvation procured my liberty.
O love beyond all telling, that led you to embrace
in love, all love excelling, our struggling, human race.**

Postlude

Koki Sato

You may be seated as you listen to the Postlude. If you choose to depart at this time, please speak gently as you exit out of respect for those who choose to listen.

COFFEE HOUR IS SERVED BETWEEN SERVICES.

Acknowledgements

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“King of kings, yet born of Mary.” That’s a big **yet**. It tells us so much of what we should know for our Biblical literacy, our faith, and how we understand what Jesus meant to those earliest people who took his title as their own when they called themselves Christians. *Born of Mary*, with a “but.” That’s a contrast because Mary’s not a princess, not in any literal sense, and not in any Disneyfied less-than-literal sense where you take a female protagonist like Rapunzel or Tiana and have her hang out with the rest of the women who were actually born of royalty as you market them to kids. Mary’s not royal. In fact, if we’re being very clear here, neither is Joseph, for though he is said to be of the line of David, David’s family had been off the throne for five hundred years. Plus, tradition and the text says that Joseph isn’t Jesus’s bio-dad, so the King of Kings wasn’t born to that title in any traditional, earthly way.

Jesus gets his royalty from the Holy Spirit, from God who was all the monarch the people needed until they begged Samuel for an earthly one. And yet, the song points us to that deep doctrine that says that despite his divine parentage, Jesus was fully human in both body and blood. And then, this Lord of Lords in human vesture gets arrested, tried, and executed in the most ignominious way possible, and the early Jesus movement says that this cross was really his throne.

To someone who didn’t grow up church-ed or even marginally aware of Christian tradition, that sounds pretty foolish, doesn’t it? Paul says so. In 1 Corinthians, he says that the message of the cross is foolishness. That early Christian proclamation about Jesus was foolish. That the Gentiles think the Christians are foolish, and that “God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom.” According to Paul, non-Christians looked at the Christians and thought, “The Church hitched its wagon to THAT guy?”

All of that foolishness was tied to the circumstances of Jesus’s death, and then both Luke and Matthew decided to add in birth stories that tie that foolishness to his birth. Luke doesn’t play it as aggressively as Matthew does, though. Luke has Gabriel show up to both Elizabeth and Mary, one barren and the other someone who has not experienced intercourse, and promises that they’re both going to have children. Elizabeth’s conceiving will happen in a mostly-traditional way—that is, with her husband Zechariah’s involvement—but Mary’s will be nontraditional, to say the least. The Holy Spirit will inseminate her with the essence of the Divine, so that the child will already be holy. Set apart. But, according to the church, “in human vesture, in the body and the blood.”

I suppose it does sound a *little* bit foolish!

Matthew, as I said, takes a harder line, emphasizing that Mary, is an unmarried woman who gets pregnant out of wedlock. All of the conventions of that day suggest that Jesus is the child of adultery, with all that this demands, and we see the pressure this places upon Joseph. His own reputation is at stake—certainly so, or he wouldn’t be so concerned about breaking off his engagement. We do, at least, get told that he wants to do it quietly so as to avoid embarrassing Mary, so I guess that’s something (if a mite too patriarchal for my taste). It takes some Divine intervention to convince him that following through with the marriage is necessary.

What does that mean for Jesus? It means that his royal lineage is a matter of adoption, not of blood. And perhaps that, too, sounds foolish because that’s not how it’s supposed to work. It’s one thing

for a king to designate as his heir a child born of a not-first wife or a concubine. It's another thing entirely for a king to choose as his heir a child who doesn't share his blood. Yet that's exactly what the Church did. They declared that this poor child, born to poor parents from a poor town in the Galilee, was party to the line of David, meaning a covenant that puts him on the path to monarchy.

Then he was killed by the Empire. No earthly throne, and to those outside the circle, that all seemed foolish.

