



The Methodist Church

Ripon and Lower Dales Methodist Circuit

Worship at Home – 4 December 2022

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Wherever you are sharing in this act of worship, you are welcome.

A prayer to prepare ourselves for worship:
Blessed are you, Sovereign God, creator of all,
to you be glory and praise for ever.
You founded the earth in the beginning and the heavens are the work of your hands. In the fullness of time you made us in your image,
and in these last days you have spoken to us in your Son Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh.
As we rejoice in the gift of your presence among us
let the light of your love always shine in our hearts,
your Spirit ever renew our lives
and your praises ever be on our lips.
Blessed be God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Blessed be God for ever.

Hymn: Singing the Faith 169
Come, thou long-expected Jesus, born to set thy people free,
from our fears and sins release us, let us find our rest in thee.

Israel's strength and consolation, hope of all the earth thou art, dear desire of every nation, joy of every longing heart.

Born thy people to deliver, born a child and yet a king,
born to reign in us for ever, now thy gracious kingdom bring.

By thine own eternal Spirit rule in all our hearts alone;
by thine all-sufficient merit raise us to thy glorious throne.

Prayer: For ever and ever, Lord God. That is Your promise to us.
A promise made before time began. A promise kept until beyond eternity. A promise

that brings us here today.
Because forever starts today, God.
It rose with the first glimpse of dawn.
It breathed in the stirring of the morning air.
It sang in the waking chorus of creation.
And it lives in all of us because You, in Your goodness,
have made it so.

This moment in time, God,
is nothing in the grand scale
of Your awesome plan.
But it is our opportunity
to recognise that every second,
of every minute of every hour,
of every day is everything,
because of Your limitless love.

We praise all that You are, Creator God.
We stand amazed at all that You give and we celebrate Your faithfulness
to us in our failure to appreciate the price of Your promises
and the cost of Your creativity.

When You created the world, Lord,
You presented it to us as perfect.
A place of growth and fruitfulness.
but we misused it and left it broken and disjointed.

When You breathed life into humanity
You chose and cherished us. But we broke away from Your gentle arms
and dismissed Your love.

When You came to us, You wept with us, You suffered for us
and You gave up Your all for us.
But we forgot the vastness of Your sacrifice and took it for granted.
We cannot fathom the scale and the nature of Your forgiveness
Yet still we seek it and need it.
And still You offer it.

For ever and ever, God.
That is Your promise as proclaimed in Your Son, Jesus Christ.
So here today, we proclaim ourselves a forgiven people,
refreshed by Your grace and ready to serve You.
We proclaim ourselves forever people.
Committed to sharing in Your work.

We proclaim ourselves Your people, now and always. Amen.

Reading: Psalm 80: 1-7, 17-19

To the leader: on Lilies, a Covenant. Of Asaph. A Psalm.

Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock! You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh. Stir up your might, and come to save us!

Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

O Lord God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people's prayers? You have fed them with the bread of tears, and given them tears to drink in full measure. You make us the scorn of our neighbours; our enemies laugh among themselves.

Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand, the one whom you made strong for yourself. Then we will never turn back from you; give us life, and we will call on your name.

Restore us, O Lord God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

Hymn: StF 180 O come, O come Immanuel
O come, O come, Immanuel,
and ransom captive Israel,
that mourns in lonely exile here until the Son
of God appear:

Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel shall come to you, O Israel.

O come, O come, O Lord of might who to your tribes, on Sinai's height, in ancient times did give the law
in cloud, and majesty, and awe:

O come, O Rod of Jesse, free your own from Satan's tyranny;
from depths of hell your people save, and give them victory o'er the grave:

O come, O Key of David, come,
and open wide our heavenly home; make safe the way that leads on high, and close the path to misery:

O come, O Day-spring, come and cheer our spirits by your advent here; disperse the gloomy clouds of night, and death's dark shadows put to flight:

Reading: Luke 1: 5 – 25

⁵In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. ⁶Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. ⁷But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.

⁸Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, ⁹he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. ¹⁰And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.

¹¹Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹²When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. ¹³But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. ¹⁴He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, ¹⁵for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. ¹⁶He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

¹⁸Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."

¹⁹ The angel said to him, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. ²⁰ And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time.”

²¹ Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple.

²² When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realised he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.

²³ When his time of service was completed, he returned home. ²⁴ After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. ²⁵ “The Lord has done this for me,” she said. “In these days he has shown his favour and taken away my disgrace among the people.”

Reflection

Edmund Sears was the minister of a small congregation in Wayland, Massachusetts, in America, in the late 1830s, and after that he went to the town of Lancaster, Massachusetts, to serve a larger congregation. After seven years of hard work, he suffered a breakdown and returned to Wayland. He wrote a famous carol while serving as a part time preacher in Wayland, which called him back to full time service in 1850. (He retired in 1865.) Some people suggest his carol was first performed by parishioners gathered in his home on Christmas Eve. It's my favourite carol because it sums up for me Advent hope and longing and the joy of incarnation and the coming of God announced by angels: It came upon a midnight clear. We will sing it today at the end of our service.

Sears's words are both beautiful and powerful and reflecting on our world right now they could have been written this week...

Yet with the woes of sin and strife
the world has suffered long;
Beneath the angel strain have rolled
two thousand years of wrong;
And man, at war with man, hears not
the love song which they bring;

O hush the noise, ye men of strife and hear
the angels sing.

