

Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence...



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

Advent 2023
December 3, 2023 - First 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, but with Pilgrim Hymnal lyrics.

**Let all mortal flesh keep silence, and with fear and trembling stand;
ponder nothing earthly-minded, for with blessing in his hand,
Christ our God to earth descendeth, our full homage to demand.**

Silence

Sound and Light

Silence

We Gather at the Table

One: I wonder as I wander, out under the sky, how God decided to take on all human frailties and foibles by becoming one of us.

Many: I wonder as I wander how in Jesus we experience God in ways as personal as a hug, a laugh, a face full of tears.

One: I wonder as I wander how the lord of bliss braved all of the ills and evils of this world just to be closer to us.

Many: I wonder as I wander how the Beloved One endured the pain of the cross just to show us such wondrous love as this.

Many, singing:

“I Wonder as I Wander”

**I wonder as I wander, out under the sky,
how Jesus the Savior did come for to die
for poor ornery people like you and like I;
I wonder as I wander, out under the sky.**

One: On a last night with his friends, just before Peter and Judas would betray him, Jesus gathered in a quiet space, in an upper room, at a Table of welcome to share one last meal. The Gospels say he did this even though he knew what was coming. The pain and heartache he was already enduring was no surprise. And yet, he did not let that stop him from loving his friends, washing their feet, and offering them grain and grape to feed them in both body and in spirit.

Many: We gather today as they did that night, pondering in wonder and awe how God was and is experienced in something so simple as a shared morsel or so blessedly human as a messy, painful childbirth in a room filled with straw.

Many, singing:

“I Wonder as I Wander”

**When Mary birthed Jesus, ‘twas in a cow’s stall,
with Magi and farmers and shepherds and call.
But high from God’s heaven a star’s light did fall,
the promise of ages it then did recall.**

One: The promise of ages: that a Child would be born named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Prince of Peace. A Child would be born whose very name proclaimed the wonder and awe of Incarnation: Emmanuel, “God with Us.”

Many: Come, Lord Jesus. O Come, Emmanuel. Come, God with Us.

Many, singing:

“I Wonder as I Wander”

**If Jesus had wanted for any wee thing,
a star in the sky or a bird on the wing,
or all of God’s angels in heaven for to sing,
he surely could have it, ‘cause he was the king.**

One: Just as Jesus did on that awe-ful night, we divide this Bread, that it may be enough to sustain us in both body and spirit.

Many: With love, we remember how he shared the bread.

One: And just as Jesus did later in the meal, we pour out a cup of refreshment, a cup filled with the fruit of the vine, that all might drink together and find in the shared cup an expression of their connectedness to each other and to God.

Many: With gratitude, we remember how he shared the cup.

One: And just as he taught his friends on the Mount of Olives, we invite the Spirit to consecrate this meal by invoking the words beyond all words:

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.

*Deacons will pass the bread trays through the pews. The bread tray has cups of gluten-free crackers in the middle; please do not touch unless you will partake, so as to avoid cross-contamination. **We will partake together.***

When all have received the bread:

One: This Bread, so often remembered as Jesus's Body, is an expression of the Incarnation even now, of Emmanuel. Partake in wonder and awe at this mystery of our faith.

Many: Thanks be to God. (Eat.)

*Deacons will pass the juice trays through the pews; there is no wine.
These trays also have peel-and-eat elements that include wafer and juice.*

We will partake together. *When all have received the cup:*

One: This juice in this Cup, by we invoke a new covenant, is for many in the Church the Incarnate blood of Emmanuel. No matter how you understand it, partake and wonder and awe at this mystery of our faith.

Many: Thanks be to God. (Drink.)

One: Let us pray in thanksgiving.

Many: We thank you, Holy One, for gathering us at this Table where we experience anew the marvel of the Incarnation in both bread and cup. Instill within us an abiding sense of wonder through these seasons of Advent and Christmas, that we may never take for granted the unimaginable grace you showed by becoming personal among us. In the name of Jesus we pray; amen.