This Advent, as we fall silent in fear and trembling at the awesomeness of God, we pause to reflect on this foolish tenet of our faith: that God just keeps on keeping on in ways that the earth never chooses for itself. Our Biblical tradition is filled with that kind of stuff. God made a covenant with a chosen family that was filled with liars—really! Go read Genesis, just like we're doing in Bible Study right now! Abraham lies at least twice about his marriage to Sarah, causing what we'd call today international incidents. Isaac takes after his dad and does it once. Isaac's wife Rebekah helps her younger son (if younger only by minutes) deceive Isaac and claim the inheritance and blessing of his firstborn twin Esau. Rebekah's brother Laban deceives Jacob repeatedly, and Jacob deceives him in turn. Everyone in this family, far from being of the line of eventual Jesus, seems more descended from Loki or any other archetypal trickster!

That's all just in Genesis. Go further, yeah? Moses is chosen to be leader, but he lacks leadership qualities. Israel demands a king, and God chooses a vain man who can't keep on the straight and narrow. The next king turns out to be an adulterer and a murderer. The one after that basically enslaves his own people. When God wants to send a message to Nineveh, the chosen prophet tries to run away. When God wants to raise up a hero to save early Israel from their enemies, God keeps choosing these super-flawed folks who commit all manner of sins because they can.

I'm not trying to overlay the squicky parts of the Bible, but show just how much stuff in there looks foolish if you look at it a little too directly. We SHOULD look at these things, these folks, these fault-filled masters of foible. But then we have to ask ourselves, what does this tell us about God and the awe we're supposed to feel that God would deign to treat with us?

It says that despite all earthly pressures to pick and choose based on wealth, ability, class, and any other category of empowerment, God rejects that. God picks who God wants, and when those folks start growing lemons, God makes lemonade. In a way imagined by JRR Tolkien, God composes and conducts a Great Music, but when one of God's kids starts injecting discord into the song, God just writes around the discord and makes it part of the melody.

There is, nowadays, perhaps too much focus on being "blessed." The word has become lazy in its application, too often inadvertently making the theological claim that God has blessed ME in a way that inevitably begs the question, why hasn't God blessed YOU? In all our human vesture, we theologize based on an earthly sense of *deservingness*. Good stuff happens because you deserve it. Bad stuff happens because you deserve it.

Let all mortal flesh keep silence, because that's not how God rolls.

Though it might sound foolish, God will do as God wills, and God will use *anyone* to help that become a reality. God will co-create with anyone who steps up to the plate, whether they were born with a silver spoon in their mouth or they were born owing a host of silver spoons to the bank. In so many religious traditions, the heroes of old were demigods, the children of humanity and heaven. We believe that God did something like that with Jesus, but totally upended the whole equation. Where we expect a royal stallion, we get a donkey. Where we expect a master, we get a slave. Where we expect a replacement for Caesar, we get a guy who Caesar executes on a cross.

At least according to Matthew, we have a Savior of no bloodline royalty, one whose genealogy is traced quite obviously through five women of traditionally-questionable repute. Tamar, who seized her agency to conceive a child off of her late fiancée's father. Rahab, of whom we know nothing except that she was probably named after a sex worker who saved the lives of some Hebrew spies. Ruth, the Moabite woman, the *foreigner* who pledged herself to her late husband's mother and said, "Your house will be my house and your God my God." And Bathsheba, who somehow managed to become the Queen Mother with actual power after David acted entirely too kingly upon her and her husband. And of course Mary, a woman who, to all appearances, had slept with someone other than her fiancée and got pregnant.

This Advent, we marvel anew at the foolishness of the Gospel, as the awe-inspiring decisions of God confound all of our earthly sensibilities. We fall silent in awestruck wonder that from these women, from *Mary*, comes the Lord of Lords.

I'm tempted to pull a *Good Will Hunting* and say, "How 'bout dem apples?" But really, in this instance, it's really more, "How about those lemons?" Or, in the words of some of my friends, "Wow! Look at God!"

Amen.

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