

Central United Methodist Church

3700 Pacific Avenue, Stockton, CA 95204

ORDER OF WORSHIP
4th Sunday of Advent
Sunday, December 24, 2023



GATHERING

PRELUDE	<i>Tambourin</i> (Brenda Portman)	Monica Adams
GATHERING MOMENT		Alexis Easton (8:30am), Martha Tipton (11:00am)
INTROIT	<i>O Come, O Come Emmanuel</i>	Chancel Choir
*CALL TO WORSHIP		Alexis Easton (8:30am), Martha Tipton (11:00am)
	Leader: Sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth.	
	All: Sing to the Lord, praise his name; proclaim his salvation day after day.	
	Leader: Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous deeds among all peoples.	
	All: For great is the Lord and most worthy of praise; he is to be feared above all gods.	
	Leader: For all the gods of the nations are idols, but the Lord made the heavens.	
	All: Splendor and majesty are before him; strength and glory are in his sanctuary. Amen	
*HYMN	<i>Blessed Be the God of Israel</i>	UMH #209
THE LIGHTING OF THE LOVE CANDLE	<i>He Came Down</i> <i>He came down that we may have love; he came down that we may have love;</i> <i>he came down that we may have love, Hallelujah forevermore.</i>	TFWS #2085
CHILDREN'S MOMENT		Rev. Sungho Lee
MISSION & MINISTRIES MOMENT		Alexis Easton (8:30am), Martha Tipton (11:00am)
PRAYER CARDS COLLECTED		
RITE OF FRIENDSHIP AND A SPECIAL WELCOME TO OUR VISITORS (11:00am)		Martha Tipton
*PASSING THE PEACE		Alexis Easton (8:30am), Martha Tipton (11:00am)
	(Stand, bow or wave, with the word "Peace be with You!")	
	All Sing: <i>Emmanuel, Emmanuel, His Name Is called Emmanuel. God with us, revealed in us, His Name Is called Emmanuel.</i>	

ANTHEM

A Celtic Silent Night
(arr. Patrick Tierney)

Chancel Choir
Jessie Hernandez, Flute

PROCLAMATION AND RESPONSE

SCRIPTURE

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16 (Pew Bible NRSV, page 281)

Alexis Easton (8:30am)

Leader: This is the word of God for the people of God.

Martha Tipton (11:00am)

All: **Thanks be to God.**

***HYMN**

That Boy-Child of Mary

UMH #241

SCRIPTURE

Luke 1:26-38 (Pew Bible NRSV, page 56)

Alexis Easton (8:30am)

Leader: This is the word of God for the people of God.

Martha Tipton (11:00am)

All: **Thanks be to God.**

SERMON

The Reel Christmas Story #2 — Joy: *It's A Wonderful Life*
(Prepared by the Rev. Mark Wharff and rearranged by the Rev. Sungho Lee)

Rev. Sungho Lee

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Alexis Easton (8:30am), Martha Tipton (11:00am)

PASTOR'S PRAYER & LORD'S PRAYER

Rev. Sungho Lee

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.

THANKSGIVING

WORSHIP WITH OUR TITHES & OFFERINGS

Alexis Easton (8:30am), Martha Tipton (11:00am)

OFFERTORY

Sussex Carol
(arr. Alfred V. Fedak)

Monica Adams

***DOXOLOGY**

Advent Doxology
(TUNE *Once in Royal David's City* MUSIC Henry J Gauntlett, R.G. Huff)
**Praise to God, the One who made us. Praise to Christ, God's only Son.
Praise the Spirit, ever with us. Praise the Godhead, Three in One.
Clear a Path! Prepare the way! Advent leads to Christmas Day!**

PRAYER OF DEDICATION

Alexis Easton (8:30am), Martha Tipton (11:00am)

SENDING FORTH

***BENEDICTION**

Rev. Sungho Lee

***RESPONSE**

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel
**O come, O King of nations bind in one the hearts of all mankind.
Bid all our sad divisions cease and be yourself our King of Peace.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel shall come to you, O Israel.**

***POSTLUDE**

Good Christian Friends, Rejoice
(arr. Anna Laura Page)

Monica Adams

*Indicates please stand as you are able.

SERVING YOU TODAY

Rev. Dr. Sungho Lee
Alexis Easton, 8:30am Worship Leader
Martha Tipton, 11:00am Worship Leader
Ric Campero, Choir Director
Monica Adams, Organist/Pianist
David Campero, Livestream
Mark Wharff & Steven Adams, Media
Cherie Hudson, Facilities Coordinator
Rupert Cooper, Audio

OFFICE HOLIDAY SCHEDULE:

Dec. 25—26	Office Closed
Dec. 27—28	9:00am—12:00pm
Dec. 29 Jan 2	Office Closed

THE REEL CHRISTMAS STORY #2 — JOY: IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE
(Prepared by the Rev. Mark Wharff and rearranged by the Rev. Sungho Lee)

About the movie.

