

Straight from the "Hart"

December 25, 2022

Christmas Morning



Welcome to Hartland UMC's "Straight from the "Hart"". We are glad you are participating in today's time of worship by reading this service script.

Opening Prayer

O God, we are stirred this Christmas morning to focus our attention on the miraculous birth of an infant. You have given us such a precious gift in your Son Jesus Christ. We gift ourselves to you in gratitude for *all* that you give to us. And it is in Jesus name that we pray, Amen.

ad David Bell © 2007 General Board of Discipleship, in UM Worship & Song, Leader's ed.[W&S]

Call to Worship

Lay Reader: Come, all who have been waiting and hoping with expectant hearts for Christ's coming among us. Come and celebrate and rejoice, let's make our hearts glad with a joy that nothing can remove from us. Let's fill our hearts with wonder at the revelation of God's glory that we have seen in Christ, our Lord.

ad, © 1999 Epworth Press, admin. by SCM Press, [W&S]

Music So let's fill our hearts with our friends around the world as we celebrate the birth of Jesus by singing

Good Christian Friends, Rejoice

Words 14th cent. Latin; tr. by John Mason Neale, 1855

Music: German melody; harm by Gary Alan Smith, 1988 harm © 1989 The UM Publishing House

1. Good Christian friends, rejoice with heart and soul and voice;
give ye heed to what we say: News, news! Jesus Christ is born today!
Ox and ass before Him bow, and he is in the manger now.
Christ is born today, Christ is born today!

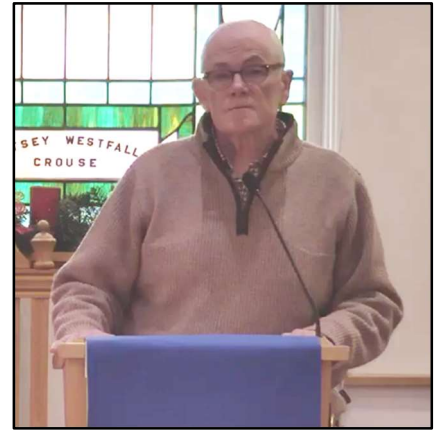
2. Good Christian friends, rejoice, with heart and soul and voice;
now ye hear of endless bliss: News, news! Jesus Christ was born for this!
He hath opened heaven's door, and ye are blest forevermore.
Christ was born for this, Christ was born for this!

3. Good Christian friends, rejoice with heart and soul and voice;
now ye need not fear the grave: News, news! Jesus Christ was born to save!
Calls you one and calls you all to gain his everlasting hall.
Christ was born to save, Christ was born to save!

Intro to Bible Reading

Lay Reader: For John, Jesus' story doesn't begin with his birth in Bethlehem, but before time began, existing as and with the Creator God. It was by him that all things were made. He is the source of eternal life. He breathed the light of life into humanity. He is a Light that shines on in the depths of darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it.

When the time was right, God sent John the Baptist to be his messenger, to identify and declare truth about Jesus Christ, the Divine Light; so that all might believe in Jesus through John's message. Some wondered if John himself might be the Light, but he only pointed to the Light. The Light does not call from a distance, but he draws near by coming into the world he created. John goes on to write: (Summary of John 1:1-10a)



Bible Reading

Lay Reader: Yet the world did not recognize him when he came. Even though he came to his own people, they refused to listen and accept him. But for all who did receive and trust in him, he gave authority to become God's children. He bestowed this birthright not by human power or initiative, but from God's will.

Christ became a human being and lived among us full of grace (full of loving forgiveness) and truth. We gazed on his glory, the glory that the Father shares uniquely with his only true Son... Each of us have received one gracious gift after another from his abundance – blessing upon blessing (beyond our imagination) heaped upon us! No one has ever seen God until now. But his only Son has, for he is straight from the Father's heart, and he has revealed the Father and made him known. John 1:10b-14,16,18 (Blend of VOICE, WE, ISV, TLB)

Theme

Sometimes, it is hard to imagine just how much we truth and grace and gifts with which God has freely blessed us. There is a story – I don't know if it is true or a parable.

