

Central United Methodist Church

3700 Pacific Avenue, Stockton, CA 95204

ORDER OF WORSHIP
1st Sunday after Christmas
Sunday, December 31, 2023



*Indicates please stand as you are able.

GATHERING

PRELUDE	<i>God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen</i> (arr. Mark Hayes)	Monica Adams
GATHERING MOMENT		Nedy Tovera
*CALL TO WORSHIP (From Wesley's Covenant Prayer)		Nedy Tovera
Leader:	I am no longer my own, but yours.	
All:	Put me to what you will, place me with whom you will.	
Leader:	Put me to doing, put me to suffering.	
All:	Let me be put to work for you or set aside for you, praised for you or criticized for you.	
Leader:	Let me be full, let me be empty. Let me have all things, let me have nothing.	
All:	I freely and fully surrender all things to your glory and service.	
Leader:	And now, O wonderful and holy God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, you are mine, and I am yours. So be it.	
All:	And the covenant which I have made on earth, Let it also be made in heaven. Amen.	
*HYMN	<i>For the Beauty of the Earth</i>	UMH #92
CHILDREN'S MOMENT		Martha Shuemake
MISSION & MINISTRIES MOMENT		Nedy Tovera
PRAYER CARDS COLLECTED		
RITE OF FRIENDSHIP AND A SPECIAL WELCOME TO OUR VISITORS		Nedy Tovera
*PASSING THE PEACE		Nedy Tovera
	(Stand, bow or wave, with the word "Peace be with You!")	
	All Sing: Emmanuel, Emmanuel, His Name Is called Emmanuel. God with us, revealed in us, His Name Is called Emmanuel.	

SPECIAL MUSIC

Navidad En Verano

Ric Campero, Tenor
Monica Adams

*My Christmas is in the summer
It does not have a pine tree nor does the snow give it lights.
My Christmas with the heat goes hand in hand
and a sweet smell of cider and sweet bread.*

*Peace to all men,
Peace on Earth.
In my hot land
and where it snows*

PROCLAMATION AND RESPONSE

SCRIPTURE Isaiah 61: 10-62:3 (Pew Bible NRSV, page 692) Nedy Tovera
Leader: This is the word of God for the people of God.
All: Thanks be to God.

***HYMN** *Hail to the Lord's Anointed* UMH #203

SCRIPTURE Luke 2:22-40 (Pew Bible NRSV, page 59) Nedy Tovera
Leader: This is the word of God for the people of God.
All: Thanks be to God.

SERMON The Reel Christmas Story: "Wag More, Bark Less. Elf More, Grinch Less"
(Written by the Rev. Mark Wharff and rearranged by the Rev. Sungho Lee) Rev. Sungho Lee

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE Nedy Tovera

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 Nedy Tovera

OFFERTORY *There's a Song in the Air* Monica Adams
(arr. Pepper Choplin)

***DOXOLOGY** *What Gift Can We Bring*
***This gift we now bring, this present, this token,
these words can convey it, the joy of this day!
When grateful we come, remembering, rejoicing,
this song we now offer in honor and praise.***

PRAYER OF DEDICATION Nedy Tovera

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**

Monica Adams

SERVING YOU TODAY

Rev. Dr. Sungho Lee
Nedy Tovera, Worship Leader
Martha Shuemake, Children's Moment
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. 29 Jan 2 Office Closed

The Reel Christmas Story: "Wag more, bark less. Elf more, Grinch less."

December 31, 2023

(Written by the Rev. Mark Wharff and rearranged by the Rev. Sungho Lee)

This morning, we conclude our light-hearted approach to celebrating the birth of Jesus by looking for Advent themes in some popular Christmas movies. This Sunday the movie is Elf.

A journey to find the lost one.