Today, we turn our attention to the 1946 picture, *It's a Wonderful Life*. The film underperformed at the box office in its original release, even failing to recover the costs of production. But thanks to numerous television showings in the 1980s, it is among the best loved movies and ranked number one on the American Film Institute's list of the most inspirational American films of all time. Director Frank Capra revealed that it was his personal favorite among all his films, adding that he screened it for his family every Christmas season.

The screenplay was based on a 1939 short story, "The Greatest Gift", by Philip Van Doren Stern. When the author failed in his attempts to publish the story, he printed it as a Christmas Card and mailed it to 200 family and friends in December 1943. David Hempstead, a producer at RKO pictures, purchased the rights for \$10,000, hoping to turn it into a vehicle for Cary Grant. Efforts to adapt the story into a feature script were unimpressive, and Grant went on to make a popular Christmas movie, *The Bishop's Wife*, in 1947.

Like in the book Job, behind human affairs, divine council meet.

Scene 1 opens on Christmas Eve, 1945. George Bailey, played by Jimmy Stewart, is at the end of his rope, considering ending his life. Practically all the residents of Bedford Falls are praying for George. When those prayers reach heaven, Clarence Odbody, an Angel 2nd Class, is assigned to help George – and Clarence hopes, earn his wings.

A person that puts the interests of others ahead of his own: An Angel in human form.

To prepare him for his assignment, Clarence views scenes from George's life. Time and time again, he puts the interests of his family, friends, and neighbors ahead of his own. One of those key episodes takes place on George's wedding day. He and Mary Hatch, played by Donna Reed, have just become husband and wife and are heading off on their honeymoon. However, George saw many people lined up in front of his office to get some money for their Christmas season expenses. He did not hesitate to help them out.

Do you get a sense of the kind of person George is? He and Mary cancel their honeymoon and use their own money to keep the Building and Loan open. And over the years, they help make the dream of home ownership a reality for many of their neighbors.

A crisis comes even to a person like an angel.

Fast forward to Christmas Eve, 1945. World War II has just ended. All of Bedford Falls is excited because George's younger brother, Harry Bailey, is coming home – a decorated war hero. George's Uncle Billy goes to the bank with an \$8,000 deposit, and carelessly misplaces the money – leaves the cash wrapped in a newspaper he hands to Henry Potter, the Grinch in this piece, played in a very effective villainous style by Lionel Barrymore. A Bank Examiner has arrived to review the Building and Loan's accounts. When the \$8,000 shortage is discovered, George will be on his way to jail. In desperation, George approaches the only person who has the wherewithal to get him out of this predicament: Potter, who rejected George's request with ridicule.

Have you considered committing suicide? Halt Now! Wait for your angel!

George feels like his entire world is crashing down on him. He prays, "Show me the way, God." But without hearing an answer, he can only think of one way out. If anyone ever needed a guardian angel to come alongside and help, it was George Bailey at that moment.

That bridge tender was a little unnerved at meeting an Angel. Have you ever met an angel? According to surveys, 77% of Americans believe in Angels, including 40% of Americans who don't participate in any religious community.

Angels seem to be everywhere, and growing in popularity. Collectible and decorative angel figurines line store shelves. Angel characters appear in television shows and movies. They even play baseball in Los Angeles.

This time of year, you see Angels atop Nativity scenes and Christmas Trees — or children costumed as Angels for the Preschool Christmas Program.

There's even survey data that Angels are #3 on a list of the most popular tattoos (But you'll have to Google the pictures for yourself).

What does the Bible tell us about Angels?

To begin with, the English word Angel comes from the Greek *angelos*, which means messenger. English Bibles also translate *malak*, the Hebrew word for messenger, as Angel when the messenger is from God. Sharing a message from God is the primary role of Angels in Scripture. An Angel is literally a messenger — a human messenger or a heavenly being.

Now Angels don't show up on every page of the Bible. But when God wants to announce something earth-shattering, when there's breaking news from heaven, God sends messengers.

1. When Mary was selected to give birth to Jesus, the Savior, God sent a messenger. What was that messenger's name? Gabriel.
2. That news was a bit troubling to Joseph, but God sent a messenger to explain in a dream that everything would be all right.
3. And of course, a whole heavenly host of Angels announced to the shepherds the good news of the Savior who is Christ the Lord.

This is what Angels do – they announce big news.

But they also show up when someone needs encouragement and strength.

4. In the 16th chapter of Genesis, we learn that an Angel of the Lord showed up to encourage Hagar when she was in the wilderness by herself and feared for her life.
5. In 2 Kings we read that an Angel of the Lord showed up to encourage Elijah when he feared the wrath of the King.
6. Matthew and Mark tell us that Angels came and ministered to Jesus when he was being tested in the wilderness for 40 days and 40 nights.
7. And again, when Jesus is in prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane in the shadow of the cross, we read in Luke 22:43 that an Angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength.