Sears's carol is remarkable for its focus not on Bethlehem, but on his own time, and on the ever-contemporary issue of war and peace. Probably more than any other Christmas carol, it talks about today — his day or our day. It says that the call to peace and goodwill to all is as loud on any other day as it was on that midnight of old, if we would but listen “in solemn stillness.”

Which leads me to think about angels and angel song in Advent.

A lady said to me one Christmas, struggling with it being everywhere, and the noise of it, “I just want some time to hear the angels sing.”

We need something to break into our world — a new song, a heavenly host to bring us good news — glory to God in the highest and on earth, goodwill to all people. “I just want some time to hear the angels sing.”

We know about angels in the Christmas story. We know about the heavenly host coming to shepherds on a hillside. We know about birth announcements to Mary and Joseph and warnings about trouble where God's intention and earthly agendas collide. We forget about Zechariah. Zechariah was an elderly faithful servant of the Lord doing his duty on the rota of stewards in the temple. Then the angel comes. He's going to be a Dad! There are other stories of elderly disbelief about sudden parenthood. Remember in Genesis, Sarah laughs! Zechariah maybe highlights what the problem is in some of our churches at the moment. We are faithful, we go to worship, we do good acts, we take our turn on the rota but we've stopped expecting that anything new might happen. We don't expect angels and we disregard good news. And sometimes dare I say we enjoy moaning how hard it is to be church people today. The angel breaks into Zechariah's routine and his protests and because he as good as limits God the angel shuts him up until the child is born.

I've been thinking about this a lot. This season is noisy. I prepared this service sitting in the wonderful White Rose book café in

Thirsk sitting by the speaker blasting out Christmas songs one after another. Maybe, just maybe, we need as we will sing later in Sears' hymn to "hush our noise" maybe we need to be quiet and still and just be to let God love us again. Maybe we need to shut up for a bit to remember in stillness comes strength.

It is only when we stop that we take in. Maybe we need to create time in these weeks to just let God share his plans and let our minds and hearts take it in. We too easily say nothing will happen and then we miss God passing by. At the end of the service today we will hear Zechariah's thinking in the silence – a mighty declaration of what God does.

My favourite contemporary Christian writer, Nadia Bolz-Weber has got to the heart of the matter, when angels and humans meet. Thinking about Zechariah she says "maybe he had become so comfortable with the story he told himself and that others had told him about what his life looks like and what it will always look like and so he couldn't believe another story was even possible." And then she gives the church of 2022 a task: "At its core, Advent is an invitation to be prophets of a different story. So may you, every single one of you, be prophets to each other - prophets of a different story – a better story, a more hopeful story, a subversively beautiful story about what is possible this Advent season – a story worthy of you all as sons and daughters of a king."

The ancient scholar Origen said that angels are "at the service of our salvation." They come to say there is another way about. So what's my prayer for these Advent weeks? May we hush our noise and hear the angels sing... our future may depend on us simply shutting up for a bit.

O Sapientia by Malcolm Guite
I cannot think unless I have been thought,
Nor can I speak unless I have been spoken.
I cannot teach except as I am taught,
Or break the bread except as I am broken.
O Mind behind the mind through which I seek,
O Light within the light by which I see,

O Word beneath the words with which I speak,
O founding, unfound Wisdom, finding me,
O sounding Song whose depth is sounding me,
O Memory of time, reminding me,
My Ground of Being, always grounding me,
My Maker's Bounding Line, defining me,
Come, hidden Wisdom, come with all you bring,
Come to me now, disguised as everything.
Sonnet | Malcolm Guite, Sounding the Seasons (Canterbury Press, 2012)

Space to pray that God might come into our world today...

Hymn: Singing the Faith 205
It came upon the midnight clear,
That glorious song of old,
From angels bending near the earth
To touch their harps of gold;
"Peace on the earth, good will to men
From heaven's all-gracious King" –
The world in solemn stillness lay
To hear the angels sing.

Still through the cloven skies they come
With peaceful wings unfurled,
And still their heavenly music floats
O'er all the weary world;
Above its sad and lowly plains
They bend on hovering wing,
And ever o'er its Babel-sounds
The blessed angels sing.

But with the woes of sin and strife
The world has suffered long;
Beneath the angel-strain have rolled
Two thousand years of wrong;
And man, at war with man, hears not
The love song which they bring; –
O hush the noise, ye men of strife,
And hear the angels sing!

For lo! the days are hastening on
By prophet bards foretold,
When, with the ever circling years
Shall come the age of gold;
When Peace shall over all the earth,
Its ancient splendours fling,
And the whole world give back the song,
Which now the angels sing.

Closing words: The Benedictus

Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel;
he has come to his people and set them free.
He has raised up for us a mighty saviour,
born of the house of his servant David.
Through his holy prophets he promised of old
that he would save us from our enemies,
from the hands of all who hate us.
He promised to show mercy to our fathers
and to remember his holy covenant.
This was the oath he swore to our father
Abraham:
to set us free from the hands of our enemies,
free to worship him without fear,
holy and righteous in his sight all the days of
our life.

You, my child, shall be called the prophet of
the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his
way,
to give his people knowledge of salvation
by the forgiveness of their sins.
In the tender compassion of our God
the dawn from on high shall break upon us,
to shine on those who dwell in darkness and
the shadow of death,
and to guide our feet into the way of peace.
Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the
Holy Spirit,
as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be
forever. Amen