Before transatlantic flight was common, a man wanted to travel from Europe to the United States. He worked hard and saved every extra penny and finally managed to purchase a ticket on a cruise ship. In those days, the trip would take 2-3 weeks. He bought a used suitcase and filled it with cheese and crackers,

because that was all he could afford. Each day of the trip, this man would sit in a corner and eat his cheese and crackers while all the other passengers went to the large, ornate dining room to eat their gourmet meals. He could smell the delicious food, and the rave reviews of people as they left the diner and complaining about how full they were and how they would have to go on a diet after the trip was over. Between the smell and the comments, he began laying awake at night dreaming of the daily banquets. But he had no extra money.

As the trip neared its end, another traveler came up to him and said, "I can't help but notice that you are always over here eating cheese and crackers at mealtimes. Why don't you join us in banquet hall?"

The man's face flushed with embarrassment as he confessed that he only had enough money to buy the ticket, he didn't have extra for the fancy meals. With surprise, the man said, "Don't you realize the meals are included in the price of the ticket? Your meals have already been paid for!"

On our journey to heaven, Jesus paid for our ticket, and not only that, but he also paid for banquet-like blessings all along the way. And sometimes we miss out because we don't realize just how great his graces are. It doesn't mean our trip never goes through high waves and dark storms, but the ship will move on and there will be a new days and new opportunities. We shouldn't have to eat cheese and crackers and hope to survive and arrive by the skin of our teeth. The commenter on this story equates eating cheese and crackers with [unnecessary and an overabundance] of devaluing self-abasement, fear, worry, anxiety; and equates the banquet with joy, forgiveness, restoration, peace, healing - whatever you [truly] need – and it has all been paid for ...

.. because Jesus came to a manger so that he could die on a cross so that you could be included in the joy of the banquet. Whatever your life's ship is bobbing through, a banquet chair has been pulled out for you... We don't need to hide in a corner and nibble on our own meager resources as if we were a stowaway on our own life's journey. excerpted and ad from "Your Best Life Now" by Warner Faith.

Joseph's ship must have been a hit some steep waves when he first heard his fiancé was pregnant not by him. He surely thought about the faithful people who were traveling with him on his journey through life. They would want Mary and himself to go sit in a corner if not throw them right overboard. But thanks to some angels and dreams, he refused to stick with cheese and crackers (with worrisome fear), and he bravely stuck with Mary and started their family with the Son of God.

And when he was born and Joseph held him in his arms, what *unimaginable* banquet-y kinds of thoughts must have run through his mind...

Special Music: Joseph's Song

Michael Card © 1982 Word Music, Mole End Music

How could it be? This baby in my arms, sleeping now so peacefully?
"The Son of God", the angel said. How could it be?

Lord, I know he's not my own.

Not of my flesh, seems not of my bones.

Still, Father, let this baby be the son of my love.

Father, show me where I fit into this plan of yours.

How can a man be father to the Son of God?

Lord, for all my life I've been a simple carpenter.

How can I raise a king, how can I raise a king?

He looks so small, his face and hands so fair.

And when he cries, the sun just seems to disappear.

But when he laughs, it shines again. How could it be?

Father, show me where I fit into this plan of yours.

How can a man be father to the Son of God?

Lord, for all my life I've been a simple carpenter.

How can I raise a king, how can I raise a king?

How could it be? This baby in my arms, sleeping now so peacefully?

"The Son of God", the angel said. How could it be?

[Prayers]

Pastor: And then Joseph laid the sleeping baby in the manger. Let's prepare our hearts for prayer by listening to Donna and Kathy play.