The Bible shows us scenes where Angels come as messengers to announce big news, and when they come to people in their hour of need with messages of hope, encouragement, and strength.

Occasionally, people share stories of their own encounters with Angels.

Two examples: A woman was at home with her two-week-old baby. Both were sleeping – mom on her bed, baby next to her in the bassinet. Mom was awakened by the voice of her grandmother who had died some years before, saying “Wake up!” clear as day. As she woke up and looked around, she saw that the pillow she had been sleeping with had fallen off her bed and was lying on top of her baby. When she picked up the pillow, the baby gasped for air. And she felt that her grandmother, acting as her guardian angel, had awakened her to save the baby.

The other example deals with the human category of Angels. A woman who was 8½ months pregnant with her third child was driving down the expressway with her two small children buckled into their car seats when one of her rear tires blew out. She pulled over off to the shoulder. It was August. She said she sort of remembered how to change a tire from years back but had never done it while 8½ months pregnant. With 2 small children in the back seat and cars whizzing by at 70 miles per hour, she was kind of afraid. And out of nowhere, a pickup truck pulled up behind her car. And she said, out of the pickup truck popped an Angel. He was dressed in greasy coveralls with a dirty ball cap on his head. And he was a messenger from God bearing good news of great joy: “I have a hydraulic jack in my truck, and I can change that tire for you in 5 minutes.” And he did. And then he drove away.

To be honest with you, when I think of Angels, I’ve never heard the voice of a deceased relative speaking to me. I’ve never seen a heavenly messenger with wings and a halo. But several times in my life I have been approached by someone who showed up to offer a word of encouragement or email a message of thanks or text a blessing at the precise instant when I needed it most.

We heard from Hebrews: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” That passage tells me that the angels you and I are most likely to encounter aren’t going to resemble the angels the classical artists imagined. They’re going to look like us. Some of them sent from heaven, and some of them guided on earth by the Spirit. And most often, when God has some breaking news, or a message of hope, of encouragement, of strength, God might send a winged heavenly being with a Golden Halo and a Harp. Or God might send somebody who looks like YOU!

What does that mean to you and me? It means our job is to pay attention: to notice when somebody looks like they might need a word of encouragement or a pat on the back or a note of thanks – or just a nod and a smile. All of us are called to be those kinds of messengers.

Imagine if you were not born! The world would look different without you!

George Bailey’s guardian angel arranges for him to get his wish: to see what the world would be like if he had never been born. Clarence takes George into town – except it isn’t Bedford Falls – it’s Pottersville – because George wasn’t there to stand up to Mr. Potter, who took over the whole town.

He goes to the local tavern – except it isn't Martini's – it's Nick's – and he sees the people he's known his whole life, except their lives turned out very differently because he wasn't there to offer an encouraging word or a helping hand when they needed it – like Mr. Gower, the pharmacist, whom George helped by preventing a tragic accident. Over and over, George comes face to face with people whose lives he touched in profound ways without realizing it. Clarence summed it up beautifully:

Each life touches so many others.
Every life is important.
All lives are interconnected in ways we could never imagine.

Do not give up your life yet. Small acts of kindness are coming to save you.

And sometimes, some challenge, some difficulty, some tragedy disrupts someone's life. And when that happens to you, you need people to come alongside you with an encouraging word or a helping hand. That's exactly what took place as the film drew to a close.

The word spread that the Baileys were in trouble. And the whole town came to pull him out of that trouble by adding their two cents to the pot of love.

Clarence Odbody wasn't the only Angel God sent to help George Bailey. There was a whole community of people he had helped over the course of his wonderful life – people for whom he had been an Angel at an important time of need. When they heard there was a need, they came through. Another way to say it is they demonstrated the power of our other Word from Scripture today. Paul urged the Galatians: "Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ."

Here is an important News from God!

God sends messengers when there is important news to share. And here is some important news: There are times when people can't bear their burdens alone. And to fulfill the law of Christ, to live as his followers, we are invited to come alongside and help lighten the load.

We can all be more than messengers – we can help embody that message. Every one of us can be God's instruments of healing and hope and encouragement for others. And when we do, when we offer ourselves to be used by God to help bring healing and hope and encouragement to others, we experience joy.

We discover that despite it all, it is a wonderful life.

I invite you to join me in prayer.

If you are in a difficult place right now or know someone who is, I want to reassure you that God knows, and God cares – and I invite you to offer a silent prayer to God, seeking light for this temporary darkness, and asking God to help by sending messengers to come alongside and bring healing and hope and encouragement...