The film opens in an orphanage on Christmas Eve. Santa Claus arrives to deliver presents, and while he's enjoying the milk and cookies the staff left for him, a baby crawls out of his crib, and into Santa's sack of toys. When Santa arrives back at the North Pole, the baby emerges from the sack. Because he was an orphan, the elves adopted him and named him Buddy. He grows up taking part in all the things elves do. He works in Santa's workshop. He helps his adoptive dad, Papa Elf, work on Santa's sleigh. And he goes to elf school, where he learns the Code of the Elves:

1. Treat every day like Christmas: This means being cheerful and optimistic, even when things are tough. It's about finding the joy in everyday life and spreading that joy to others.
2. The best way to spread Christmas cheer is singing loud for all to hear: This code encourages elves to express their joy through song and music. Singing is seen as a way to bring people together and lift their spirits.
3. The code of the elves is the law: This code is taken very seriously by the elves. It serves as a guide for their behavior and ensures that they always act in a way that is consistent with the Christmas spirit.
4. There's room for everyone on the nice list: This code encourages elves to be inclusive and accepting of everyone. It's about seeing the good in others and believing that everyone has the potential to be good.

However, Buddy gradually comes to the realization that he is not an elf. He is a human, with a human dad. Most troubling of all, his dad is on the Naughty list. What does the Code of the Elves say? There's Room for Everyone on the Nice List.

So Buddy left the North Pole, and traveled through the seven levels of the candy cane forest, past the sea of twirly, swirly gumdrops, and then he walked through the Lincoln Tunnel. And he arrived at last at the Empire State building in New York City, where his dad worked.

Buddy went in search of his dad from the North Pole all the way to New York City. He sought out a biological parent who was, at that point, a stranger to him, to express his love for him and to help him find his way onto the Nice list.

That reminds me of the very heart of the message of Christmas – the message that, because of God's love for us, God came from heaven to earth to be with us as one of us – came as a baby, born to a poor family in a out of the way village. In Jesus' words from Luke 19:

"The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost." (Luke 19:10) Jesus came to seek and to save those who are on the Naughty list. He came to seek and save those who are on the lonely list. Those on the heartbroken list. Those on the broken dream list. Those on the "I'm good; I can do things on my own" list. Whatever list you're on, he came for the people who are on that list. To seek and to save you and me.

There is a room for everyone at the table of the Lord.

Perhaps the most powerful aspect of what we celebrate at Christmas is there's room for everyone on the Nice list. There's room for everybody to be part of something better; there is an opportunity for everyone to have his or her heart transformed. There's hope.

The love that came down at Christmas can change anyone. The love that was born at Christmas is worth celebrating! Come to think of it, we should treat every day like Christmas.

Of course, that's also part of the Code of the Elves. If you've seen the movie, you know Buddy treats every day like Christmas. A day at Gimbels for Buddy would likely be filled with activity, joy, and Christmas cheer. He would use his unique talents and enthusiasm to help others and make their holiday shopping experience special. His enthusiasm and positive attitude would likely make him a favorite among customers and coworkers. Not everyone would appreciate Buddy's elf-like behavior, however, and he might encounter some negativity from other employees or customers. Despite any challenges, Buddy's positive spirit would prevail, and he would leave a lasting impression on everyone he meets at Gimbels.

Unless you accept God's kingdom in the simplicity of a child, you'll never get in.

Buddy is just one big kid, right? Even as an adult, he's very childlike. Watching Buddy puts me in mind of a story from the 18th chapter of Luke. People were bringing children to Jesus for his blessing, but the disciples got in the way. Jesus told them, "Let these children alone. Don't get between them and me. These children are the kingdom's pride and joy. Unless you accept God's kingdom in the simplicity of a child, you'll never get in." (Luke 18:15-17, The Message)

The first part of that text is often used in churches to point out that, though children are often referred to as the church of the future, young people are a very important part of the church today —and that it's important to value children and for the church to have a vital children's ministry and provide care for kids in every way possible.

But the final verse focuses on the child in us all: Unless you accept God's kingdom in the simplicity of a child, you'll never get in.

What does it mean to be faithfully childlike?

Paul encouraged the Galatians to exhibit spiritual qualities he called the Fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, (notice how the first 3 are represented among the candles in the Advent Wreath); he goes on to mention patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

What are some spiritual qualities we see and appreciate in children? My list would include Wonder. I would add Playfulness as a faithful childlike quality. Creativity is a way we grow closer to God, our Creator. And Curiosity would be on the list, too. When I'm indulging in curiosity, I recognize I don't have all the answers. There's always more to discover, more to appreciate about God.

