

Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence...



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

Advent 2023

December 24, 2023 - Fourth 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

* Opening Hymn

“Angels We Have Heard on High” (#125)

(Pilgrim Hymnal lyrics)

**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.**

The Church Bell Rings

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.4, but with *Pilgrim Hymnal* lyrics.

**At his feet the six-winged seraph, cherubim with sleepless eye,
veil their faces to the presence, as with ceaseless voice they cry,
Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia, Lord Most High!**

Silence

Sound and Light

Silence

A Time for Children (10:30)

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

Cole Marshall

Scripture Reading – Luke 1:26-38

Lector, **Congregation**

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." ²⁹ But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰ The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³² He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³ He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." ³⁴ Mary said to the angel, "**How can this be, since I am a virgin?**" ³⁵ The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. ³⁶ And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God." ³⁸ Then Mary said, "**Here am I,**

the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

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

Many: Thanks be to God.

Sermon

Rev. Chris McArdle

Hymn

"It Came Upon the Midnight Clear" (#131 *alt.*)

**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, goodwill to all, 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.**

**And ye, beneath life's crushing load whose forms are bending low,
who toil along the climbing way, with painful steps and slow,
look now, for glad and golden hours come swiftly on the wing;
O rest beside the weary road, and hear the angels sing.**

**For lo, the days are hastening on, by prophet bards foretold,
when with the ever-circling years comes round the age of gold.
When peace shall over all the earth its ancient splendors fling,
and the whole world sends back the song which now the angels sing.**

Prayers of the People

*If you wish to share a prayer with the congregation (joy, concern, hope, worry, or anything at all), raise your hand and a Deacon will bring you a microphone. Offer your prayer and finish by saying, "God in your love" to which we will all respond, "**Hear our prayer.**"*

Sung Prayer

"Angels We Have Heard on High" #125

Just the chorus, repeatedly and softly.

Gloria in excelsis Deo, Gloria in excelsis Deo.

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

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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

Acknowledgements

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Sermon Text

The shepherds' terror when the angels herald the birth of Jesus might be a surprise to those who are thinking of angels in the most colloquial of ways. We're accustomed to seeing shirtless, fit men with golden locks and eight-pack abs with a couple of enormous, white wings. Or maybe the angels appear in the feminine, dressed in wispy fabrics or in armor similar to that worn by Athena. Maybe they're even little rosy, chunky-cheeked cherubs playing their harps whilst perched upon a puff of cloud. But these aren't what the shepherds saw, at least not if we look to Isaiah and Ezekiel. Those angels are generally terrifying.

Ezekiel tells us that the cherubim, far from being Campbell's Soup kids, are of human form, but they have calves' feet, sparkling like polished bronze. Each has four wings, with two touching the wings of their companions and two covering their bodies. They each have four faces: human, lion, ox, eagle. The song says "cherubim with sleepless eye," suggesting that those four heads don't all sleep at once.

Ezekiel describes another class of angel, one known in Hebrew as "galgal," an angel that appears like four gleaming wheels with rims and spokes, perhaps interlocking—or as we're told, "a wheel within a wheel." Perhaps they're gyroscopic, because when they move, they maintain their direction relative to the main wheel. And the best part: each of those wheels is covered with eyes, as if someone took a value pack of googly eyes and glued them to every available surface. They also have eye-covered wings. Peacocks on psychedelic drugs!

Isaiah mentions the most innocuous of the angels, the seraphim, of which there is little description other than they have three sets of wings. With two wings they cover their faces, with two they cover their feet, and with two they fly. It seems these seraphim in particular might be what the Liturgy of St. James was referencing as the ones who "veil their faces to the presence," inasmuch as they already cover their eyes. But why might they need to do this? They're angels!

It wasn't always that way. In the beginning, what God created the first people and gave them a home in Eden, we were allowed to see the face of God. That much is implied, as we read that God would take walks in the garden, and moreover, there aren't any intermediaries transmitting God's words to people. But after the expulsion from the garden, that starts to change. By the time God appears to Abraham, it seems to still be in bodily form, but the text suggests that Abraham doesn't initially recognize that his visitors are God and two angelic beings. When Jacob wrestles with a stranger, he doesn't seem to initially realize it's God, either. By the time we get to Moses, mortals have become separated enough from God that God only lets Moses see the Divine Backside, not the Divine Face, saying (Exodus 33:20), "you cannot see my face; for no one shall see my face and live." After that, God speaks largely in visions and dreams or sends angels to transmit messages—fitting enough, since the Greek for "angel" literally means "messenger."

