

First Sunday after Christmas – Year A

First Sunday after Christmas – 1 January 2023

The Faith Nurture Forum would like to thank Rev David Coleman, Environmental Chaplain, Eco-Congregation Scotland, for his thoughts on the first Sunday after Christmas.

Weekly Worship, based on the Revised Common Lectionary, is for everyone – in any capacity – who is involved in creating and leading worship.

It provides liturgical material that can be used for worship in all settings. Our writers are asked to share their approaches to creating and delivering this material to equip leaders with a greater confidence and ability to reflect on their own worship practice and experience and encourage them to consider how this material might be adapted for their own context.

We would encourage continual reflection on the changing patterns of worship and spiritual practice that are emerging from disruption and how this might help identify pathways towards development and worship renewal.

We may not all be gathered in the same building, but at this time, when we need each other so much, we are invited to worship together, from where we are – knowing that God can hear us all and can blend even distant voices into one song of worship.

Introduction	3
Isaiah 63:7-9	4
Psalm 148	5
Hebrews 2:10-18	6
Matthew 2:13-23	7
Sermon ideas	8
Prayers	9
Musical suggestions	14
Reflecting on our worship practice	15
Useful links	17

Introduction

Our readings this week have in common the significance of prior stories, previous experiences and scriptures relating to the reader's relationship with God. What the traditions and stories meant to them is the fertile soil for that which their stories will become in us. Even within scripture, the stories of God's people/family are never single-use, but are recycled and reshaped *multiple times*.

What has made Christmas *Christmas* for you, your family, your church, this time round? What has carried you and challenged you in the stories we have shared? Have you built in, and will you acknowledge, the ongoing threats and crises of climate emergency, fuel poverty and the continuing violence of warfare? What did you encounter that was nourishing, hopeful and profound? And, what did you encounter that was the opposite?

On 1 January, in the quiet streets, with hangovers of the night before, the debris of Christmas lies around us. Could the festivities have entailed a different journey, and yet retained their identity as the season that celebrates God's most deeply personal commitment to life and to Creation, becoming flesh in the vulnerability of the Christ Child?

There is a shared determination in our readings, that the perceived promises of God to one generation will not be found wanting in another, though the differing circumstances from one age to another highlight the need for inspiration and creativity to recycle and repurpose what God offers. We strangle the gift if we only read 'as we always have done'.

'Fulfilment' is a relational experience; more akin to adoption into God's family than shackled to a narrowly forensic adherence to prior instructions. To grasp fulfilment requires poetry more than precision.

Simply, but demandingly put: without a relationship with both our own time and place and that in which the texts arose, the texts will not become scripture: 'fulfilment' will degenerate into a futile hope, rather than an encouragement and affirmation of the active commitment to share our lives according to our faith in Christ.

Today, will we simply sleep in, or set out on a hopeful journey to see what the New Year has to offer? And will we see what, with God's help, we have to offer the life of the Earth?

Isaiah 63:7-9

The passage is created by probably the final in a succession of poets who took up the mantle of 'Isaiah'. We can see this as much as a job as a personality. The return of the exiles to Jerusalem had not been a glamorous new Golden Age. No new reign of glory.

Like successive preachers in your local church, each 'Isaiah' digs deep to share from shared wells of encouragement. Faced with much disappointment in what was hoped to be a time of renewal; each may be blessed to bring something memorable to sustain their own people and generations to come. Preachers may, perhaps, not *solve* problems, but they can certainly help us to live through them. Can we build the spiritual resilience of our people as troubles continue?

Here, the tone is one of pastoral care: whatever the mess we're in, a 'big stick' will not promote healing, nor will the writing off in advance of the possibility that the people *might yet* respond with justice and integrity, even if for now they're bogged down in making ends meet: cutting corners, neglecting fair trade, and acting as if – living well, justly, and mindfully of those with whom we share life – were a luxury for those who could afford it.

Whom do you know who has had to decide whether to heat or eat? Whether to recycle and re-use, because they bought quality; or throw away because they felt they can only afford rubbish?

Yet even if we live unjustly, we're part of the family whose identity is justice. We become more truly ourselves when we're mindful of the Earth. Justice is one with our healing. In our day, that means Climate Justice. Taking responsibility as we speak out, vote, and pray, open to the truth of the connections between our choices and the suffering of neighbours – human and non-human, which we ourselves may not escape without a change of direction.

