



Merry Christmas!

Wherever you are this Christmas morning, the elders and staff encourage you to set aside an intentional time to worship with your family, friends, and loved ones. Although we'll be separated geographically, our prayer is that our entire church family will be united spiritually in the same worship experience all over our city, state, and country.

Our worship will be guided by an adaptation of a cherished Christmas liturgy called *The Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols*. This liturgy was first used Christmas 1918 at the King's College Chapel at Cambridge University in England. It was conceived by Eric Milner-White, Dean of the College, whose experience as a military chaplain during the First World War persuaded him that the Church of England needed more imaginative worship. The service has since been embraced by Christians all over the world.

I first experienced *The Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols* in seminary. I was immediately drawn to its simplicity and beauty, and it quickly became a cherished part of the Simone family's Advent traditions. The readings tell the Christmas story from Genesis to the Gospels and provide a step-by-step walking tour through Scripture's redemption story. As you read, you will get a sense of God's master plan to draw people back into loving relationship with Him through Jesus Christ.

Here are some tips to help you get the most out of this service:

1. The worship leader will offer the opening prayer, lead the carols, select readers, ask the reflection questions, facilitate discussion, and read or offer the closing meditation. Select a worship leader who feels comfortable fulfilling this role.
2. To help engage everyone, include as many people as possible in the reading of the various lessons from Scripture.
3. Use the reflection questions to generate conversation and discussion. Some of the questions may seem elementary, but digging a little or asking follow-up questions of your own will often uncover deeper answers to familiar questions.
4. You may want to use your own Bible for the readings. However, we have printed the text here in the New Living Translation. Our hope in using this accurate and easy-to-understand version is that younger children will enjoy greater levels of comprehension.
5. The final meditation serves a function similar to that of the sermon in a worship service. Feel free to simply read what we have written, or create your own meditation specifically for the needs of your family.

As you worship this Christmas morning, my hope is that you encounter the living Christ. I trust that God—who became flesh in Bethlehem!—will once again become flesh in your heart as you pray, read, reflect, and ponder the greatest gift of all, God Himself in the person of Jesus Christ. In the words of one of our greatest carols, "O holy Child of Bethlehem, cast out our sin and enter in. Be born in us today."

Merry Christmas,

Travis Simone
Associate Pastor, Williamsburg Community Chapel

OPENING PRAYER:

The worship leader introduces the worship service and opens in prayer. Prayer can be extemporaneous, or the worship leader can read or adapt the following prayer:

God, take me in my heart this morning to the field where the shepherds kept watch over their flocks, and let me hear the good news that brings great joy. Place me with the ox, donkey, cattle, and sheep so that I may look upon my Redeemer's face. Help me journey with the wise men to the manger so that I may bring a gift of worship to You, Lord, this Christmas morning.

CAROL: *Away in a Manger*

Away in a manger, no crib for His bed,
The little Lord Jesus laid down His sweet head.
The stars in the bright sky looked down where He lay,
The little Lord Jesus, asleep on the hay.

The cattle are lowing, the poor Baby wakes,
But little Lord Jesus, no crying He makes.
I love Thee, Lord Jesus, look down from the sky,
And stay by my side, 'til morning is nigh.

Be near me, Lord Jesus, I ask Thee to stay,
Close by me forever, and love me I pray.
Bless all the dear children, in Thy tender care,
And take us to heaven, to live with Thee there.

LESSON 1: *The Fall of Man and the Proclamation of the Gospel* GENESIS 3:6-15

The woman was convinced. She saw that the tree was beautiful and its fruit looked delicious, and she wanted the wisdom it would give her. So she took some of the fruit and ate it. Then she gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it, too. At that moment their eyes were opened, and they suddenly felt shame at their nakedness. So they sewed fig leaves together to cover themselves.

When the cool evening breezes were blowing, the man and his wife heard the LORD God walking about in the garden. So they hid from the LORD God among the trees. Then the LORD God called to the man, "Where are you?"

He replied, "I heard You walking in the garden, so I hid. I was afraid because I was naked."

"Who told you that you were naked?" the LORD God asked. "Have you eaten from the tree whose fruit I commanded you not to eat?"

The man replied, "It was the woman You gave me who gave me the fruit, and I ate it."

Then the LORD God asked the woman, "What have you done?"

"The serpent deceived me," she replied. "That's why I ate it."

Then the LORD God said to the serpent,

"Because you have done this, you are cursed
more than all animals, domestic and wild.
You will crawl on your belly,
groveling in the dust as long as you live.
And I will cause hostility between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and her offspring.
He will strike your head,
and you will strike his heel."