My read of the canon suggests that this fading access to the glory of God's Presence is a function of sin, especially as Paul Tillich describes sin, calling it "separation." A distance grows between God and the Creation, not by God's choice. The abiding theology is that people turn away from God and walk in the other direction, chasing the temptations of the world and embracing the idols of power, wealth, and war instead of the holy pillars of justice, righteousness, and *shalom*.

In the Christian tradition, many believe that the coming of Jesus was the answer to that separation in the sense that Jesus "defeated death" and absolved people of sin due to his sacrificial death on the cross. You've heard me push on that theology many times; a God who is Love shouldn't need any such act to forgive people. No purchase necessary. And didn't Jesus say, "I came for mercy, not sacrifice?" So no, I

don't think that's a healthy theology at all. It sets up God as needing a price to be paid for forgiveness, and the last time I checked, that undermines the meaning of grace. Rather than all of that, I increasingly find myself reflecting upon the birth narratives as a far more grace-filled answer to that separation.

I didn't get there initially. In seminary, in learning more about the sometimes-confusing theologies of the Trinity, I once opined that I didn't have much use for the Trinity. It seemed enough to me that God was both immanent and transcendent, meanings captured in the old affirmation that God is as close to us as breathing and as distant as the farthest star. Experienced right here among us, but also in such a way that we have no mortal words to describe it. The proximity of our very breath, and billions of light years away. Or, as Grover suggests, both, "Near...and far!" One day, though, my theology teacher Dr. Niles said to me, "Don't confuse *immanent* with *personal*," and it opened me to the third part of the Trinity. Jesus. The Word Made Flesh. Emmanuel. God With Us.

I daren't speak for any other religious tradition or make any implications about the truth of their beliefs. I can say only that for us, for Christians, for the Church, the birth narratives offer to us as holy gift the awe-inspiring belief that the face of God, so mighty and powerful that no mortal or angel can look upon it, took form among us as something that COULD be seen and touched, the face of an infant. Holy in its own way. Innocent and soft. As yet unblemished by the world, though that would come. A decisive experience of God that would not make our heads explode or the blood freeze in our veins. A voice we could hear, lips we could read, arms we could feel reaching out to us.

The Psalmist gives us such words of beauty to capture our awe that God would come among us in this way: "When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor" (Psalm 8:3-5). In our Christian faith, in Jesus, we added a new way to understand that glory and honor: that God chose to come among us as a human, God With Us.

One quick look at the world is enough to make us question God's choice to join us here, especially of late as we look at the horrific conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza—and that's just the ones we're actually paying attention to. It's not for nothing that the Lutheran Church in Bethlehem chose to build their nativity scene differently this year, placing the baby Jesus among broken and blasted rubble. And yet, that crèche still captures the essence of Christmas: that God *did* Incarnate into a world filled with pain and ruin. In the midst of so much trauma, the story says we can behold God's face with us.

The Good News of this belief is enough to spur us to sing continually, "Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia, Lord Most High!" It's a reminder to us, in the words of American astronaut Andrew Morton, that, "This is some good news: the earth is still beautiful. An earth in crisis is still an earth worth returning to." We celebrate that return every year. Our church year *begins* with that Good News—that despite the sin, despite the brokenness, despite the overwhelming messiness of this world, God came among us and comes among us again and again. God chooses to be with us again and again. The Doctor recently said that the human race is "savage, venal, and relentless." But he also said we are, "clever, bright, and brilliant."

In the end, perhaps that is God's great hope. It's not just the Doctor who keeps returning; so does God. Emmanuel arrives over and over to join us in our sickness and our health, our plenty and our want, our joy and our sorrow, as long as the stars burn.

As a child, I loved Christmas the most, but in my teens and younger adulthood, I would say that Easter was my favorite Church holiday. Perhaps I said as much because it was contrary to those who favored Christmas. Perhaps it was because I wanted to please my pastor, inasmuch as Easter is sort of the reason for the whole thing. But as I have aged, I hope that I have grown wiser. Some of that could be remembering that when I was a child I thought and reasoned like a child, but the greater part may be realizing that becoming an adult *doesn't* mean I have to put an end to childish ways. So nowadays, I freely admit that I love Christmas the most. For this I know is true: so many in the church have followed Paul in

saying, “for while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly” (Romans 5:6). In other words, Easter says that Jesus was willing to die for us.

Christmas says that Jesus was willing to LIVE for us.

O come, O Dayspring, come and cheer our spirits by your advent here.

Amen.

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

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