Special Instrumental Music Away in a Manger

Pastor's Prayer

Let's pray. Our Father, the day we celebrate Christ's birth has arrived – as you drew near to the world so long ago, now draw near to us today. We wait for the return of your full glory recognized through the earth, and when all your children will fully experience the rebirth of joy, when old becomes new before our very eyes. In the meantime, renew us. Let us remember how sure it is that weeping only lasts the night but gives way to morning joy. **Praises and Petitions** It is in this hope that we lift both our celebrations and our concerns — * Cheri requests prayers for the man who slid into the median on highway 23. (he seemed to be okay).* We pray



for the family and friends of Jan Martin's friend Darlene Tidmore, whose relative Kim Blakely who passed away this week, her husband's name is Chuck.* We also pray for the Campbells (Jo has occasional (what they suspect) are seizures and they are trying to control it through medication; * for the Mallots and others who are recovering from covid or other illnesses, * may be traveling this weekend, and into places where the weather may be more severe than here so we pray for their safety on the roads, * we pray with thanksgiving for the lives of those for whom we have honored and remembered, some through the altars that are around our altar, * we pray for Jan's brother Reese Thornton, * for Mary Jo's Mallott's sister-in-law Colleen Huffman * Bert Honour's friend Dennis, *and there are others on our hearts and minds whom we have not named but now in the silence, we lift to you.

Innovative and creating God, you amaze us with how all the parts of your world fit together and how solutions can be found to vexing troubles and problems. You sent Christ, your Son, to fix our problem of sin and open the path to heaven. We thank you for that, and we want more than anything to follow your path, for we are your people, your children, made by the work of your hands, filled with the breath of your Spirit. We are your vulnerable lambs who belong to Christ, the lion-hearted, whom we trust and love. We seek your heaven here. We hope for your solution in your time. We pray in this holy and celebrated season, that we may all join our hearts in praise of you, and that your joy might touch us all. This we pray, in Christ's holy name, who taught us to pray **LORD'S PRAYER**.

Music – Before the reading and sermon, let's sing, declaring everywhere the good news of Christ's birth and his salvation that brings us back to God.

Go, Tell it on the Mountain

Words: John W Work, Jr., 1907

Music: Afro-American Spiritual, ad and arr by Williams Farley Smith, 1986
ad and arr © 1989 The UM Publishing House

Refrain

Go, tell it on the mountain, over the hills and everywhere;
go, tell it on the mountain, that Jesus Christ is born.

1. While shepherds kept their watching, o'er silent flocks by night,
behold throughout the heavens there shone a holy light.

Refrain

2. The shepherds feared and trembled, when, lo! above the earth,
rang out the angel chorus that hailed our Savior's birth.

Refrain

3. Down in a lowly manger the humble Christ was born,
and brought us all salvation that blessed Christmas morn.

Refrain

Intro to Bible Reading

Lay Reader: This Advent, we have heard the prophet Isaiah speak of the restoration of the world through the Messiah. The dry desert will burst into joyful bloom. Burning sands and hardened wastelands will become pools shimmering with life. People will revel in the majestic glory of God which will become beautifully visible. He will right all wrongs, make his people safe and give them success. God will come and rescue them. Confused and fearful people will become courageous, calmed, strengthened, and healed. They will sing and dance.

(Summary of Isaiah 35:1-7)



Bible Reading

Lay Reader: And a road to this happy renovation will be there and it will be clearly signed [it will be] called the Way of Holiness. It will be for those whom he guides to walk its pleasant path... There will be no dangers on that road... The road will be for the people God saves, only those made right with God will journey there. The Lord will make his people free, and they will come back to him. They will walk this path, singing and waltzing to Zion, an aura of everlasting joy will be like a crown on their heads. Gladness and joy will fill their hearts completely while the sighing of sorrow, sadness and despair will flee, will evaporate into thin air.