Children are curious and creative and playful and full of wonder.

And because I want to encounter God's kingdom in the way of a child – a child of God – I want to be curious and creative and playful and full of wonder, too. Honestly, I believe most people do.

We'd like to treat every day like Christmas, just like Buddy.

Lots of us envy Peter Pan, the boy who never grew up. (I never noticed the resemblance before!) But the way to Neverland is filled with obstacles. And I think one of the biggest obstacles for us is that we are so busy. We don't have time for play or creativity or curiosity.

We'd like smiling to be our favorite – but we are expected to make work our favorite – or driving the kids to all their activities – or now that we're retired and the kids are grown, we don't have time to be childlike because we're too busy with all our senior activities (although many senior activities are things kids love to do, and we wish we had done them all through our lives, if we'd only had time).

Gilbert Keith Chesterton was an English writer, poet, philosopher, and lay theologian. In his book, *Orthodoxy*, he described the heart of God. Here is part of what he wrote:

“Because children have abounding vitality, because they are in spirit fierce and free, therefore they want things repeated and unchanged. They always say, ‘Do it again’; and the grown-up person does it again until he is nearly dead. For grown-up people are not strong enough to exult in monotony.

But perhaps God is strong enough to exult in monotony. It is possible that God says every morning, ‘Do it again’ to the sun; and every evening, ‘Do it again’ to the moon.

It may not be automatic necessity that makes all daisies alike; it may be that God makes every daisy separately but has never got tired of making them. It may be that God has the eternal appetite of infancy; for we have sinned and grown old, and our Father is younger than we.”

– G.K. Chesterton

Rev. Steven Blair, one of the Pastors of Congregational Care Ministries at the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, Kansas, interviewed some members of their congregation...

In the video Interviews Mary Jane, Pat, and Myron say they value curiosity and wonder; creativity and playfulness. And I think they might be people who don't take themselves too seriously... but take life with God very seriously.

Wag more, bark less. Elf more, Grinch less.

I once saw a bumper sticker on a car in a church parking lot that I think sums up that approach to life: wag more, bark less. There must be a Christmas version of that bumper sticker: elf more, grinch less.

In other words, Treat every day like Christmas. Always remember There's room for everyone on the Nice List. And Article 3 of The Code of the Elves: The Best Way to Spread Christmas Cheer is singing loud for all to hear.

There's a scene at the end of the movie where you see Buddy's dad just going through the motions – he still hasn't quite got it yet.

I can think of some times when I was just moving my lips and not really singing; not living life to the fullest, but just going through the motions. What's the big deal? I don't think God meant for us to go through life that way. I think of what Jesus said in John, chapter 10:

"I came so that they could have life – indeed, so that they could live life to the fullest... real and eternal life, more and better life than they ever dreamed of."

I don't think he intended for us to just lip sync and phone it in. When I hear Jesus say he came so that we could live life to the fullest, I think he may have meant for us to treat every day like Christmas.

I think he may have meant for us to Elf more, and Grinch less.

Let's pray: Lord, what we celebrate at Christmas is your coming into the world so that we could have life – indeed, so that we could live life to the fullest. You came into the world at Bethlehem so we could have real and eternal life, more and better life than we ever dreamed of. Help us to live every day – no, every moment - like Christmas, with the excitement and the enthusiasm of youth, with the wonder, the playfulness, the creativity, and the curiosity of a child, always remembering and never forgetting that we are, each and every one of us, your beloved children. Amen.



OFFERING ENVELOPES

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

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.

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.

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.

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! 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 TO 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."

LEADERSHIP TRAINING

When: **Jan. 20 Saturday 9 AM to Noon**

Where: **Via zoom**

Who: **All the Committee Chairs and members. Please register at the Conference Website, 2024 Church Leadership Virtual Training Event.**

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 FEB. 15, 2024

71st annual interfaith tea at the Buddhist church. Sponsored by Community of Faith of San Joaquin County (Church Women United has reorganized to be more local and inclusive of all faiths.)

SAVE THE DATE: FEBRUARY 29TH 2024!

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