

Such a Strange Way to Save the World

Call to Worship

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. (Isaiah 9:6)

You who bring good news to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good news to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, "Here is your God!" (Isaiah 40:9)

Prayer

Praise your name Heavenly Father, that you sent Jesus at the right time and in the right place to declare your love to me through him, to bring me salvation, to establish your kingdom under his Lordship both in my heart and in my church.

I shout with joy at what you have done. Give me the faith and courage to "stand on a high mountain", "to lift up my voice and shout" to declare to the world, "Here is your God!"

Amen

Song: "Joy to the World" (Isaac Watts)

1. 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.
2. Joy to the world! The Saviour reigns; let men their song employ;
While fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains repeat the sounding joy,
repeat the sounding joy, repeat, repeat the sounding joy.
3. 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.

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Prayer of Intercession

Lord, in this season when we celebrate the Prince of Peace, I pray for those affected by the ravages of war. I pray for those I know who have not, and cannot, find peace in their lives. In this time of the year when we are alive with reminder of hope, I pray for those who are lost in hopelessness. I pray for those I know who are facing the end of life without hope. In this time when we declare that "love came down at Christmas", I pray for those whose hearts are hardened by hate. I pray for those I know personally who have been damaged by a lack of love and cannot find it in themselves to love others.

And in this time when we are filled with joy for the birth of the Saviour who has redeemed us, I pray for those whose lives are beset by sadness, filled with grief and plagued by loneliness.

I pray in the name of the Lord Jesus, who brings us peace, hope, love and joy. Amen

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Bible Readings:

Matthew 2:10-11 When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Mark 1:9-11 At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptised by John in the Jordan. Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

Luke 2:16-18 So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in a manger. When they had seen him they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.

John 3:16: For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

Song: "O Holy Night" (Placide Cappeau)

1. O Holy night! The stars are brightly shining, it is the night of our dear Saviour's birth.
Long lay the world in sin and error pining 'til he appears, and the soul felt its worth.
A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices, for yonder breaks a new and glorious morn.
Fall on your knees; O hear the Angel voices!
O night divine, O night when Christ was born, O night, O Holy night, O night divine.
2. Led by the light of Faith serenely beaming, with glowing hearts by his cradle we stand.
So led by light of a star sweetly gleaming, here come the Wise Men from Orient land,
The King of kings lay thus in lowly manger, in all our trials born to be our friend.
He knows our need, to our weakness no stranger.
Behold your King, before Him lowly bend. Behold your King, before Him lowly bend.
3. Truly he taught us to love one another; His law is love and His gospel is Peace.
Chains shall He break, for the slave is our brother, and in His name all oppression shall cease
Sweet hymns of joy in grateful chorus raise we, let all within us praise His Holy name.
Christ is the Lord; O Praise His name forever!
His power and glory for evermore proclaim. His power and glory for evermore proclaim.

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Message: "Such a Strange Way to Save the World"

The echoes of the Christmas carols have faded for another year (although I have put some in this service). The gift wrappings are in the recycling bin (or neatly folded for re-use next year!). What did you find most inspiring, uplifting, revelational, joyous, or exciting about Christmas this year? In a society which is cancelling or ignoring Christmas as we understand it to be, it is important for us to keep Jesus, God's answer to our human condition, in the centre of Christmas. The other day I read an article

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reporting on a Letter to the Editor that expressed anger that the church was hijacking Christmas for its own purposes!!

I must confess that sometimes I find myself singing carols mechanically after singing them hundreds of times over the years. This year it has been a joy to refocus on these great statements of faith. I have also listened more carefully to a song sung by Michael Crawford, standing in Joseph's shoes as he ponders Jesus' birth. Here is most of the song:

I'm sure he must have been surprised at where this road had taken him,
for never in a million lives would he have dreamed of Bethlehem.

And standing at the manger he saw with his own eyes
the message from the angel come to life.

And Joseph said, "Why me, I'm just a simple man of trade?

Why him, with all the rulers in the world? Why here inside this stable filled with hay?

Why her, she's just an ordinary girl?

Now I'm not one to second guess what angels have to say,
but this is such a strange way to save the world.

To think of how it could have been if Jesus had come as he deserved,

There would have been no Bethlehem, no lowly shepherds at his birth,

but Joseph knew the reason, love had to reach so far,

and as he held the Saviour in his arms, he must have thought, "Why me"

It's a bit tempting to "second guess" the wisdom and will of God and ask, "Lord, what were you thinking?", because the nativity certainly seems like a strange way to save the world.

Firstly, a strange choice for earthly parents. An unmarried teenager for a Mum and a consequently very embarrassed town carpenter for a Dad. Nothing majestic about this entry to the world. But what a good choice God made. Joseph was very much an ordinary man, but such an honourable one. It must have been a shock when he discovered his fiancée was pregnant and he had nothing to do with it. He could have shamed her in public (with the risk that she could have been stoned) to excuse himself, or quietly hide her. He was intending the latter when an angel visited with a third choice – marry her and call the baby Jesus, because he was to save people from their sins, and Joseph was obedient to that.

