

# God bless us, everyone!



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

December 31, 2023  
First Sunday after Christmas

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

### \* Carol

“O Come, All Ye Faithful” (#135)

**O come, all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant,  
O come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem;  
come and behold him, born the king of angels;  
O come let us adore him, O come, let us adore him,  
O come let us adore him, Christ the Lord!**

**Sing, choirs of angels, sing in exultation,  
sing, all ye citizens of heaven above!  
Glory to God, all glory in the highest,  
O come let us adore him, O come, let us adore him,  
O come let us adore him, Christ the Lord!**

**Yea, Lord, we greet thee, born this happy morning,  
Jesus, to thee be all glory given;  
Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing;  
O come let us adore him, O come, let us adore him,  
O come let us adore him, Christ the Lord!**

### Call to Worship (from Psalm 100)

**One:** Make a joyful noise the LORD, all the earth!

**Many:** We worship you, O God, with gladness and come into your presence with singing.

**One:** Know that the LORD is God.

**Many: You made us, God, and we are your beloved sheep in your pasture.**

**One: Enter God's gates with thanksgiving and God's courts with praise.**

**Many: We thank you, Holy One, and bless your name!**

**One: For the LORD is good;**

**Many: Your steadfast love endures forever, and your faithfulness lasts through all generations!**

Carol

“Angels We Have Heard on High” (#125)

**Angels we have heard on high sweetly singing o'er the plains,  
and the mountains in reply echo back their joyous strains.**

**Gloria in excelsis Deo, Gloria in excelsis Deo!**

**Shepherds, why this jubilee? Why your joyous strains prolong?  
Say what may the tidings be, which inspire your heavenly song.  
Gloria in excelsis Deo, Gloria in excelsis Deo!**

**Come to Bethlehem and see him whose birth the angels sing;  
come adore on bended knee, Christ, the Lord, the newborn King.  
Gloria in excelsis Deo, Gloria in excelsis Deo!**

A Time for Children

\* Carol

“Joy to the World!” (#132)

**Joy to the world! The Lord is come: let earth receive her king;  
let every heart prepare him room, and heaven and nature sing,  
and heaven and nature sing, and heaven, and heaven, and nature sing.**

**Joy to the earth! The Savior reigns! Let all their songs employ;  
while fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains repeat the sounding joy,  
repeat the sounding joy, repeat, repeat the sounding joy.**

**He rules the world with truth and grace, and make the nations prove  
the glories of his righteousness, and wonders of his love,  
and wonders of his love, and wonders, and wonders of his love.**

Scripture Reading – Matthew 2:13-18

Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." <sup>14</sup> Then Joseph got

up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, <sup>15</sup> and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son." <sup>16</sup> When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. <sup>17</sup> Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: <sup>18</sup> "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more."

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

Many: **Thanks be to God.**

Sermon

Rev. Chris McArdle

\* Carol

“Go Tell It on the Mountain” #154

**(refrain) Go tell it on the mountain, over the hill and everywhere.**

**Go tell it on the mountain, that Jesus Christ is born!**

**While shepherds kept their watching o’er silent flocks by night,  
behold throughout the heavens there shone a holy light. (refrain)**

**The shepherds feared and trembled when lo! above the earth  
rang out the angel chorus that hailed our Savior’s birth. (refrain)**

**Down in a lowly manger the humble Christ was born,  
and God sent us salvation that blessed Christmas morn. (refrain)**

Acts of Prayer

*Today, as we pray we will reflect on 2023 as it closes and 2024 as it begins.  
On your prayer card, consider writing a prayer for both BEHIND and AHEAD.*

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](http://uccanoka.org/donate)).*

*You can support the church further through the RaiseRight program:*

*[www.raiseright.com](http://www.raiseright.com). Our unique church ID is gWKLGX8TRZCN.*

## Prayers of the People

*A Pastor will read aloud the prayers of the congregation, occasionally including the call/response:  
God in your love // **Hear our prayer.** Prayers marked “SILENT” will not be read aloud.*