From Isaiah 35:8-10 (VOICE, CJB,ERV)

Sermon He Comes – To Include You

It is when people recognize and fully open themselves up to God and lay their lives before him in total honesty and complete surrender, eagerly willing to follow through on his directions for us; -- that is when he can begin recreating our life. This is the “condition” of the promised restoration of the prophet Isaiah. Actually, Isaiah said that it is more than mere restoration – it is even better! Dry places become rushing springs, the desert sand becomes a marsh -- everything blooming everywhere!

And just as nature blooms, so do the people who decide to journey with Him; strengthening shaky hands, steadying aching knees, becoming strong and courageous, fears relieved by knowing that God's work has been for our own good,



that we have been redeemed and healed, our eyes are opened, our ears unstopped; we find our tongues, speaking and singing the praises of our God; and where before we limped along in the rocky desert of spiritual stagnation, now we leap down the holy highway like a gazelle. That's what Isaiah is talking about.

As we allow
Christ to develop

Journey this Highway -- Travel lightly

our lives as we travel along this journey to God, we increasingly live with each other in radically new and healthier ways. It is implied, if not from this text, at least from general biblical principles, that we travel light on this journey. Richard Leider experienced what he called a "blinding glimpse of the obvious" while leading a backpacking safari in East Africa.

He had a state-of-the-art backpack loaded with every gadget imaginable. His group was accompanied by a Masai chief who carried a knife and a stick. At the end of the day, Leider was completely exhausted while the chief was fresh as a daisy. The chief asked what was in his backpack. He opened it up, took everything out and explained why each component was crucial to the journey. Then the chief asked, 'But does all of this make you happy?' He ended up leaving about half of his stuff in the village, and he admitted he actually could have left a whole lot more."

We can't bring baggage to heaven -- not only in the sense that we can't take *stuff* with us, but also in the sense that if we have been forgiven and redeemed, our past is past, and the baggage of sins and wounds and pain will also be left behind if we are going to experience the glorious victory Christ has won for us on our journey.

As just one example: one piece of baggage many of us want to pack and take with us on the journey through this life is an *unhealthy* desire. Desire to have (which we sometimes call envy or greed), desire to control (desire for unauthorized power over others), desire to experience what I want to experience the way I want to experience it. (I like to call that the "Burger King motto ☺ "Your way right away" -- that kind of what we live by isn't it? (no offense to Burger King). (We'd usually call this general selfishness, or in its more severe forms -- entitlement). We tie up our identity up in these things, these influences, these whims, and we fear if we fail to possess, or force others to our way, or get our own way and get our whims -- we

will lose ourselves, and so we pack them into our life and carry them with us and they weigh us down and they wear us out. But if we can get past that -- this fear, and let go -- we may find an even more abundant life than the one we think we want. Travel lightly,

Travel the king's highway also: selflessly. E.S. Jones, missionary to India, wrote this: The very act of self-surrender gives God the opportunity to cleanse us from selfishness with our consent and cooperation. Having cleansed us of our central selfishness, God gives our "self" back to [us]."

Travel selflessly

We cannot just claim surrender and maintain control over our life. We must seek Jesus and his ways. We cannot follow half-heartedly. We must love Jesus and pursue him as the lover and caretaker of our souls. (Paul said, forgetting everything that is behind, all those things I used to think were important, I now consider them garbage compared to knowing Jesus and relying on his faithfulness -- and not that I have arrived there yet, but I am leaving my old values behind and sprinting toward the only goal that counts – knowing Christ and his resurrection. (See Phil 3:4-14)

A woman wanted to catch a bus. The bus stop was on the other side of a busy intersection. She saw the bus approaching and she realized under normal circumstances, she wasn't going to make it. She put caution to the wind, put her head down and ignored her safety and self-preservation and ran headlong toward the stop and was able to get on the bus – because it was a blustery day and she didn't want to wait.