This version of Isaiah 'talks up' the possibilities of their people because they are able to hitch a lift on the identity of those who are remembered as having got it right, and those who recognised it was God who saw them through.

Verse 9 is particularly valuable here: the deeply hopeful and encouraging affirmation that God is already – inconspicuously and without pomp, circumstance and fireworks – at work for our good. It should not need to be announced, but it helps to be reminded!

Given the content of the Gospel reading, within the whole service, a pastoral awareness of the pain associated with the death of children may be advisable.

Psalm 148

In this psalm, praise to God is exuberantly expressed in the authentic life, not just of every dimension and every generation of human existence, but in the life and the cycles of every animate and sentient participant in Creation, both domesticated and completely wild, especially including those beyond any human control. It does us profound good to join in with such a choir. It leads us into an identity we should joyfully claim.

Even the hierarchies of politics and power are not exempt from the call to live in the fellowship of praise, rather than in rebellion and deceptive autonomy. Power without respectful partnership with Creation is a short-term illusion.

The perspective of this joyful and uplifting hymn is limited, as our life is limited. Though global, it is pedestrian and terrestrial: the stars are included as we experience stars in the night sky, as characters in their own right who look down from heaven/ the sky, which is not separate from the whole of Creation that includes the Earth.

Find a lively setting to sing this, as well as to read it, or a videoclip which presents the variety and complexity to the senses of the congregation. If you have a choir, ask the organist to pull out all the stops.

Of course, in the Psalms, as the pre-eminent national hymnbook of ancient Israel, a special place, purpose and closeness is reserved by the poet for 'God's People'. Not unconditionally, though!

The other side of this coin is of course, that where the life of a nation – or our human globalised capitalist culture – destroys habitats, disrupts ecosystems, exploits species to extinction and completely knowingly continues to tip off-balance everything which the Psalmist perceived as fixed for ever (v6). Every action of a nation or a nation's rulers – for instance, in the aggressive pursuit of new fossil fuels when it's clear what harm this does – takes us further away from the blessing and the joy and the divine endorsement of what is far more than a metaphorical harmony of the web of life.

Are we still able to sing along with this psalm, and if so, how, when the World has lost two thirds of their wildlife in the last 50 years?

If, in any sense, we, in the churches, are inheritors of the Israel of whom we've just made Jesus king in all those carols, then to continue, without prayer, protest or attempt at change

of direction, in the unsustainable way we find ourselves as 2023 begins, would be a jarring discord; a blasphemy, rather than a hymn of praise.

[Hebrews 2:10-18](#)

The concern of the original writer is to sweep away every excuse and every barrier which might obscure the visceral intimacy of God's decisive sharing in Christ with what it means to be flesh and blood.

Fellowship with Christ is 'the real thing', and the troubles and degradations of our lives – or of our neighbours – cannot disenfranchise us from that nourishing friendship.

For the writer of Hebrews, in a culture where blood sacrifice is still very current and meaningful, that has to be acknowledged. And where a powerless minority, Christianity – which had likely not yet formally integrated high-profile talk of sacrifice into the love-feasts which became Holy Communion – there may have been many layered existential threats to integrity, validity, authenticity.

If we don't talk/sing/pray/walk/dance/sacrifice the way they do up the road, where they have the means to 'do everything properly', does it mean we're just playing at it?

Who deserves to be the 'real' church when one fellowship can afford it and another is facing closure? Or do we look down on those who just get together to pray?

What intimidates us in our faith? What makes us hesitant to wear it on our sleeve as well as on our heart? What, in our spiritual heritage, and the life of Christ, will reassure, and give courage and confidence to share Good News?

The risen Christ in us, and in the Church, is in touch with those fears, including the fear of endings, which prevents us from grasping the fragility of our own life and the life of the World.

Within the Reformed tradition (including the Church of Scotland) a traditional pastoral task is preparation for death. When, through Christ, we're not afraid of the fact of endings and transformations, we live very differently. We live better, and more joyfully.

But use your time and energy – like the writer of Hebrews – to look for what rings bells in scripture for your congregation, to encourage them: don't work too hard with things that don't. Break down the walls; don't bash your head against them.

[Matthew 2:13-23](#)

Christmas is severely diminished without the story of the massacre of the innocents, and without identifying the Holy Family as refugees: Christ at His most vulnerable in firm solidarity with the millions displaced by the twin and related injustices of climate crisis and war, over and above any purely natural tragedies. A 'suicidal war against nature' as the Secretary General of the United Nations described it last June. Refugees are created – and will be created – by the continued and expanded new exploitation of oil and gas.

