

## Barren song

Two voices (voice 1 a woman and voice 2 a man) fade in and out of this marrying of the Magnificat with the prophecy in Isaiah 35: 1-10. As each voice ends in the repeated words fading out, the other voice picks them up quietly and grows louder thus each “sedges” into the next. These words heavily based on Eugene Peterson’s *The Message*.

Woman	I wait, I long, I hold on to God, for love has taken me, and shaped a promise in me, once more, once more, once more... <i>(fading)</i>
Man	<i>(getting louder)</i> ...once more, once more, once more a desert blooms, a barren place fills with joy, and God’s glory is fully on display: a symphony in joy, in joy, in joy... <i>(fading)</i>
Woman	<i>(getting louder)</i> ...in joy, in joy, in joy God rebalances the world; in mercy blesses the unblessed; in truth, knocks away at untruth, for justice is born, is born, is born... <i>(fading)</i>
Man	<i>(getting louder)</i> ...born, born, born in the deserts is new hope. Fear-filled souls, gird yourself, grasp hold of hope - it is heaven’s doing, heaven’s doing, heaven’s doing... <i>(fading)</i>
Woman	<i>(getting louder)</i> ...heaven’s doing, heaven’s doing, heaven’s doing a new thing, in me, a lowly, unknown, woman and through me will pull the victims from the mud, the starving from the bread queues, the rich from their mansions. The just God will remember, remember, remember... <i>(fade)</i>
Man	<i>(getting louder)</i> ...remember, remember, remember what the prophets have said: God is on the way: the justice-blind will see anew! The law-deaf will hear a new truth! The life-lame will leap again! The hope-dumb will sing a new song! And love streams will flow, will flow, will flow... <i>(fade)</i>
Woman	<i>(getting louder)</i> ...will flow, will flow, will flow like heaven’s mercy through this world, for the child of Israel has been embraced, and we have been remembered. God is on the way, the way, the way... <i>(fade)</i>

Man	<p><i>(getting louder)</i> ...the way, the way, the way is opened, the road straightened, and only the redeemed will walk it, for this is God's highway, and God is returning along it, for God has found the way, the time, and a womb, a womb, a womb... <i>(fade)</i></p>
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Promise  
Advent  
Wilderness

**Scripture: Isaiah 35:-10, Luke 1:45-55**

## Consent

A reflection/prayer for an ambient communion. It attempts to make communion a little more fleshy and orthodox.

Consent my people,  
consent to grace;

and take in your hands,  
flesh:  
love in its earthy guise.

Consent my people,  
consent to grace;

and fill your throat,  
with sound:  
heavens voice.

Consent my people,  
consent to grace;

and let your lips taste,  
God,  
broken and spilled.

Consent my people,  
consent to grace;

and let your tongue,  
tell,  
the glory of the heavens.

Consent my people,  
consent to grace;

and let your eyes,  
see,  
the truth of incarnation.

Consent my people,  
consent to grace;

and let your fingers,  
play,  
with God incarnate.

Consent my people,  
consent to grace;

and let your arms,  
reach,  
to hold into God.

Consent my people,  
consent to grace;

and let bread,  
break,  
as your name is spoken.

Consent my people,  
consent to grace;

and let wine,  
spill,  
as you breathe in the waiting.

Consent my people,  
consent to grace;

rg  
10<sup>th</sup> December 2004

Grace  
Communion  
Scripture: Isaiah 35:1-10

## Five Stories of the Nativity

### Mary

It was quiet except for the swish, swish of a straw broom over a hard mud floor, swish, swish and a gentle hum of a song, a song she remembers her mother singing to her.

It was an ordinary day like every other day and Mary was sweeping floors and fetching water from the nearby pool and thinking about making the flat bread mixed with coriander she always made every day for a meal to scoop up whatever gravy she would make to give the bread a little more taste.

She had bare feet, but then she always had bare feet and she enjoyed the cool mud floor as she practically danced over it humming and sweeping.

She was just about to do a final twirl with the broom when she noticed someone from the corner of her eye, and she lost concentration and her balance, and stumbled into the person. Both fell onto the floor with a soft thud, clatter, and plume of dust from the small pile they had fallen on that was waiting to be scooped up and thrown outside.

Mary jumped to her feet quickly, dusted herself down, sorted her long skirt, and stared at the floor. It wasn't the custom for young women to look strangers in the eye.

"Pardon me, sir," she said.

"Mary!" the stranger said before he burst out laughing at the picture of the two of them tangled on the floor. And it really was a humorous thought because it's not everyday you see an angel in a dust heap, with a fankle of wings, halo and glory.

But that was how Mary and the angel Gabriel met.

"That was fun!" smiled the angel.

Mary just cleared her throat and stared at the floor embarrassed. The dust was settling now and she could see the face of the stranger: bright eyed with a radiance and glow that brought a honey light to the space.

"Mary, why don't you sit down. I've got something to tell you."