Many, singing:

“I Wonder as I Wander”

**I wonder as I wander, out under the sky,
how Jesus the Savior did come for to die
for poor ornery people like you and like I;
I wonder as I wander, out under the sky.**

A Time for Children (10:30)

Choir Anthem

“Call to Advent”

J. Williams

Anoka UCC Chancel Choir; Don Shier, Director

*O come, O come Emmanuel. And ransom captive Israel,
that mourns in lonely exile here until the son of God appears.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.
Let all mortal flesh keep silence, and with fear and trembling stand;
ponder nothing earthly minded, for, with blessing in his hand,
Christ our God to earth descendeth, our full homage to demand.*

Scripture Reading - Zechariah 2:10-13

Sing and rejoice, O daughter Zion! For lo, I will come and dwell in your midst, says the LORD. ¹¹ Many nations shall join themselves to the LORD on that day, and shall be my people; and I will dwell in your midst. And you shall know that the LORD of hosts has sent me to you. ¹² The LORD will inherit Judah as her portion in the holy land, and will again choose Jerusalem. ¹³ Be silent, all people, before the LORD; for she has roused herself from her holy dwelling.

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

Many: Thanks be to God.

Sermon

Rev. Chris McArdle

Hymn

“Of the Father’s Love Begotten” #118 (vv. 1, 3, 5)

*Feel free to use “Father’s,” “Parent’s,” “Mother’s,” or something else that fits.
“Evermore and evermore” replaces “Forever and forever” because it sounds better!*

Of the [Parent's] heart begotten when the worlds were yet to be,
one there was with no beginning, one who is eternally—
source and ending of all things that have been,
and all things that are to be, evermore and evermore.

Blessed dawning of salvation as the Word is breathed in grace
into earthly flesh receiving—God Incarnate taking place;
now the light of God revealed through the Child of human face, evermore and evermore.

Depths and heights break forth in singing, angels, saints, make melody,
all dominions, every power sing, make new psalms of ecstasy,
let no heart refrain from praising God, celebrate in harmony, evermore and evermore.

Offering

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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 gWKLGX8TRZCN.*

Offertory

Koki Sato

* Doxology

All Praise Be Yours, My God, This Night #100 (v.3)

**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.*

Acknowledgements

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Sermon Text

I once had a teacher at Boston University, Dr. Geoffrey Hill, who was a famous poet of the 20th century. He was a crusty old British academic, serving at BU in their prestigious University Professors program, a cross-disciplinary cohort of professors who were all famous and in-demand. The class I took with him, I think, was on religion and politics in England from 1500-1800, with a lot of focus on the Anglican church and its integration with the throne.

Perhaps because it was a long time ago—around 1998—I don’t remember a lot about the class, but one quote stands out. Professor Hill one day opined that something was awesome, but then in his curmudgeonly way added, “But not in the lazy way people use that word nowadays that just means ‘neat’ or ‘cool’; in the true sense of the word, meaning that it invokes *awe*.”

Awe-some. Invoking awe. Invoking that sense of wonder that causes us to fall silent in, the words of the song, fear and trembling.

It’s not fear in the sense of being scared, you know. It’s fear in the sense of deep respect and, well, *awe*. Again. That sense of being so gobsmacked (such a good British word) that your tongue freezes in your mouth and your neurons seem to stop firing for a moment. Or maybe it’s that your neurotransmitters, for just a moment, are touching upon a higher level of reality, giving you a sense of what early 20th century theologian Rudolf Otto named (coining the term) “numinous.” In his effort to define that, Otto said*,

We are dealing with something for which there is only one appropriate expression, *mysterium tremendum*... the feeling of it may at times come sweeping like a gentle tide pervading the mind with a tranquil mood of deepest worship. It may pass over into a more set and lasting attitude of the soul, continuing, as it were, thrillingly vibrant and resonant, until at last it dies away and the soul resumes its “profane,” non-religious mood of everyday experience.

I’m sure many of us have had that experience of the numinous, often as a response to something amazing in the natural world. The one and only time I went scuba diving I had that sense as all of my anxieties about being in the water with sharks and this terrible regulator in my mouth evaporated in a sense of abiding awe. Or the time I slept upon the soft sand of a wadi-bottom in the Negev Desert, opening my eyes in the middle of the night to the actually blinding light of billions of stars I had never before beheld. Or perhaps the experience of just a couple of weeks ago at seeing the 9/11 memorial in New York City and watching as countless drops of water fell into a pool, and then that water fell into a chasm in the center of each Twin Tower’s footprint, recapturing in an infinite cascade the shock and horror of watching people jump rather than burn.