This *will* kill and evict sisters and brothers in Christ. The science we have seen at the COP conferences has made the connections. That is the post-Christmas message!

But globally, as 2023 begins, Herod is still in power, calling the shots, complacently oblivious to calls for 'loss and damage': for compensation for the damage consciously chosen and caused to the homelands of those who have contributed least to the crises which are part of all our lives for as long as we live. This, too, is what 'fulfilment' means – that greed and injustice are called to account.

What this passage does, is strikingly to affirm the spiritual significance in the loving plans of God, even of the most wretched and persecuted; of the nameless and 'insignificant' casualties of political expediency. Thus to make any family homeless is an offence against God. To choose to add to the rising seas is an offence against God. To ignore that these things are happening is an offence against God.

Make sure, in your preaching, that you make it clear that it is 'children' not just 'boys' who were murdered by Herod's thugs. State-sponsored violence of any kind can never hide behind the excuse of a 'surgical strike'.

And of course, nature, and our non-human fellow creatures, beloved of God, are generally the first and most casual casualties of war. The burning of trees, the salting of fields, pollution through spilled oil-wells and scorched-earth policies of all kinds.

The absence thus far of any historical record beyond Matthew's Gospel of the massacre is no cause to relegate this incident to pious fantasy, any more than the cases of those whose families 'disappear' through extra-judicial action in our lifetimes. This is a brutally contemporary and daily truth.

Nor is it useful to look down on what might seem an over-eagerness of Matthew to slip in yet one more scriptural prophecy. Stories of flight and persecution, of travel to survive, are quite true enough today, and Christ lives with them. In them we encounter Christ.

The fulfilment of prophecy then, goes on and on, cycled and recycled, as a signpost that commitment, prayer and action are called for.

What saves the Holy Family? No more than an angel in a dream: salvation hangs by the slenderest of threads. Does the will of God wait until everything is fully, neatly and rationally worked out?

Have we seen enough of the signs of the times? Are we, this year, finally going to live differently, realising that even our small commitment – by the grace of God – will make a difference?

Sermon ideas

New Year's Day in Scotland is inescapably a chance to pause for thought. And after the crises all too fresh in our memory, to draw breath; for what lies in the years ahead is demanding beyond precedent in our lives. We look back in order to move forward. And yet we do not command.

What have you learned in the last year which might guide your steps in the way ahead? what have we learned as (a) church?

We recall that other cultures mark their years in differing ways; that January comes shortly after the Winter Solstice; that thanks to the Roman Empire, Christmas has been hung on the festival of the Unconquered Sun, just as Easter and Pentecost, within Christianity, are festivals taking note of the phases of the moon. We choose our time-markers in various ways, but the cycles of Creation, which unite us all, carry us with them. Some, like the lunar and solar cycles, are beyond us to influence. Some, like the cycles of water, carbon and more, have already been tipped dangerously out of balance.

As a new year begins, will our resolution be to live with less impact on the planet; with less cost to our neighbours, both human and non-human?

And yet as, repeatedly, we flee with the Holy Family into the New Year, in which, as our climate changes, things will not be as predictable or reliable even as they have been in living memory, we learn with them what it is to survive in unfamiliar territory. Relying on such

wits as we have and the reading of such signs as we are given. Be this the honest witness of science or those visions, stories and dreams which, if all seemed well, we could dismiss or put back on the mantel shelf.

Whichever of our readings you choose to preach on today, all have in common that, within them, and in the process of the telling, existing faith and scripture are already creatively recycled and repurposed as resources for the vital decisions that must be faced. We can use them as armour to build our spiritual resilience to problems we may not be able to fix, but which we can engage with.

In our own lives, in our contemporary world, prophecy and scripture is fulfilled over and over again. That's the point of poetic preaching, rather than just giving a sober historical account. Scripture will continue to be fulfilled.

Fulfilled delightfully in the grateful realisation of God's healing, solidarity, and providence. Fulfilled shockingly, in the realisation that in the sufferings of refugees and 'disappeared' communities, in the marginalisation of the indigenous wisdom which holds hope for a different relationship with the Earth, the will of God – which the Herodian powerful despise and fear – is seen and gifted for the healing of all.

When we hear of refugees, Christ is with them. How can we show ourselves and our neighbours – especially within the season of Christmas – that the faith we hold is rooted in the experience of danger and persecution, rather than the safety of a royal palace?