### Joseph

Mary was on her own again when Joseph visited. She was still staring at the floor holding her tummy rocking backward and forward looking at the dust that now covered the floor once more. But the last thing she was thinking about was clearing it up.

She had sat there for hours.

She said nothing. Just sat rocking backward and forward staring at the floor.

Joseph tried to say something asking what was wrong. He put his arm round her asking her what had happened, if she was hurt, and why she was holding her tummy.

But Mary said nothing.

Joseph decided to go and get help but that would have to be in the morning because it was late now and he was tired. He managed to lay out Mary's sleeping mat and make her lie down and cover her with a blanket. Joseph watched as she fell asleep now humming to herself a tune he remembered his mother singing to him when he was a little child.

Joseph then returned to his own house and fell asleep. But it wasn't an easy sleep. He tossed and turned and at one point woke up sitting bolt upright having just had the most vivid dream he could

ever remember.

It was etched in his mind as clear as day. He was to marry Mary, soon, and that she was going to have a baby whose father was God and he was to call the child, when it was born, Jesus.

Joseph didn't sleep much after that. He sat up, put his arms round his knees, and found himself rocking to and fro troubled by it all, wondering what was to be done and humming, humming a tune he hadn't heard since he was a child.

## Stable

Bethlehem was small. For the birth place of King David it wasn't up to much and tonight it was teeming with people most of them were lying outside houses, on roofs, under trees. Most slept beside their camels or donkeys to keep warm and the smell was something awful: hot dusty people, sweating animals, smoky fires, baking bread, and sizzling fat.

Mary had to sit down. It was just far too much. She was heavily pregnant and the last thing she wanted to do, or indeed was able to do, was wander round the village looking for a place to stay among all the fumes of her fellow travellers.

Joseph left her for a short while to rest as he tried to find a place.

Mary was sore when he came back: sore feet, sore tummy and she stared at Joseph with a pleading look in her eyes.

"Come with me," he said as positively as he could. He really didn't know how to break the news that there was no where for them to stay except an offer of a cave in the hillside in which people normally kept their animals. So he just led her off and as they left the few houses behind and climbed the short distance to the cave Mary already knew but she was past caring and settled down on the straw when they got there without complaint and prepared for an uncomfortable night.

Not long after that Jesus was born; a bawling, crying baby who filled that shelter with a lot of noise over the baying cattle and bleating goats. The noise carried down the hillside into the village where everyone, wrestling against all the other noises of people trying to find a comfortable place to sleep, heard nothing unusual.

There wasn't the slightest recognition that tonight the son of God had been born and the ancient promises and long spoken prophecies had been fulfilled.

## Shepherds

Have you ever seen the stars in the middle of the night and how they stretch like a thick smear of paint right across the middle of the sky? A great wedge of glory like an angelic highway. And have you ever sat beneath it and wondered what was going on up there behind it all?

Well there were some shepherds who wondered just that. Sitting round a fire on the hillside late at night telling stories and asking questions and conjecturing theories about the heavens they say when, wham, out of no where tore a bolt of light that flashed right across the sky.

"Wow!" cried the shepherds. Well, that's what one of them was able to say. The others had lost their voices. The whole hillside was bathed in a pale milky glow with ripples of honey and butterscotch and caramel. Pure gold.

There was a silence that felt like forever as the hillside tried to recover from the shock when, flash, another bolt of light, even brighter, ripped across the sky, and there, tearing their way through all the glory, were a million angels.

Now I don't know what you think angels look like, but for the shepherds they were brought up to believe in wings and halos and all the traditional stuff. And so it was that's what they saw: wings fluttering ever so grandly, halos gleaming melting into the golden glow. Just then there was a great sucking noise and they all took breath (that is the angels) and in harmonies not yet invented

filled the sky with a cadence of alleluias, and glissando of hosannas, and symphony of praises.

The shepherds stared open eyed and open mouthed looking around them. The sheep didn't seem to notice. They just slept on. In fact it was as if no one else noticed except them. They looked at each other and they all felt an urge to run, run down the hill and into the village of Bethlehem. And they did. With all their might and speed and panic they ran.

And as they ran they found themselves approaching a cave on the hillside and stopped because they heard a baby cry. They looked in and knew somehow, deep down, the angels in the sky and this child were connected and they fell on their knees and the panic lifted and the fear disappeared but the wonder remained. They were staring at God.

None of them could tell how long they stared into the manger but when they left the Milky Way was as it had always been and the sheep carried on snoozing and the birds were just beginning to sing as morning once more, so normally, began to break on a new day, on a new world.

## Scholars

Have you ever been close to a camel? They smell!

And so it was that a group of scholars were glad to leave their camels behind at the watering hole and breathe in some fresh air. Months sitting downwind of camel breath is not the most pleasant of journeys.

But the smell of a stable wasn't much better. But this is where they had ended up. It wasn't what they were expecting. In fact they felt completely out of place. Had they lost their directions somewhere? Had they followed the wrong star? Had they misread the prophecies?