The angels had a very busy time and were sent by God to visit Zechariah, Joseph, and the shepherds. The angel Gabriel visited Mary who was unsurprisingly a bit scared and a bit unsettled by both his presence and his message. But what a remarkable response from the teenage Mary. "I am the Lord's servant, may your word to me be fulfilled." She accepted an unusual, "unplanned pregnancy". And then after the affirming words of Joseph's cousin Elizabeth, her song of praise is one of the most beautiful in the Scriptures (Luke 1:46-55). All these events sound like a strange way to save the world, but what an extraordinary demonstration of God's grace to us ordinary people – certainly not reserved for the privileged, titled, or powerful.

Secondly, such a strange choice of a birthplace, involving a 100km journey, probably on a donkey, while 9 months pregnant. Then the Son of God, the Saviour of the world, the King of kings, is born in a less than sterile stable. Extraordinary. No ladies

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in waiting, no palace, no privileges for this king. But God becomes man, empties himself, made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant (Phil 2:7), and identifying himself with us ordinary people. A strange way to save the world. But perfect!

Thirdly, the visitors. Very strange. A choir of angels singing “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.” I would love to have heard that. A performance worthy of a world tour that would put Taylor Swift’s in the shade, but reserved for a small group of shepherds in some fields near Bethlehem. The MC was another angel who scared the daylight out of the shepherds, but this insignificant, unimportant group of men were told of the Messiah, the Saviour, and where they could find him. They left their flocks (a bit of a “no-no” I imagine), were the first visitors to see the baby Jesus, and the first evangelists as they went out and told everybody about him. Another demonstration of God’s grace and perfect plan. If Jesus was born in a fancier palace, the shepherds would have never gotten to see him.

And how strange that the Magi should come. This group of men (Three? The Bible doesn’t say), not kings, perhaps wise, were pagan astrologers (a bit the same as the one in the Advertiser who predicts from the stars what sort of day you are going to have). They probably came from somewhere in Iraq, perhaps from the ancient cities of Nineveh or Babylon. They didn’t believe in God, but God revealed to them that a king was to be born and gave them a star (possibly an angel) to show them where he was. They arrived probably a year or so after Jesus was born (and therefore no longer in the stable with the shepherds long gone). In the house where they found him, these men, non-believers, knelt and worshipped him. The revelation from God which led them to bring the gifts they did, is remarkable. Gold was symbolic of kingship – we know they understood that this baby was the King of the Jews. Frankincense was used by the priests for worship – I wonder how much they understood that they were worshipping the Living God. And myrrh was an ointment used to anoint the dead. How much did they understand that this baby had come to die on the cross to fulfill the Father’s purpose of Jesus taking the penalty of sin for us. Strange that these men were chosen by God to come. Strange that God chose some Gentiles to come all that way. Strange, but the perfect will of God because he makes his intentions clear that salvation is for everyone. And that’s us!

Such a strange way to save the world, but here we are over 2000 years later, rejoicing, and worshipping God because this was the way God chose to reconcile his people to himself, all people from priests to paupers, Jews and Gentiles, young and old, men and women. And as we move on from this season for 2023, that is what has brought joy to our Christmas celebrations.

A few years ago, my wife and I visited some friends in Canada over Christmas. As we breakfasted on our arrival at the Vancouver airport, nearby was a choir of children singing Christmas carols. We sat there for an hour and listened to the adventures of Frosty the Snowman, and of Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer and Santa Claus. We heard about the Christmas tree and were wished a Merry Christmas with the delights of a figgy pudding, but in the whole hour we did not hear the name of Jesus once! I praise God that we have heard the Good News about Jesus. Praise God for this “strange way to save the world. His way! Perfect! Praise God!

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Song: “A Hallelujah Christmas” (by Cloverton)

1. I’ve heard about this baby boy who’s come to earth to bring us joy, and I just want to sing this song to you. It goes like this, the fourth, the fifth, the minor fall, the major lift, with every breath I’m singing Hallelujah. Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah.
2. A couple came to Bethlehem. Expecting child, they searched the inn to find a place for you were coming soon. There was no room for them to stay, so in a manger filled with hay God’s only Son was born, oh Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah.
3. The shepherds left their flocks by night to see this baby wrapped in light. A host of angels led them all to you. It was just as the angels said, you’ll find Him in a manger bed, Emmanuel and Saviour, Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah.
4. A star shown bright up in the East. To Bethlehem, the wise men three came many miles and journeyed long for you. And to the place at which you were, the frankincense and gold and myrrh they gave to you and cried out Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah.
5. I know you came to rescue me. This baby boy would grow to be a man and one day die for me and you. My sins would drive the nails in You, that rugged cross was my cross too. Still every breath You breathed was Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah.

Benediction

May the hope, joy, peace, and love that comes to us in Jesus, stay in us and grow in us in the coming days and the coming year. Amen

This service was prepared by Ron Tiller, HopeNet SA