REFLECTION: *Why do we need a Savior?*

LESSON 2: *The Promise to Abraham*
GENESIS 22:15-18

Then the angel of the LORD called again to Abraham from heaven. “This is what the LORD says: Because you have obeyed me and have not withheld even your son, your only son, I swear by my own name that I will certainly bless you. I will multiply your descendants beyond number, like the stars in the sky and the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will conquer the cities of their enemies. And through your descendants all the nations of the earth will be blessed—all because you have obeyed me.”

REFLECTION: *Why is it important that God reveals His plan to send the Savior through Abraham’s, the father of faith, offspring?*

LESSON 3: **Isaiah Foretells of the Coming Savior**
ISAIAH 7: 13-14

Then Isaiah said, “Listen well, you royal family of David! Isn’t it enough to exhaust human patience? Must you exhaust the patience of my God as well? All right then, the Lord himself will give you the sign. Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel (which means ‘God is with us’).

REFLECTION: *What does the name “Immanuel” mean, and how does its meaning impact our understanding of the identity of the baby in the manger at Christmas?*

LESSON 4: **Micah Foretells of the Coming Savior**
MICAH 5:2-5

But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah,
are only a small village among all the people of Judah.
Yet a ruler of Israel will come from you,
one whose origins are from the distant past.
The people of Israel will be abandoned to their enemies
until the woman in labor gives birth.
Then at last his fellow countrymen
will return from exile to their own land.
And He will stand to lead His flock with the LORD’s strength,
in the majesty of the name of the LORD His God.
Then His people will live there undisturbed,
for He will be highly honored around the world.
And He will be the source of peace.

REFLECTION: *What will the Savior bring to the earth when He comes?*

LESSON 5: **The Angel Gabriel Greets Mary**
LUKE 1 :26-33

In the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a village in Galilee, to a virgin named Mary. She was engaged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of King David. Gabriel appeared to her and said, “Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you!”

Confused and disturbed, Mary tried to think what the angel could mean. “Don’t be afraid, Mary;’ the angel told her, “for you have found favor with God! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name Him Jesus. He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give Him the throne of His ancestor David. And He will reign over Israel forever; His Kingdom will never end!”

REFLECTION: *What do we learn about the Savior and His purpose from this passage?*

LESSON 6: *The Birth of the Savior*
LUKE 2:1-7

At that time the Roman emperor, Augustus, decreed that a census should be taken throughout the Roman Empire. (This was the first census taken when Quirinius was governor of Syria.) All returned to their own ancestral towns to register for this census. And because Joseph was a descendant of King David, he had to go to Bethlehem in Judea, David's ancient home. He traveled there from the village of Nazareth in Galilee. He took with him Mary, his fiancée, who was now obviously pregnant.

And while they were there, the time came for her baby to be born. She gave birth to her first child, a son. She wrapped Him snugly in strips of cloth and laid Him in a manger, because there was no lodging available for them.

REFLECTION: *Imagine yourself as one of the characters in this reading. What emotions might you be feeling? What thoughts might be running through your mind?*

CAROL: *Joy to the World*

Joy to the world! the Lord is come;
Let earth receive her King;
Let every heart prepare Him room,
And heaven and nature sing, and heaven and nature sing,
And heaven, and heaven, and nature sing.
Joy to the world! the Savior reigns;
Let men their songs employ;
While fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains
Repeat the sounding joy, repeat the sounding joy,
Repeat, repeat the sounding joy.
No more let sins and sorrows grow,
Nor thorns infest the ground;
He comes to make His blessings flow
Far as the curse is found, far as the curse is found,
Far as, far as, the curse is found.
He rules the world with truth and grace,
And makes the nations prove
The glories of His righteousness,
And wonders of His love, and wonders of His love,
And wonders, wonders, of His love.

LESSON 7: *The Shepherds Worship the Savior*
LUKE 2:8-20

That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep. Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounded them. They were terrified, but the angel reassured them. "Don't be afraid!" he said. "I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! And you will recognize Him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger."

Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others —the armies of heaven—praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in highest heaven,
and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased."

When the angels had returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, "Let's go to Bethlehem! Let's see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

They hurried to the village and found Mary and Joseph. And there was the baby, lying in the manger. After seeing Him, the shepherds told everyone what had happened and what the angel had said to them about this child. All who heard the shepherds' story were astonished, but Mary kept all these things in her heart and thought about them often. The shepherds went back to their flocks, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. It was just as the angel had told them.

REFLECTION: *What can you do to glorify and praise God today?*

LESSON 8: *The Wise Men are Led to the Savior*
MATTHEW 2:1-12

Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the reign of King Herod. About that time some wise men from eastern lands arrived in Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the newborn King of the Jews? We saw His star as it rose, and we have come to worship Him."

King Herod was deeply disturbed when he heard this, as was everyone in Jerusalem. He called a meeting of the leading priests and teachers of religious law and asked, "Where is the Messiah supposed to be born?"