Prayers

Opening prayer (*relating to the Gospel*)

In times of emergency

Send dreams of Your angels

In the face of oppression

God save those who flee

Lord fulfil Your Word in us

through faith, with integrity

Give hope and give joy

through the Christ, Refugee

Gathering prayer

Risen Christ, who as an infant was carried to safety
when Your adopted father learned to value the hints of dreams,
as we gather in worship, and in our need,
send to us such urgent and delightful visions
as will set us on Your way
for the good of the Earth
and to Your glory.

Confession, repentance

Sustaining God,
in this continuing Season of Christmas,
as we sing of Your birth and hear
how You shared the vulnerability of a child,
we confess our hard-heartedness,
our imperviousness to the signs of our times,
even to the unconquered Sun
and the growing brightness of each morning,
which should lead us once more
to set aside the works of darkness.

Today the cycles of the seasons
which tell of Your faithfulness
are gagged and stifled.

And with them the human voices of those hurt first and worst
by emergencies, not just of climate,
but the injustice on which our human societies
continue to rely.

For what the rich do to the poor
our species does to the Earth as a whole.

We acknowledge our part,
and our knowing silence in these and more sinful choices of today:

food waste

biodiversity loss

plastic pollution

deforestation

air pollution

mismanaged agriculture and factory farming

global warming from fossil fuels

melting ice caps
food and water insecurity.

Sustaining God,
as in Christ
You enter with mercy, energy and compassion
into the life of the Earth,
speaking out wherever creatures are out of place or lost.
With the Voice of the Earth,
call us to account,
show us the power we have
and how we continue to misuse it.

May our praise join the chorus of all that has breath
with a loud shout of challenge, for we are Your people.
Your people forgiven,
Your people committed
for the healing of the Earth by God's grace alone.
Amen

Thanksgiving /gratitude

God who gives and receives
who sends and welcomes....

With gratitude we praise You, for everything You have chosen to share with us;
that great gratitude which we put even into words
and which everything that has breath expresses after their kind.

We thank You, not with the petty gratitude of closed-off ownership,
for 'presents' we can claim are 'mine' and no-one else's.
Can we say thanks at all for things we do not share?

(Pause)

We are grateful above all,
for our place in the web of life
for the air which we breathe in – and then breathe out.
For the minerals and water of which our bodies are shaped
and which we release for Creation's further use

throughout our lives and at their ending.
For the year which has released us,
and the year of hope and threat and possibilities
for which we pray we may be grateful.

May we live each day sustained by giving our thanks
receiving even Yours:

God's gratitude for Creation
in the friendship of the Word become Flesh.

The child, the refugee, the Christ,
who gives our thanks to God

Amen

Intercession

**Sustaining God, may we sustain
in prayer, commitment, and in speaking out**

Pray for the most prominent needs we have heard in the news this week.

**Sustaining God, may we sustain
in prayer, commitment, and in speaking out**

In prayer we are one with the Earth;
the habitat, the home of such diversity,
the ever-changing source of life which You have given shape and purpose.

Help us to tend the wounds
attend to their causes
and stand up to the lies and twisted truths
that claim both that our response is fruitless
or that the Earth can be fixed, so we can breathe easy.

**Sustaining God, may we sustain
in prayer, commitment, and in speaking out**

In prayer we become one with the Church,
Christ's family in every age,
more varied of race, speech and language,

of identity, body-language and preoccupations
than any single life could encompass.

Help us be the Church in our place, in our time,
by our welcome to all who follow Christ
and our discipline of justice and forgiveness.

Heal the hurts, break the barriers,
that in our day of crisis
Church may truly be Light for the World
and for our neighbour.

**Sustaining God, may we sustain
in prayer, commitment, and in speaking out**

In prayer we are open to Your love
in the needs we are comfortable naming before others,
and in the needs we cannot share in words.

We keep silence, to be reminded that You hear and understand.

(Pause)

We let our needs be known; we share the prayers of others,
we remember the anniversaries, difficult decisions, thresholds
of our friends and of our enemies.
For, including all, we pray with Christ
who loves and warns and heals.