That is horrific advice in physical traffic, but it is a good attitude about the spiritual highway. Pursue Jesus like nothing else matters. Give up your sense of self-preservation, for you can't preserve yourself anyway. Jesus said it is only when we lose our life that we find it. (See Matthew 10:39, 16:25) Paul added, Give up what may be permissible for the sake of focusing on what is constructive and beneficial. (See 1 Corinthians 6:12, 10:23)

E Stanley Jones continues: "It is a paradox, but you are never so much your own as when you are most his. Bound to him, you walk the earth free. Though at his feet, you stand straight before everything else. You suddenly realize that you have aligned yourself with the creative forces of the universe, so that you are free. Free to create. Free to love. Free to live. Free to live at your maximum. Free to be. Free to be all he wills you to be."

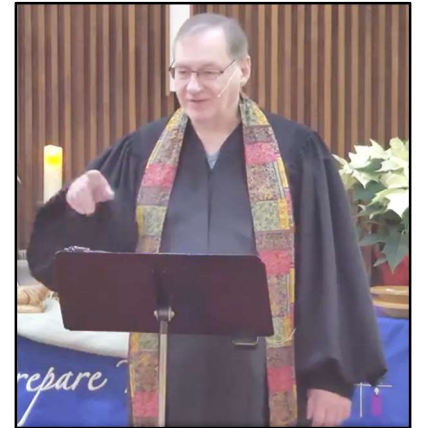
We have a hymn that says, Make me captive Lord, and then I will be free – it is when I surrender that I can conquer. Look at the life of Jesus. Completely submissive to the Father, and look how free it made him to do what he needed to do, unhindered by fear of what others might do to him. It reminds me of the prayer of St. Francis:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace:
 where there is hatred, let me sow love;
 where there is injury, pardon;
 where there is doubt, faith;
 where there is despair, hope;
 where there is darkness, light;
 where there is sadness, joy.

O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
 to be consoled as to console,
 to be understood as to understand,
 to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive,
 it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
 and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

The more we pursue something, the more it seems to elude us. Think of the dog chasing its tail. Faster and faster, but still can't get there. And the more we chase after it the more we stress over – finding comfort, for example. If you stress over finding comfort, you aren't going to get very comfortable. You will not find it. When we seek to be understood, it seems everyone is scratching their heads (like some of you are today 😊 just teasing). But the more we offer comfort, then peace finds us, when we seek to understand others, others begin to understand us as well. It is when we are willing to forgive that we find at least God's forgiveness in our own life, if not of others.



To be able to live that way requires much faith and trust. The amount that we can trust God to come through with what is best for us is related to the how much we are willing to put our lives in God's hands and let him guide us.

For those who do that, the promise is that the journey is safe; for he himself will escort us on the journey and protect us from any dangers along the way of this now bloomin' divine King's highway. All the potholes are filled, all the bumps smoothed down. We just need to stay on the road, and

Travel is safe

stick tight with the king, and not even death itself will slow our journey to God. This is not meant to be a cheese and crackers trip while everyone else is prospering – though it may seem like that sometimes. It is to be a banquet anticipating the heavenly banquet – filled with grace, with peace, love and joy – when all his children sit down together with him.

In the broader context, Isaiah hints that all of this would take place with the Messiah, who would bring the people

Jesus is the Messiah

back from exile and into the promised day. And we believe that Jesus is that Messiah, the one who came from heaven, is seeking and saving we who are lost, exiled in the valley of sin and death. He came and conquered the spiritual powers that thrive there, and is leading us back to God and filling us with the gift of his abundant mercies all along the way.

He is not only leading us on the way, he is the way itself.

Jesus said, "*I **am** the way and the truth and the life*", and he

Jesus is the Way

said he will return again and take us with him to a home he is preparing even now. (See John 14:1-6) It will be a place of great joy and singing, restoration will be complete, and we will never know the desert again.