## 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.**

## \* Carol

Hark! The Herald Angels Sing” (#144)

**Hark! the herald angels sing, “Glory to the newborn 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 hosts proclaim, “Christ is born in Bethlehem!”  
Hark! the herald angels sing, “Glory to the newborn king!”**

**Christ, by highest heaven adored; Christ, the everlasting Lord!  
Late in time behold him come, offspring of the virgin’s womb.  
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see; hail the-incarnate Deity,  
pleased on earth with us to dwell, Jesus, our Emmanuel.  
Hark! the herald angels sing, “Glory to the newborn 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 we no more may die,  
born to raise us all from earth, born to give us second birth.  
Hark! the herald angels sing, “Glory to the newborn king!”**

## \* 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.*

Sermon Text

As I look back on a year nearly completed at Third and Main, I ponder the things we have done, and I consider who we have further discerned ourselves to be. Through that all, there is one evolution that has stuck with me the most indelibly, one accomplishment that stands out for me as a moment of potent growth. I speak of the beginning of our REEL group, the collection of church members who gather monthly to discern together how we can live into our resolution to become an anti-racist congregation.

Perhaps you recall a large Zoom gathering in July of 2020 in which we considered a lengthy resolution that was the result of some Council discernment. It was a couple of months after George Floyd died when I asked the council if it was time—or past time—for us to declare publicly that Black lives matter. The Council was immediately amenable to that, knowing that we would be saying something that needed saying: specifically, not that Black lives ONLY mattered, an altogether omnipresent and misleading caricature, but that Black lives matter TOO in a nation where too often Black lives have NOT mattered.

It being early in a pandemic, to I’m sure no one’s surprise, we didn’t exactly get off to a rousing start—and that’s okay. We did all have some fairly abiding concerns in our homes where we were stuck for many moons yet to come. But eventually, folks from this community—and here I particularly credit Beth Cains and her daughter Lauren—decided we needed to take to heart the resolution we had made. They dreamed, they planned, they invited, they acted.

One of the most visible ripples from this ongoing effort has been our movement toward association with ISAIAH, an organization self-described as “a multi-racial, state-wide, nonpartisan coalition of faith communities, Black barbershops, childcare centers, and other community based constituencies fighting for racial and economic justice in Minnesota.” I’m so happy to see this happening, in no small part because Oby Ballinger has been involved in ISAIAH for many years and has repeatedly invited me to participate. But even more than that—and I told Oby this repeatedly—I didn’t want to put my own energy into ISAIAH, which is fundamentally an organization of entities, not faith leaders, if the church wasn’t participating as well. And this I knew was true: I couldn’t make it happen if y’all didn’t want to make it happen.

Well, you’re making it happen. Alleluia! Thank you, and let’s keep it going!

Perhaps a casual Sunday on the last day of the year when I promised we’d be singing Christmas carols seems like an odd time to talk about our commitment to anti-racism, but two elements today drew me here. First, I have remembered that with few exceptions, our Christmas hymnody is largely drawn from white, European contexts, and given that our religion sprouted among nonwhite people in Palestine, that’s something to which we probably should devote some attention. Secondly, I always remember at this time of year something I was told while on a seminary trip to Ghana.

Before I tell you what that was, let’s remember that the Christmas story isn’t all angels and shepherds and cooing babies born among livestock. Part of the full story includes Epiphany, which arises

this coming Saturday, the day on which we remember the Matthean story of the magi visiting the two-week old Jesus. But before they could do that, they had to visit Herod.

In what was almost certainly not a historical story, Matthew spins a tale about Herod killing kids that surely IS supposed to make us think of Moses and Pharaoh and a whole lot of murdered children, both at Moses's birth and then as a plague when he was trying to liberate his people. We tend to gloss over that part of the story, because Christmas doesn't seem like a super time for us to be regaling each other with a tale traditionally known as "the massacre of the innocents." But the lives of Palestinian and Israeli children that have been violently snuffed out in the last two months beg us to remember this part of the story, too. That it is Christmas is no excuse to forget the hard parts of the story, especially when they're so present.