But this is where the journey ended and so they swallowed hard, looked at each other and moved towards the open barn. And there in an unexpected picture of normality was a man kneeling before a manger staring into it with the proudest, happiest, besotted look on his face you could ever imagine. His hands hovered above the stall hesitating, poised to lift the baby lying there but they didn't seem quite to know how to do it.

A woman, probably the mother, was asleep in the hay; pale, worn out, exhausted lines across her brow, and so young.

The scholars crept in not wanting to disturb anyone. But a foot snapped a twig lying in the straw. Joseph jumped back from the stall, yelped, and Mary woke up startled.

There was a moments silence, broken by a gurgle from the manger. They all froze, looked in the manger, and then there was quiet, and they breathed again.

The group of travellers moved closer, spoke a language unknown to Mary and Joseph, offered three gifts in warped glass jars, bowed, looked in the stall, pressed their hands gently on the baby's head, and crept out again.

Mary and Joseph stared at each other, looked at the gifts, looked at each other again, and looked into the stall. Jesus opened his eyes, furrowed his brow, cleared his throat, and then bawled louder than he had all that night.

The travellers looked at each other as they stood outside the barn and sighed with relief. They got on their camels again. They maybe smell, they thought, but it was better that a screaming child.

They moved off this time a different way so they didn't have to visit the king of the country again. He had given them permission to travel but had asked them to return to him. They didn't trust him and left the baby crying in his mother's arms, and wondered how ordinary the child seemed to be.

rg

14<sup>th</sup> December 2004

Nativity

Incarnation

Humanness

Scripture: Matthew 1:18-25

## In the midst...

To be read by the whole congregation, fairly quickly. Different congregational groups could be given each line. You could change it throughout to keep everyone on their toes. Gimmick, but then it is for Christmas.

Leader	In a stable
Children	with straw
Men	and animals
Women	and smells
Leader	in the night
Children	with angels
Men	and shepherds
Women	and hills
Leader	in the arms

Children	of a mother
Men	a maiden
Women	a girl
Leader	in the place
Children	of feeding
Men	the manger
Women	a stall
Leader	in the moment
Children	of history
Men	of prophecy
Women	of truth
Leader	in the presence of
Children	shepherds
Men	of low-lifers
Women	and youth
Leader	in the travels
Children	of magi
Men	of scholars
Women	of wise-ones
Leader	in the light
Children	of the angels
Men	the stars
Women	of heaven's suns
Leader	in the anger
Children	of Herod
Men	the powerful
Women	the world
Leader	in the darkness
Children	of winter
Men	of life
Women	old and knarled
Leader	in the longing
Children	for light
Men	for God
Women	for the morn
Leader	in this place
Children	Jesus was born
Men	Into this living
Women	Jesus was born
Leader	in the midst
Children	of us
Men	and us
Women	and us
Leader	love is born
Children	peace is known
Men	truth takes flesh
Women	life becomes just
Leader	Thanks be to God
Children	So be it

Men	Let it be so
Women	Alleluia
All	Amen

rg  
17<sup>th</sup> December 2004

Christmas  
Nativity  
In the midst  
Scripture: Matthew 1:18-25

## Not yet born

A statement of faith for Advent. This was used a few moments before midnight trying to make Incarnation a whole lot less romantic and a whole lot more real of the world that particular night.

**When Christ is not yet born,**  
we stand in the echo of the prophets,  
holding on to the rumour of God:  
that incarnation holds a promise  
for both Baghdad and Washington,  
and we long for its fulfilment.

**When Christ is not yet born,**  
we stand in the echo of the prophets,  
depending on the naming of love:  
that Emmanuel holds an words  
for both Jerusalem and London,  
and we yearn for its pronouncement.

**When Christ is not yet born,**  
we stand in the echo of the prophets,  
believing in the conspiracy of grace:  
that birth brings with it a hope  
for both Kabul and Brussels,  
and we ache for its revelation.

**When Christ is not yet born,**  
we stand in the echo of the prophets,  
waiting in the labouring of heaven:  
for Word to become flesh  
in both us and our community,  
and we crave the moment.

rg  
22<sup>nd</sup> December 2004

Promise  
Prophecy  
Waiting  
Scripture: Isaiah 9:2-10



## There is a waiting

These are words used just before the Christ Candle was lit at our Watchnight service. There was lots of pausing between each stanza as midnight approached.

there is a hollow place in which the fugitive of heaven pushes,  
restlessly

there is a forgotten place in which the handmaid of God bends and labours,  
painfully

there is a backdoor stable in which an anxious soon-to-be father worries,  
helplessly

there is a distracted world in which the prophets promises will be fulfilled,  
benevolently

there is a silent moment in which a God who is to let go the only son into the arms of a first time  
mother ponders,  
uneasily

there is a waiting community here in which light hesitates, word falters, and rumour grows,  
anxiously

there is a pausing in time in which all of heaven holds it's breath,  
expectantly

rg  
23<sup>rd</sup> December 2004

Watchnight  
Waiting  
Incarnation  
Scripture: Isaiah 9:2-8