

Immanuel, God with us, guide us to recognize you in our midst. Bless us as we hear your word and seek to understand. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Welcome to *the most wonderful time of the year!*

Don't you think *it's beginning to look a lot like Christmas?*

I'm sure that everyone is *simply having a wonderful Christmastime.*

Well... at least, some of us are. I hope.

The food and gift-giving, the decorations and age-old family traditions that fill our holiday celebrations can be wonderful and joyous.

But sometimes, you don't know where the money is going to come from to buy the gifts. Or folks in your family aren't on speaking terms. Or you are planning to celebrate Christmas five different times in order to accommodate all of the traditions of all of your families, and just the thought of it makes you exhausted.

In the midst of preparations, advertisements, *Frosty the Snowman* and *Baby It's Cold Outside*, sometimes we have too much to deal with... and one more *silver bell* is going to break our *one-horse open sleigh*.

Between the joyful times and the stress, it can be easy to lose sight of the reason for the season.

As you know, more important than giving or receiving gifts, or replicating Grandma's recipe for the perfect holiday dessert, more important than how the tree looks or whether there's a tree at all, is remembering the birth of Jesus.

About 2000 years ago, God decided to tear down all boundaries between humanity and divinity, and our infinite God chose to occupy a finite body.

And more than this, God elected to enter the world in the way that all humans do – through the womb of a woman, born as a baby, going through all the steps of teething, learning how to walk, being weaned and potty trained – not to mention the awkwardness of adolescence!

Jesus came to earth to be God-with-us, so that we could more deeply understand God, and God could more openly relate to us.

Jesus' birth is good news.

This is why we include church as part of our Christmas celebrations.

This is important.

Celebrating Christmas with a church community reminds us that we are connected to something bigger than ourselves.

Jesus, obviously.

But also the work of Jesus.

As a faith community, we are able to do things and be things that none of us could do or be in our own.

Through the church, we feed the hungry.

Every week, people bring donations of food that are brought to St Stephen's food pantry in Monona.

Every week, people come through our doors looking for financial assistance to buy their groceries, and most weeks we are able to offer them gift cards to Woodmans through the Pastors' Emergency Fund.

Every month, folks from this church donate food and volunteer hours to a free meal at Luke House, available to anyone who shows up.

Through the church, we reach out to people who are different from us.

Our Sunday adult education classes offer chances to meet people who have been incarcerated, or to hear music or see photos from other places, or to learn about issues and initiatives regarding racism in our society.

Our building bridges program connects this mostly white congregation to the mostly black congregation of Christ the Solid Rock. By sharing meals together, going on retreats, and perhaps most importantly, co-hosting vacation Bible school for our children, we work to dismantle racism.

Through the church, we help the poor.

The knitters and crocheters make hats and mittens to share with those who are cold this season.

The Cristo Rey scholarship program covers educational fees for many children at our partner church in El Salvador.

The Schenck Weekend Nutrition Program, Meals on Wheels, The Road Home, and any number of other social service programs provide assistance to people who are in need – and we support them through our money and donations and volunteer time.

Through the church, we connect to all of humanity.

Our prayers reflect the needs of people around the world.

Your pastors spend time advocating for the needs of people who are oppressed around the world, through our involvement in advocacy groups on your behalf.

Our peace and justice mission seeks to support organizations that connect us to people from all walks of life, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, regardless of nationality or immigration status, regardless even of religious affiliation.

We feed the hungry. We reach out to people who are different from us.
We help the poor. We connect to all of humanity.
Through the church, we are part of something much bigger than ourselves.
Our holiday celebrations are important, but doing the work of Jesus is more important.

Of course, this year of all years is a very difficult time for many of us.
Even though we hear the festive refrains of *Jingle Bell Rock*, *I Want a Hippopotamus for Christmas*, *Grandma Got Run Over By Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*, and a partridge in a pear tree – our minds sometimes come back with *Mr. Grinch*, and our hearts feel two sizes too small.

Some of us are struggling to find the joy this Christmas.

Many in our community are grieving the loss of loved ones.
And – I don't think I'm overgeneralizing here – most of us are grieving the loss of a sense of community, of understanding that certain values are important to us as Americans, and that progress trends in a particular direction and keeps on moving that way.

Christian author and activist Brian McLaren says it well:

It's not so easy to settle into that joyful holiday spirit when the political world mocks so many values I hold dear, from protecting our planet to caring for refugees to respecting the equal rights of minorities to upholding the value of truth.

Then, just as I find myself stewing in that bitter soup, it hits me: that's what Christmas was, in fact, about.

<https://www.onfaith.co/commentary/jesus-christmas-message>

In the midst of our grief and struggles, today we remember:

Jesus came for such a time as this.

If we are struggling with our personal finances or family relationships, Jesus still came to earth for us. God wants to be with us, in all of our ups and downs.
If we are grieving the loss of a loved one – due to illness or estrangement or death – Jesus is with us to fill that hole in our hearts.

If we are in despair over the state of the world, whether environmental or human rights crises, violence or discrimination, God came to be with us precisely in this struggle. Jesus worked for those same values.

Jesus wasn't born because everything was prepared – Jesus came in spite of it.

Jesus' mother wasn't married when she got pregnant, and she was displaced from her home when she gave birth. There was no nursery for the baby Jesus,

just a manger. And shortly after his birth, the family fled persecution by their government and lived as refugees.

Mary and Joseph weren't ready for Jesus.

And the people he was sent to during his ministry certainly weren't ready for Jesus, either. Instead of welcoming him, they ran him out of town, judged him unfairly, arrested him on trumped-up charges, and executed him unjustly.

And yet – Jesus came to be with us, to teach us about the nature of God, and to help us remember that what's really important is to love one another.

We are in church today because we believe that this matters.

Things like bringing an end to violence and discrimination, working against poverty, and creating equal rights for everyone.

This is what Jesus came for.

And this is our Christian calling.

For some of us today, it really *is* the most wonderful time of the year. And for some of us, it really is not. But because of Jesus, and two thousand years' worth of his followers that we call the church, we are able to make a difference and help the world *become* wonderful for people who need to hear good news.

Because Christmas, of course, doesn't come from a store.

Because Christmas, we know, means a little bit more.

All I want for Christmas is peace on earth, goodwill to all. I want justice and love and peace and joy. I want the hungry to be fed and the oppressed to be set free, and I want barriers between people to be toppled to the ground.

This is what God wants, too.

This is why Jesus came on Christmas.

God is with us to help us make the world a better place.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.