Herod was afraid. In the realm of this story, he had received a prophecy, a foretelling of the future, that promised his replacement. The agent of that fall would be a boy-child born right around then, and when the Magi who shared the prophecy didn't return to tell him if and where they'd found the child, he decided to wax Pharaonic and order mass executions. This would have meant the end of Jesus, too, but for one key detail in the story: the angel who spoke to Joseph in a dream. "*Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt.*"

If you were hearing this tale for the first time in the late first century when it was being told hither and yon, and if you were a Jewish person who was familiar with your core stories, you might have raised an eyebrow. Fleeing to Egypt for safety had a pretty spotty track record in ancient Israel. Doing so, usually without the blessing of God, was seen as a demonstration of a lack of faith. The people were to turn to God in times of both plenty and want, but Israel had a tendency to run south to the fertile Nile River civilization whenever stuff got bad. That's how the whole Exodus story got rolling, after all. So here was God, via an intermediary, telling Joseph and Mary and Jesus to go to Egypt?

Yes. Because if God sends you, you GO!

The Bible doesn't tell us exactly how long the family sheltered in Egypt, saying only that they were to stay until Herod died—which we know happened in the year 4 BCE. But there are traditions that grew up around that story, and the one that blew up my brain and my heart the most was recounted to me in Ghana in the winter of 2009. I had traveled there with other students from Eden Seminary in what had already become a tradition at my school after the Reverend Jane Ellefson, a missionary from the UCC's Nebraska Conference, had invited an Eden administrator to come see what she was doing in the country.

One day on our trip, we Eden students were guests of a roomful of pastors from the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, a western Ghanaian denomination with some ties to the United Church of Christ. Between that and the worship services we had attended, I was led to understand some of the effects of European religious colonialism. Most visibly, white collars, black clericals, and black academic robes were ubiquitous among the clergy. And yet, it became clear that there was a particularly African sensibility woven through it all—perhaps inevitably—that made the EP Church feel like nothing I had before experienced.

The most compelling moment came when the elder pastor in the room made a statement of faith that shook my foundations: ***Africa saved the Savior***. I had never heard of such a thing. The flight to Egypt doesn't show up in a Nativity set. The massacre of the innocents is usually passed over in the interests of a more celebratory, gentle Christmas.

***But Africa saved the Savior.***

In justice-work, an important skill to develop is the ability to center the voices of the marginalized. So often in the history of our nation, it has been the white voices who tell the story, write the history, and dominate the cultural narrative. The work of anti-racism involves stepping out of the limelight and allowing voices of color to tell the story, write the history, and inform the cultural narrative. That day in

Ghana, I learned how powerfully African Christians had already centered themselves in the story of Jesus's birth, all because ***Africa saved the Savior.***

If not for Egypt, Jesus would have died.

If not for Africa, the Body of Christ would be bodiless.

European missionaries took their reframed stories of Jesus to Africa, and Africans found themselves in the middle of it all.

Africa saved the Savior.

As we move into 2024, I want you to keep that phrase in your minds. As we wrap up another Christmas season, keep it close to your hearts. And perhaps, in this moment, on this day, we might also remember that even as we sing all manner of European Christmas carols, there's one that appears in all of our hymnals, one that is written into the fibers of all our hearts, that isn't European at all. It's the product of American slaves, and it was recorded or perhaps even partly composed by a Black musician and scholar of folk music, John Wesley Work II, one-time director of the Fisk University Jubilee Singers.

That song is "Go Tell It on the Mountain."

### Acknowledgements

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## ◆ **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](mailto:office@uccanoka.org)

Text-to-Give: 844-334-1477



*First Congregational Church, UCC of Anoka is an Open and Affirming Christian Community for all. We affirm that the image of God is most fully reflected in diversity. We invite all people to share their energy and talents in full participation with our community. We welcome all individuals and families of any sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, gender expression, relationship status, race, national origin, socioeconomic status, age, mental and physical health or ability, or belief. Together, we celebrate these and all other facets of one's essential being.*