"In Bethlehem in Judea," they said, "for this is what the prophet wrote:
'And you, O Bethlehem in the land of Judah,
are not least among the ruling cities of Judah,
for a ruler will come from you
who will be the shepherd for my people Israel.'"

Then Herod called for a private meeting with the wise men, and he learned from them the time when the star first appeared. Then he told them, "Go to Bethlehem and search carefully for the child. And when you find Him, come back and tell me so that I can go and worship Him, too!"

After this interview the wise men went their way. And the star they had seen in the east guided them to Bethlehem. It went ahead of them and stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were filled with joy! They entered the house and saw the child with His mother, Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped Him. Then they opened their treasure chests and gave him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

When it was time to leave, they returned to their own country by another route, for God had warned them in a dream not to return to Herod.

REFLECTION: *Why do you think the wise men were compelled to bring Jesus gifts?*

LESSON 9: *The Identity of the Savior*
PHILIPPIANS 2:5-11

You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had.

Though He was God,
He did not think of equality with God
as something to cling to.
Instead, He gave up his divine privileges;
He took the humble position of a slave
and was born as a human being.
When he appeared in human form,
He humbled himself in obedience to God
and died a criminal's death on a cross.

Therefore, God elevated Him to the place of highest honor
and gave Him the name above all other names,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

REFLECTION: *What is one aspect of Jesus Christ's attitude that you want to reflect today?*

CLOSING MEDITATION:

The Meaning of the Manger (Re-printed with permission *The Journey* by Adam Hamilton (c) 2011 Abingdon Press)

This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger. **LUKE 2:12**

I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry. **JOHN 6:35**

After Jesus was born, he was wrapped in strips of cloth and placed in a manger. A manger is a feeding trough from which donkeys, horses, and other animals eat. While we usually picture the manger as constructed of wood, the only examples we have left in the Holy Land from ancient times are actually large stones that have been carved out on top to hold straw.

Luke mentions the manger three times in just a few verses as he tells the story of Jesus' birth. This is unusual and should lead us to ask why. Why does Luke feel it important to tell us about Jesus' first bed? And why does he mention it three times?

One reason is obvious: the manger points to Jesus' humble birth. It embodies a profoundly moving truth: that on his first night on this earth, the King of Glory, the Son of God, slept in a trough where the animals fed. What a picture of God's desire to identify with the humble and the poor.

But I think Luke had something more in mind, something I had not seen in twenty-five years of preaching the Christmas story. I believe Luke mentions the sign of the manger three times to communicate the powerful image of Jesus' first bed being the place where God's creatures come to eat.

Jesus was born in Bethlehem, a town that means "House of Bread." John would later describe Jesus multiplying the loaves of bread and saying, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry" (John 6:35). Jesus was, of course, speaking of a spiritual sustenance the world would receive from him. Matthew, Mark, and Luke record Jesus taking bread at the Last Supper and saying, "This is my body, which is given for you." (See Luke 22: 19.)

The manger—the feeding trough—was a sign of what Jesus came to do. He came to offer himself as bread for our souls. He came to satisfy a hunger that could not be satisfied any other way. When Jesus was tested in the wilderness at the beginning of his ministry, the devil tempted him to turn scones into bread. But Jesus responded by quoting Deuteronomy 8:3, "One does not live by bread alone" (Luke 4:4). Yet one of our greatest struggles is that we forget this. We come to believe that if we have enough bread—enough money, enough stuff—we will be satisfied. But here's something I am absolutely certain of: there is nothing you or your family members will open on Christmas morning that will ultimately satisfy the deepest longing of your heart.

I have watched people in the congregation I serve who forgot this. They found that the "cares of this world and the desire for wealth" choked out the gospel. They lived their lives for more and bigger and better; but the more they had, the less they were satisfied, like someone with a disease that leaves them always hungry, and though they eat and eat and eat, they are never filled.

Our hearts hunger to know that we are loved; that our lives have meaning and purpose; that we can be forgiven and find grace; that we are not alone; that there is always hope. We hunger to know that even death will not be the end of us; and we hunger for joy, and peace, and goodness, and grace.

In this life, we wrestle with the temptation to believe that if we just had enough bread we would be happy. Luke, in the sign of the manger, is reminding us that Jesus is the only one who can satisfy the hunger of our hearts.

CLOSING PRAYER:

The worship leader closes the service in prayer. Prayer can be extemporaneous, or the worship leader can read or adapt the following prayer:

Jesus, our Bread of Life, feed me until I am full of Your grace and truth. Help me to trust in You and You alone as I seek to live in Your grace and be guided by the truth of Your Word. Let our celebration of Christmas remind us of the greatest gift of all, God himself as the child of Bethlehem, come to redeem our debt and forgive our sins. To God be the glory, today and forever. Amen.