Jesus is the Messiah, he is the way, and to see our way on the path, he is also the light. We heard in the early reading

Jesus is the Light

that God's Word, his message, his character, the expression of who he is -- takes human form and walks among us as a living, breathing expression of God's grace and truth. Word, deed, flesh and spirit all come together in Jesus to show us most clearly what God desires for us. John conveys this idea by calling Jesus light. He is the true light that has come to the world to light everyone's path... and to those who received his light, he gave the right to become God's children, and we become a part of his family. I think I told you not too long ago about how when as a youngster we went to the UP and to have our Saturday night sauna, we had to go to this other house through the woods, dark muddy path, and we had to use flashlights to see the way – that image comes to my mind almost every time I hear about Jesus being the light, and showing us the way through so that we can be clean and ready for him.

But we have to receive him. A little over 2,000 years ago, God left a gift for each of us under the tree. The gift was withheld from no one. But some have left their packages unclaimed. Some have accepted the gift and carried it around, but (like our cheese and cracker traveler) they have never removed the wrappings to

discover its true splendor. Receive the gift of Jesus and live. Experience his light for yourself. If you don't, the throne of heaven will just be a lofty theory. The choirs of angels will only be winter caroling, and sermons will just be speeches in which we will be disappointed or unimpressed.

Jack London's popular quote from *Call of the Wild* talks about yearning for authentic life over mere living. He put it something like this: I'd rather be ashes than dust, that his spark of life burn out in a brilliant blaze rather than simply gradually rot away, he'd rather be a meteor with every atom in magnificent glow rather than a sleepy, permanent planet, for the proper function of a person is to live, not just exist.

The more we can strip away the bad baggage, the more we can develop our lives by trusting in the light of Jesus to protect us against the dangers of this world, by following His way, His pattern, by being willing to travel lightly, and by giving of ourselves to him and to each other. It is in doing this that the highway blooms and our spirits soar.

The greatest wonder of the Christ-life is that, unlike London's vision of a blazing life that then fizzles out to nothing; through Christ we enjoy the blinding brilliance *and* the eternal flame! The darkness of mere existence is transformed into an experience of a full and eternal life as we become and remain God's children.

Prayer Let's pray. God, you have promised that whatever the circumstances of our desert, that you will come, that you will save, that you will burst on the scene of our troubles and not only show us the way but become our Way. You invite us to walk with you, with endurance, on the highway of holiness, until that day when we will fully see your splendor and glory, and we are all home together. But in the meantime, as we have relived the manger story once again this year, come to our hearts and help us to see with understanding your coming to our world and our lives, to see Jesus as our light, our way, our protector, in every healing, and in every call to follow -- with endurance on the highway of holiness until we fully see you in all your splendor and glory. We pray this in Jesus name, our Savior, our king. Amen.

Music Let's stand and sing the prayer that we would not only see Jesus, but capture the meaning in his birth, his life, his healings, and his call to include us in his mission of service to the world he created.

We Would See Jesus

Words: J Edgar Park, 1913 Music: Herbert B Turner, 1907

1. We would see Jesus; lo! his star is shining
above the stable while the angels sing;
There in a manger on the hay reclining;
haste, let us lay our gifts before the King.
2. We would see Jesus, Mary's son most holy,
light of the village life from day to day;
shining revealed through every task most lowly,
the Christ of God, the life, the truth, the way.
4. We would see Jesus, in his work of healing,
at eventide before the sun was set;
divine and human, in his deep revealing
of God made flesh, in loving service met.
5. We would see Jesus, in the early morning,
still as of old he calleth, "Follow me!"
Let us arise, all meaner service scorning;
Lord, we are thine, we give ourselves to thee.

Blessing

Most of you I will not see until next year, and so I hope you have a blessed end to this year and can move into 2023 with great anticipation of what is going to happen then. I pray that in this Christmas Season, that throughout all your preparations, all you relationships you've experienced with others, and when you finally get a chance to rest from all that activity, you have and will continue to experience the fullness of Christ; that you would know in your heart the outpouring of grace upon grace; that the glory of the Lord will shine in your heart; and that after all this time, you will still be amazed by the reality that Christ has come to you. Amen.

adapted from LuAnn Rourke