**Sustaining God, may we sustain
in prayer, commitment, and in speaking out
Amen**

Closing *(as the opening prayer: relating to the Gospel)*

In times of emergency

Send dreams of Your angels

In the face of oppression
God save those who flee

Lord fulfil Your Word in us
through faith, with integrity

Give hope and give joy
through the Christ, Refugee

And may the blessing
of the God of love and justice,
of the homeless child who triumphs,
of the Wild Wind who blows where they will,
enliven and encourage you,
today and in all the days to come
Amen

Musical suggestions

Our [online music resource](#) is on the Church of Scotland website; you can listen to samples of every song in the Church Hymnary 4th edition (CH4) and download a selection of recordings for use in worship. You will also find playlists for this week and liturgical seasons and themes on the *Weekly Worship* and *Inspire Me* tabs.

You can find further musical suggestions for this week in a range of styles on the [Songs for Sunday blog](#) from Trinity College Glasgow.

This is a time still to sing Christmas songs and carols, especially those with darker themes and acknowledging the massacres of the children, which might have been set aside by the commerciality of 'Xmas'. Within the whole service, a pastoral awareness of the pain associated with the death of children may be advisable.

Songs out of the darkness, looking to the growing of the light, such as:

- CH4 295 – “Who would think that what was needed”
- CH4 303 – “It came upon a midnight clear”

- CH4 330 – “The tyrant issues his decree”
- CH4 331 – “Unto us a boy is born!”
- The dark and beautiful “[Coventry Carol](#)” might be a haunting choir piece. The discordant older settings are striking .
- “Whilst still the ground is hard” – (*David Coleman*) Tune: short metre (6686 e.g. Carlisle – CH4 202). A hymn for the beginning of the year, written for a service in Dalgety Parish, noted here with permission to use.
 1. Whilst still the ground is hard
– and life has yet to show –
the power of germination waits
for dawn, for skies aglow.
 2. Life changes, age by age:
our task as Christ’s own friends
to love the world, rock, flesh
and blood;
air-breathing, water-cleansed.
 3. For God so loved this world:
– diverse and great and small –
that human beings were called
to care
God-like, God-loving all.
 4. These winter days are long:
and hope in short supply;
the greener shoots: will they appear?
Will we despair and die?
 5. The risk God takes in us
seems awesome, costly, rash:
bright creatures: gone before their time,
great forests: burned to ash!
 6. Yet trusting God, we hope
– though life has yet to show
the story we shall tell of how
we thanked God even so.

Reflecting on our worship practice

Since the start of the pandemic in 2020, the way we worship has changed and we need to reflect on the changing or newly established patterns that emerged and continue to emerge as a result of the disruption.

We can facilitate worship for all by exploring imaginative approaches to inclusion, participation and our use of technologies in ways that suit our contexts. This is not an exhaustive list, but some things we could consider are:

- Framing various parts of the worship service in accessible language to help worshippers understand the character and purpose of each part. This is essential for creating worship for all (intergenerational worship) that reflects your community of faith.
- Holding spaces for reflection and encouraging prayer to be articulated in verbal and non-verbal ways, individually and in online breakout rooms.
- In online formats the effective use of the chat function and microphone settings encourages active participation in prayer, e.g. saying the Lord's Prayer together unmuted, in a moment of 'holy chaos'.
- While singing in our congregations is still restricted, we can worship corporately by using antiphonal psalm readings, creeds and participative prayers.
- Using music and the arts as part of the worship encourages the use of imagination in place of sung or spoken words.
- Use of silence, sensory and kinaesthetic practices allow for experience and expression beyond regular audio and visual mediums.

The following questions might help you develop a habit of reflecting on how we create and deliver content and its effectiveness and impact, and then applying what we learn to develop our practice.

- How inclusive was the worship?
Could the worship delivery and content be described as worship for all/
intergenerational? Was it sensitive to different "Spiritual Styles"?
- How was the balance between passive and active participation?
- How were people empowered to connect with or encounter God?
What helped this? What hindered this?
- How cohesive was the worship?
Did it function well as a whole?
How effective was each of the individual elements in fulfilling its purpose?
- How balanced was the worship?
What themes/topics/doctrines/areas of Christian life were included?
- How did the worship connect with your context/contemporary issues?
Was it relevant in the everyday lives of those attending and in the wider parish/
community?
How well did the worship connect with local and national issues?
How well did the worship connect with world events/issues?

- What have I learned that can help me next time I plan and deliver worship?

Useful links

Up to date information for churches around Covid-19 can be found [here](#)

You can listen to samples of every song in the Church Hymnary 4th edition (CH4) and download a selection of recordings for use in worship [here](#)

You can find an introduction to spiritual styles online [here](#)

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