The song calls upon us in this Advent season to fall silent in the face of the numinous, the awe-inspiring, the *mysterium tremendum*. “Let all mortal flesh keep silence, and with fear and trembling stand.” It’s not just a call; it’s a lesson. It’s a reminder to us that in the face of the

numinous, we don't have to give into the temptation to describe it in words. Marvel doesn't require words. It just requires silent appreciation and wonder.

Naturally, that's something that many struggle with, especially in the history of the church. So much heartache over the centuries came because folks were fighting—sometimes physically—over how to put into words the nature of Jesus and God and everything else. There have been so many arguments over heresy, over doctrine, over just exactly which words of a new creed would best establish orthodox Christian theology. So much of it is all up in the head—and I'm certainly not innocent of such things! But as the song says, sometimes all you can do is fall silent. Stand in fear and trembling. Just let the awe of the moment permeate your body and transport you to a higher plane of awareness.

In Advent, we're invited to marvel at one specific doctrine of the Church, one that—I can't say this enough—doesn't really require us to argue about its intellectual accuracy: the Incarnation. The idea—and let's just call it that—that God descended to earth from heaven, our full homage to demand. Or as I prefer to think of it, God taking on flesh because their love for the Creation was so profound that God had to enter it in bodily form so as to be with us all. To feel all the feels of human living.

God with us. Emmanuel. Here, in the flesh. Personified and personal. Come, O come, Emmanuel.

There's nothing scientific about the Incarnation, of course, unless perhaps it's in that Carl Saganesque sense that we are all the universe, trying to figure itself out. The Incarnation doesn't demand our thinking, except perhaps to acknowledge that we're dealing in the world of metaphor. We don't have to ponder anything earthly-minded other than the world of feeling. Of experience. Of the indefinable numinous that invites us simply to fall silent in fear and trembling. In a world so filled with noise, we can be the Grinch, aghast from atop Mount Crumpit, though that shock turned into awe quickly. *Every Who down in Who-ville, the tall and the small, was singing! Without any presents at all! He HADN'T stopped Christmas from coming! IT CAME! Somehow or another, it came just the same!*

In Advent, we can let our mortal flesh keep silence, and stand in fear and trembling as we experience the wonder of the Incarnation anew that comes just the same. As we anticipate the awe of the shepherds who were stirred from their silent watch by choirs of angels. As we pause for as long as we can in the hubbub of our hurly-burly lives to marvel that Christ our God to earth descended.

With our silence, we do him homage.

Amen.

* <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Rudolf-Otto/The-Idea-of-the-Holy#ref226756>

◆ **First Congregational Church UCC, Anoka, MN** ◆

1923 Third Avenue, Anoka, MN 55303 ◆ (763) 421-3375

Pastor – Rev. Chris McArdle

Minister of Visitation – Pastor Kelsey Renk

Director of Health Ministries – Jessie Waks, NP

Director of Music Ministries – Don Shier

Keyboardist – Koki Sato

Moderator – Terja Larsen

Website: <http://www.uccanoka.org> ◆ Email: office@uccanoka.org

Text-to-Give: 844-334-1477



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I Wonder as I Wander

APPALACHIAN CAROL
COLLECTED BY JOHN JACOB NILES

JOHN JACOB NILES
ARR. DONALD P. HUSTAD

Unison

1. I won - der as I wan - der, out un - der the sky, How
2. When Ma - ry birthed Je - sus, 'twas in a cow's stall, With
3. If Je - sus had want - ed for an - y wee thing, A
4. I won - der as I wan - der, out un - der the sky, How

Je - sus the Sav - ior did come for to die For
Ma - gi and farm - ers and shep - herds and all. But
star in the sky or a bird on the wing, Or
Je - sus the Sav - ior did come for to die For

poor ord' - nary peo - ple like you and like I; I
high from God's heav - en a star's light did fall, The
all of God's an - gels in heav'n for to sing, He
poor ord' - nary peo - ple like you and like I; I

(Optional Coda)

won - der as I wan - der, out un - der the sky.
prom - ise of a - ges it then did re - call.
sure - ly could have it, 'cause He was the King.
won - der as I wan - der, out un - der the sky. Out un - der the sky.