

First Sunday of Christmas

Call to worship

Christmas has arrived,
God is with us – Immanuel.
Today, we are a Christmas people,
And we believe in new life, new hope and the possibility of transformation.
Amen.¹

Hymn: 203 STF – [I had a dream](#)

Opening Prayers

Incarnate God-with-us,
We come before you with grateful hearts.

[Pause]

You have come into the world
...and into our hearts,
never to leave.

[Pause]

Our eyes have seen your salvation.

We are no longer slaves,
but your children and your heirs.

Praise to you O God!

You ordained the cosmos into being
Forgive us when we imagine we are in control.

[Pause]

Let the earth bring forth new shoots
Let righteousness spring up in all nations
And help us build a fairer, humbler world.

Amen.²

Let us now say the Lord's Prayer

¹ Additional prayers by Tim Baker

² Opening prayers written by Phil Craine

Readings:

[Galatians 4:4-7](#)

[Luke 2:22-40](#) - Jesus Is Presented in the Temple

Reflections on the readings

Hope is the great theme of the Christmas season, and especially the season of advent that we have just lived through. During those weeks of waiting, and counting the days, and lighting candles, and opening doors...we hope.³

Now, on the third day of Christmas, we gather in worship again. This year when many of us have had to reimagine worship, rethinking how we 'connect' in the midst of a pandemic where physical connection is a problem. We come together this day to celebrate the miracle of Christmas: that the Advent hope becomes real. In Jesus Christ, born into the margins of society, hope transfers from an abstract concept into a physical, incarnate, human being.

This Christmas, as every Christmas, hope is made real.

As we stand on the threshold of 2021, I wonder what you are hoping for?

What are your hopes for this season?

And, perhaps an even harder question: 'what does hope mean to you?'

Hope is such an important Advent and Christmas theme, because so much of hope is about waiting...and Advent is the season of waiting, of preparing, of looking forward, of believing that the future could be better than the present. That's what it means to wait.

Christians put their hope in God, and so Advent hoping is also about waiting for God's plans to be made known to us, for our faith in God to become real. Three year's ago, during Advent, my wife Hannah was heavily pregnant with our first child. As we waited, and prepared, we also realised that all our preparations, all our planning, all our emotions, were about to become real – in the life of a real, small, human child. At Advent, we don't just wait for an abstract hope, we wait for the person of Christ. At Christmas, we don't just celebrate a story from thousands of years ago, we celebrate a God who is present in our lives today.

This Christmas, as every Christmas, hope is made real.

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And 2020 has been a year of waiting, hasn't it? Waiting, and hoping. We have all experienced Coronavirus in different ways, but it has changed so much about our way of life, and much of it has involved waiting, whilst we hoped we might make it out the other side...

- Perhaps you have been waiting to emerge from a time of self-isolation or shielding.
- Perhaps you have been dealing with the uncertainty of waiting to find out about your employment, and whether your employer will be able to keep you on in light of economic uncertainty.
- Perhaps you have been waiting to see friends and family who have been cut off from you by restrictions.
- Perhaps you have been waiting for a hug.
- Or a hand squeeze.
- Or just the chance to sing in church again...

We have been waiting, we have been hoping.

Like Simeon and Anna, in today's gospel story – they have been waiting all their lives for a moment like this. Then Jesus comes, hope becomes real. As Paul puts it in today's Galatians reading: "but when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman".

Which leads us to the question that the two characters in Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* ask of each other: "what shall we do, while waiting"? The play is structured around the human experience of waiting – there is always something on the horizon, and the characters in the play attempt to find ways to pass the time, while waiting. Perhaps this is the question that we must all ask each other today?

As we wait for God, we wait on God, we await God's return in some mysterious and glorious way. As we wait, what should we *do*?

There is a dangerous strand of thought within Christianity – and, indeed, other religions that speak of an 'end time' when all will be made well – that suggests our job is to kind of 'put our feet up'. We hear the most ominous strands of this thought amongst people who claim that things like climate change are, in fact, merely God's way of bringing about the end of the world and we ought to sit back and watch it happen...

This seems to run counter to what Jesus taught in the gospels and the heart of the Christian religion – which is about activism, about action, about seeking to love our neighbours and to make disciples of all nations. So, what shall we do, while waiting? Perhaps this Christmas season, as we celebrate God made human – hope made real – we can hear again God's call on our lives. What is mine to do, O God? What are you hoping for? How can you make hope a reality in your family, your community, your country, your world?

This Christmas, as every Christmas, hope is made real. And perhaps it is made real for someone else, by you.

So, let us return to Simeon and Anna for our final thought: can we remain faithful in our waiting? They find a way to remain devout, despite everything. Can we?

As Aragorn says in *Lord of Rings*, when in pursuit of his friends but fearing he may be too late: "this is an end to hope perhaps, but not to toil". Perhaps, sometimes, we can't 'feel' hope, we sense the rising panic and despair that comes with life in a pandemic, or our own life situation. But, even then, we don't stop our active waiting, our preparation, fulfilling our calling.

Take the next step. Keep waiting. Keep hoping.

Grace comes, grace abounds, this Christmas, as every Christmas, hope is made real.

Wherever you are in your walk with God today, wherever this Christmas service finds you, let us capture the spirit of Simeon and Anna today: waiting with purpose, hoping with faith, waiting on the Lord.

We close with words from Psalm 130:

“I wait for the Lord, my whole being waits,
and in his word I put my hope.

I wait for the Lord
more than watchmen wait for the morning,
more than watchmen wait for the morning.

Israel, put your hope in the Lord,
for with the Lord is unfailing love
and with him is full redemption.

Amen.⁴

Prayers of intercession

Father of Grace we glorify you, for you have made all things and each one of us.

We pray for those who feel alone this Christmas time or find this season difficult. We pray that you would bring comfort. Thank you that you are our living hope, and you know us and love us.

Righteous Father, you are full of justice and blessings.

We pray for kindness and generosity to be shown across this world and for hatred and fear to be no more. We pray that you would reconcile families, bring communities together and bring your love into this world.

Loving father we cry out to you.

[Pause]

We pray for hope in the most hopeless of situations, breakthrough in the most impossible of times, joy for those who are sad, and for peace that transcends all understanding for those that worry.

Wonderful and exalted Father, we are humbled that you sent your one and only Son to earth and we thank you for the gift of Jesus Christ.

⁴ Reflection written by Tim Baker

We pray that you would use us how you will, to share your good news with the world, to radiate your goodness and to follow you, whatever the cost and whatever the journey looks like to build your kingdom.

Amen.⁵

Hymn: [O holy night the stars are brightly shining](#)

Blessing

Glory to the new-born King, peace on earth and mercy mild – God and sinners reconciled.

Glory to God indeed, and happy Christmas!

Amen.⁶

⁵ Prayers of intercession written by Alice Young

⁶ Additional prayers by Tim Baker