

Christmas Day/Year B
Dec 25, 2023
Isaiah 62:6-12; Psalm 97; Luke 2:8-20

Call to Worship – before Opening Hymn...

Come away, come away, come today to Bethlehem.
Come adore on bended knee, one whose birth the angels sing.
Come away, come away from your noisy celebration,
to a place of quietness and peace.
Come with wonder, come with awe.
Take your place among sheep and cattle.
Sing with joy, praise God, for the time of promise has come.
Sing the good news of Emmanuel: God-with-us!
The Christ has come!
Come away, come away, come today to Bethlehem. **Amen.**
~ *Ruth C. Duck in Bread for the Journey.*

**Bishop Mark Lattime's (8th Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Alaska)
Christmas Message: *Away in a Manger***

Whether you are a fan of the William Kirkpatrick setting titled “Cradle Song” that appears in our hymnal (and the hymnals of the Church of England and the Anglican Church of Canada), or the setting composed by James Murray titled “Mueller” (incorrectly attributed to an unknown character named Carl Mueller) that holds popularity in the United States, “Away in a Manger” is a Christmas Season favorite for many.

It is sweet; it is gentle; it is nostalgic--a peaceful Christmas image where the little Lord Jesus, awakened by the lowing cattle, no crying he makes. “Away in the Manger” goes hand in hand with “Silent Night.” All is calm, all is bright, the holy infant, so tender and mild, sleeps in heavenly peace.

This year I cannot escape an overwhelming sense that these carols are more than nostalgic, sweet, gentle words to soothe our spirits and warm our hearts with Hallmark Christmas joy. No, this year, perhaps more than previous years, as we welcome another Christmas season and another New Year in a world of conflict, war, terror and despair, I recognize these carols for what they are: prophetic words—words to shake us from our holiday idylls.

These seemingly tender and beloved carols offer words of Christmas judgment on a world where babies are crying—people are crying for lack of food, health care, safety and love; crying out in the midst of the shattering noise of violence, terror, war, and death.

These cries are a scandal to the angels' song that first Christmas: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace and good will."

The last verse of "Away in a Manger" is a prayer. It bids Jesus to be near us always and to love us--all of us, as his children. The prayer ends, however, with a request that Jesus bless us and fit us for heaven where we may live with him there. I don't see this last verse as a request for a promise of heaven in some far-off future after we die, nor some far away spiritual realm in the skies, but as a Christmas calling to each of us to live here and now in the light and love of Jesus.

Here and now there are children crying. Here and now the world does not seem fit for heaven, not fit for Christmas—we do not seem fit for Christmas. But Christmas is our hope.

Just as it was when Mary gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger all those years ago, we need Christmas to make us fit for Christmas. Not the nostalgic, sweet, Hallmark Christmas, but the prophetic transforming, redeeming Christmas of God's Word made flesh in Jesus. The Christmas where every child may sleep in heavenly peace.

For God so loved the world that he sent his only son--a baby, the Lord Jesus, born of Mary, to fit us, through his love and his way of peace, for a Christmas such as this.

My Christmas prayer: Son of God, love's pure light, help us in your light to see light: Light that burns away the fog of sin so that we see each other clearly; so that we see beyond labels, accents, gender, or skin color; beyond grievances or past harms; beyond creed, or political party. May your light in us radiate like the sun to melt our selfishness so that we can share the joys and feel the sorrows of our neighbors and hear the cries of all your children. May the radiance of your Christmas Light be so bright that we see all people as our neighbors—all people as your children. May Christmas make us fit for Christmas that we seek to live in peace on earth and with each other. *Amen.* *

Merry Christmas! May there be peace on earth, and may it begin with Christmas and with me and with you.

**Inspired by and adapted in part from "A Prayer For The World" by Rabbi Harold Kushner.*

Closing Prayer/Hymn: Let There be Peace on Earth

Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me;
Let there be peace on earth, the peace that was meant to be,
With God as creator, brothers and sisters are we,
Let us walk with each other in perfect harmony.

Let peace begin with me, let this be the moment now.
With ev'ry step I take, let this be my solemn vow:
To take each moment and live each moment in peace eternally.
Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me.