



Image: by Robert A. Tino

What a world of sound it must have been
for Jesus, newly-born —
Mother Mary singing songs of praise
to God that Christmas morn;
Joseph, reaching for the child,
whispering when the baby fussed;
Songs and whispers bear the promise:
You are truly God-with-us.

HYMN OF JOY

Founded in 1916, we are an Open & Affirming (LGBTQ+), anti-racist, and justice seeking church that is part of the greater United Church of Christ.

* Hymn 132

“Joy to the World!”

ANTIOCH

Joy to the world! The Lord is come:
Let earth its praises bring;
Let every heart prepare Christ room,
And heaven and nature sing,
And heaven and nature sing,
And heaven, and heaven and nature sing.

Joy to the earth! The Savior reigns!
Let all their songs employ;
While fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains
Repeat the sounding joy,
Repeat the sounding joy,
Repeat, repeat the sounding joy.

Christ rules the world with truth and grace,
And makes the nations prove
The glories of God’s righteousness
And wonders of God’s love,
And wonders of God’s love
And wonders, wonders of God’s love.

Stories for All People

Dr. Lee Parrish

Hymn

“Love Has Come”

BRING A TORCH

Love has come: a light in the darkness!
Love shines forth in the Bethlehem skies.
See, all heaven has come to proclaim it;
Hear how their song of joy arises:
Love! Love! Born unto you, a Savior!
Love! Love! Glory to God on high.

Love is born! Come, share in the wonder.
Love is God now asleep in the hay.
See the glow in the eyes of his mother;
What is the name her heart is saying?
Love! Love! Love is the name she whispers.
Love! Love! Jesus, Emmanuel.

Love has come and never will leave us!
Love is life everlasting and free.
Love is Jesus within and among us.
Love is the peace our hearts are seeking.
Love! Love! Love is the gift of Christmas.
Love! Love! Praise to you, God on high!

Pastoral Prayer

Dr. Lee Parrish

Modern Lesson Reader

Caroline Utz, Sally McLester

Our Modern Lesson for today comes from the writings of Dr. Lee Parrish, who perceives the events of Jonah 4:1-11, through the lens of the Divine seeking to restore a relationship with creation. In his writing he says...

The air hung heavy with the scent of salt and disappointment. Jonah, his heart a tempest of anger and despair, watched the sunrise paint the horizon in hues of bruised purple and sickly green. He had expected the city of Nineveh, notorious for its wickedness, to crumble beneath the divine wrath he'd so fervently prayed for. Instead, God, in that infuriatingly merciful way of God, had spared them.

Jonah, a queer man in a world that often saw him as an abomination, knew the sting of rejection, the suffocating weight of societal disapproval. He'd felt the venomous whispers, the withering glares, the cruel pronouncements of his very existence as an affront to the divine order. How could God, of all beings, extend such grace to a city that undoubtedly harbored those who would condemn him, who would see his love as an abomination?

He retreated to the outskirts of the city, constructing a flimsy shelter from the blistering sun. There, under the indifferent gaze of the sky, he poured out his frustration. "It's not fair!" he cried, his voice hoarse with emotion. "They deserve to suffer! They deserve to know the pain of being cast out, of being deemed unworthy of love!"

A gentle voice, like the rustling of leaves in a summer breeze, broke through his despair. "Jonah," it whispered, "Do you have any right to be angry?"

Jonah, startled, looked up. A woman, her face etched with kindness, stood before him. Her eyes, though filled with compassion, held a hint of knowing sorrow. "I know the sting of prejudice," she said softly. "I know what it's like to be told my love is wrong, that my very existence is a sin."

Jonah, speechless, could only stare at her. He had never encountered someone like her before - someone who understood the depths of his pain, who mirrored his own struggles in the eyes of a world that sought to define him by his sexuality.

"Forgiveness," the woman continued, her voice a balm to his wounded soul, "is not about condoning evil. It's about recognizing the shared humanity that binds us all. It's about acknowledging the capacity for change, for redemption, that resides within every heart, regardless of their beliefs or actions."

Her words resonated deep within him, stirring something within his own heart - a flicker of empathy, a glimmer of understanding. He began to see Nineveh not as a faceless enemy, but as a city of individuals, each with their own joys and sorrows, their own hopes and fears.

As the sun began to set, casting long shadows across the land, Jonah finally understood. God's mercy, like the sun itself, embraced all, regardless of their perceived sins, their sexual orientation, their gender identity. It was a love that defied categorization, a love that sought to mend the broken, to heal the wounded, to offer a path to redemption for all.

And in that moment, beneath the vast expanse of the sky, Jonah began to feel a shift within himself - a softening of his heart, a loosening of the grip of his anger. He began to see the possibility of forgiveness, not as a weakness, but as a strength, a testament to the enduring power of love and compassion.