And now for all of us, whether we are experiencing challenging times or difficulties, each and every one of us has the opportunity to be an Angel, a messenger delivering God's gifts of healing and hope and encouragement. May I invite us all to pray silently after me:

Lord, please use me...

Help me to pay attention to those who may be in need...

and allow me to be an instrument...

bringing encouragement and help and hope...

in Jesus' name, Amen.



NEW YEAR'S EVE DAY

Sunday, December 31 there will be only two services. The Khmer service will be at 10:15am in the Fireside Room and our 11:00am in the Sanctuary. **THERE WILL NOT BE AN 8:30PM SERVICE.**

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 31

The congregation is being invited to move closer to the front of the Sanctuary during the season of Advent. The back five rows on either side of the sanctuary have been roped off. We hope you will get accustomed to this and move closer to the front after the first of the year.

COLUMBARIUM EVENT CHRISTMAS EVE

Following up on our recent Halloween and All Saints Day events, the Columbarium Committee would like to invite members of the congregation and family members to join us at an event in the Columbarium following the 7:00 p.m. Christmas Eve service (weather permitting). Christmas is a time when we remember loved ones who are no longer with us and we hope that this brief event and a few traditional sing-along carols will rekindle fond memories. The columbarium will be decorated with lights, cyclamens, and poinsettias and the walkway to the columbarium will be illuminated with luminaries to lead the way to the event. We hope that you'll be able to join us for this first-time event.

OFFERING ENVELOPES

If you turned in a pledge card, you can pick up your offering envelopes in the Fellowship Hall on Sundays.

SANCTUARY FLOWERS

Sponsoring the Sanctuary floral arrangement for a Sunday worship service is a beautiful way to celebrate an occasion or honor your loved ones. Your personal dedication will be published in the worship bulletin on the Sunday of your sponsorship. There is a \$35 donation to the Flower Fund to sponsor an arrangement.

Sign up for a 2024 Sunday in the Fellowship Hall. You will be contacted the week prior to your Sunday to arrange wording for the bulletin. Your check must be received in the church office the week prior to your Sunday.

THANK YOU! THANK YOU! THANK YOU!

Many thanks to all who made pledges as part of this year's stewardship campaign. So far, we have 91 pledges of time, talent and funds for 2024. We still have not reached our goal of 10% more pledges than last year so **REMEMBER IT IS NOT TOO LATE TO PLEDGE.** We hope that some of you who have forgotten or were waiting to make your pledge will still show your commitment to Central by submitting a pledge soon. 91 pledges sounds like a good number, but we have at least twice as many active members. There is still time, and it is never too late. If you want a pledge card, they are available in the pews at church, in the narthex when you enter the church building, at the church office or from Dick Edelstein (209 351-5857). Again, **MANY THANKS** to all who have pledged. "You Rock."

END OF THE YEAR GIVING - If you are in a position to make an additional 2023 gift, we invite you to do so by December 31. In order to claim a charitable contribution deduction for 2023 pledge/donation checks must be delivered by or be postmarked by December 31, 2023.

BOOK GROUP

The Book group met Dec. 10th for another informative discussion. The current read is *River Sing Me Home* by Eleanor Shearer - a mother's gripping journey to find her stolen children in the aftermath of slavery. Next discussion date is Jan. 7, 2024.

MARK YOUR CALENDAR

The Chili Cook off featuring Snap Jackson and the Knock on Wood Players returns to the Fellowship Hall Sunday, January 28 at noon. Tickets go on sale soon. Watch for more information in the coming days.

SAVE THE DATE: FEBRUARY 29TH 2024!

Rotary Read-In, 10:00 am - Cleveland and Team Charter Schools - Sign-ups will start in January.

FOOD PANTRY

The food pantry shelves are getting bare. We are serving 10-12 homeless people per week, and I expect that to go up as the weather gets colder and wetter. Here are some guidelines to help you pick items for the closet.

Everything needs to be no cook items! The people we serve do not have access to cooking facilities or can openers or refrigerator space. ***Please do not empty your cupboards or fridge or give us anything that is expired, legally we can't use it. We rarely serve families and we direct them to the Emergency Food Bank. Sometimes the cheapest and easiest way to get these items is to go through Amazon and have it sent directly to the church!***

Here are our immediate needs:

Tuna (with a pull tab to open or packets of tuna that can be easily opened.)

Water bottles 16 oz. size

juice (apple, orange) small sizes

canned soups (with pull tabs that can be opened and eaten without water or heat.)

Vienna Sausage with pull tabs

Raisins, small boxes

milk (shelf stable, small sizes)

Cereal individual servings

Pudding cups in any flavor

Cup O' Noodles or something similar

If you have any packets of utensils with napkins that they hand out in some fast-food places, we can use those too!

Thank you so much! This congregation is so compassionate.

Dianne England, food closet organizer