One: May we hear what the Spirit is saying to the people.

Many: Open our ears, our hearts, our minds.

Hymn

"What a World of Sound"

HYMN OF JOY

What a world of sound it must have been for Jesus, newly-born –
Mother Mary singing songs of praise to God that Christmas morn;
Joseph, reaching for the child, whispering when the baby fussed;
Songs and whispers bear the promise: You are truly God-with-us.

Surely there were sounds of women from that small community,
Stopping by to see the baby, offering hospitality;
Lambs were bleating, donkeys braying, children playing in the street.
Jesus, close against his mother, felt her heart's rejoicing beat.

In that town were shepherds calling; workers there were cutting wood;
In the distance, angry shouts and people begging for their food;
In a doorway, someone weeping, saddened by some inner pain –
Jesus, in your incarnation, unto each of these you came.

What a world of sound we live in; many words we daily hear.
Mid this world's conflicting voices, be for us God's Word so clear.
Help us listen to your story; help us hear you when we pray.
In you, Jesus, is our hope: God came to us on Christmas Day.

* Gospel Lesson

Luke 2:41-51 (CEB)

Laura Hankins

Our Scripture Lesson for today comes from the Gospel of Luke where Joseph and Mary are returning from Jerusalem and realize that Jesus is not with them in their caravan, they return and find him among the teachers and the scholars...

Each year his parents went to Jerusalem for the Passover Festival. When he was 12 years old, they went up to Jerusalem according to their custom. After the festival was over, they were returning home, but the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. His parents didn't know it. Supposing that he was among their band of travelers, they journeyed on for a full day while looking for him among their family and friends. When they didn't find Jesus, they returned to Jerusalem to look for him. After three days they found him in the temple. He was sitting among the teachers, listening to them and putting questions to them. Everyone who heard him was amazed by his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him, they were shocked.

His mother said, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Listen! Your father and I have been worried. We've been looking for you!"

Jesus replied, "Why were you looking for me? Didn't you know that it was necessary for me to be in my Father's house?" But they didn't understand what he said to them.

Jesus went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. His mother cherished every word in her heart.

One: For the word of God in scripture, for the word of God among us. For the word of God within us.

Many: Thanks be to God.

Invitation to Generosity

Laura Hankins

The blessings we receive—in wisdom, years, and favor—are meant to be shared. When we use these gifts to sustain the ministry of the church and respond to the needs of the community, we demonstrate the good news in the world. Let us give with boldness and boundless trust in the provision of the Creator of all.

* Doxology

CAROL

Praise God from whom all blessings flow.
Praise God all creatures here below.
Praise God above, ye heavenly host.
Creator, Christ, and Holy Ghost.

Prayer of Dedication (*unison*)

Laura Hankins

Lavish God, collect these offerings so that the blessings and favor you have given to us may be shared among our neighbors with trust, hope, and love.
Amen.

* Hymn

“Here I Am, Lord”

D. L. Schutte

I, the Lord of sea and sky,
I have heard my people cry.
All who dwell in dark and sin
My hand will save.
I who made the stars of night,
I will make their darkness bright.
Who will bear my light to them?
Whom shall I send?

Refrain: Here I am, Lord, Is it I, Lord?
I have heard you calling in the night.
I will go, Lord, if you lead me.
I will hold your people in my heart.

I, the Lord of snow and rain,
I have borne my people's pain.
I have wept for love of them,
They turn away.
I will break their hearts of stone,
Give them hearts for love alone.
I will speak my word to them
Whom shall I send? (*R*)

I the Lord of wind and flame,
I will tend the poor and lame.
I will set a feast for them, my hand will save.
Finest bread I will provide
Till their hearts be satisfied.
I will give my life for them.
Whom shall I send? (R)

* Benediction

Dr. Lee Parrish

* Benediction Response 154

GO TELL IT

Go tell it on the mountain, over the hill and everywhere.
Go tell it on the mountain, that Jesus Christ is born!

Postlude

“The First Noel”

arr. J. Carter

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*Parts of the liturgy for today’s service was adapted from UCC Worship Ways,
and written by Dr. Lee A. Parrish.*

*Candid photographs and/or video recording share our work and witness
and invite others into the fellowship of our congregation. Some pictures/video
may be published in church print publications, on our website or on our
official social media sites. If you do not wish to have your image published,
please contact the church office by phone or email.*

WHAT'S HAPPENING AT HOLY COVENANT

Stay connected! There are many new events in our future! Check out all the current happenings in the weekly newsletter via Constant Contact. *Not seeing it in your inbox? Sign-up here:*
<https://holycovenantucc.org/newsletters/>

WE PROVIDE OUR EXTRAVAGANT WELCOME WITH HELP FROM:

D Evans, Brian Hankins, Laura Hankins, Jo Ann Jellison

Ushers: Shakti Subramanian

Greeters: Yvette Wynn

Refreshments:

WORSHIP VOLUNTEERS NEEDED

Greeters and ushers are needed starting at 10:30am every Sunday. Liturgists and readers roles are also available. Please sign up in the Gathering Room or at
<https://www.signupgenius.com/go/10C0C44ACAD23A2FE3-ushers>.



Please welcome our Guest Speaker today, Dr. Lee A Parrish!

CHECK OUT OUR ONLINE CALENDAR AT <https://holycovenantucc.org/events/>

THIRD ANNUAL NEW YEARS EVE GAME NIGHT!

Come and join us on New Year's Eve at church from 6:30 pm until 9-ish for all kinds of games and jocularity. Bring your favorite games and goodies!!

YEAR-END GIVING - THANK YOU FOR YOUR GENEROSITY!

Holy Covenant's fiscal year ends on Tuesday, December 31. Contributions for 2024, or prepayments for 2025, **must be received at the church by noon on 12/31/2024**, or postmarked on or before 12/31/2024 if being mailed. Please use the secure address of: Holy Covenant UCC, PO Box 481285, Charlotte NC 28269. Questions about year-end contributions, stock gifts or electronic giving may be directed to Dawn Simmons at office@holycovenantucc.org. Please let Dawn know if you are making a stock gift so we can include the value of this gift on your year-end giving statement. We are blessed by your generous support of the ministries at Holy Covenant!

The church office will be closed New Years Day.

SOJOURNERS CLASS

The Sojourners meet Sundays at 9:45am in the Conference Room or via Zoom. On January 5th, we will resume our Bible study of Mark with Lesson 5 "True Power".

Everyone is welcome and no preparation is necessary.

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/89561758099?pwd=d1gvUmh3K2hCNmdidm1QdjIiNKF5QT09>

Meeting ID: 895 6175 8099 Passcode: 986788

PROJECT LINUS

Our church is proud to sponsor **Project Linus**, which provides handmade blankets to children 0-18 who are seriously ill, traumatized, or otherwise in need. Due to the tremendous need for comfort and warmth as it gets cold several blankets are being made for those affected by Hurricane Helene. Supplies and instructions are available for anyone wishing to help. Return the completed blankets to the gathering room.

SAVE THE DATE, JAN. 25, 2025, ALL CHURCH WORK DAY

We might start at 10am, and wrap up by 1pm. Join us for some fun and fellowship while we're #CleaningGodsHouse!

NEW MEMBERS CLASSES PLANNED IN 2025

If you are interested in becoming a member at Holy Covenant or would like to explore what becoming a member means, mark your calendar for some upcoming dates in 2025. We hold new member classes on February 2nd and 16th, with a new member installation on March 2nd, which is Transfiguration Sunday. If you are interested in becoming a new member or have questions, please reach out to **Pastor Chris**, RevChris@holycovenantucc.org or contact the church office, office@holycovenantucc.org.

PLEASE REMEMBER IN PRAYER

If you wish to add someone to the list, please send a note to
prayers@holycovenantucc.org.

Members

Jana Harrison & Jeff Hughes in the death of Jana's father,
James Thomas Harrison

Friends and Family in the recent death of the Rev. H. Linn Finger

Linda Carver, Liz Colton, Kevin Decker, Alix Felsing & Joann Felsing, Jim & Faye
Humphrey, Sharon Landis, Suzanne Lamorey, Sue & Bill Pascucci, Isabelle Reedy
Powell, Ed & Beth Sharp, Anita Taylor, Darline Warren

Friends & Family Members

Will Judd and family in the death of his father, Grady Judd

Beth, Michael & Julian Bliss (Robert Shepherd), Melissa Brown, Jeffrey Calder
(Martha Bomely), Craig Chrismon (Melissa Noll), Jeanne Hord (Diane Neese), Pam
Culp (Melissa Noll), Cindy Hedrick (Barb Schneller), Henry Hildebrand (Bill &
Connie Hildebrand), Charles Jernigan (Lee Parrish), Dave Johnson, Richard Lease
(Barb Schneller), Earl & Susie Morgan (Ed Vickery), Joe Parks (Beth Sharp), Larry
& Karen Roark (Ed Vickery), Michelle Sharp (Beth & Ed Sharp), Janet Wakefield
(Linda Burby), Brian Weddell (Jon Weddell), Kim Wiggs-Gamblin, Scott Whitley
(Jay Whitley), John Zastrow (Barb Schneller)

OUR MINISTRY TEAM

Rev. Christopher Czarnecki, MDiv, MBA, Senior Pastor
RevChris@holycovenantucc.org, 314-402-8167

Jon Weddell, MDiv, MSW, Minister of Music

Dawn Simmons, BSBF, Executive Assistant

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