# On the Life and Faith of Florence Nightingale: Worship Service Commemorating the Bicentenary of Her Birth

*This service was created by Ralph Carl Wushke and Lynn McDonald for use at* [*First Evangelical Lutheran Church*](https://firstelc.ca/)*, Toronto, ON, January 26, 2020.*



This photograph of Florence Nightingale (c. 1860) was taken by Henry Hering (1814–1893) and hangs in the National Portrait Gallery, London, England. It is in the public domain and available for download from [Wikimedia Commons](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Florence_Nightingale_(H_Hering_NPG_x82368).jpg).

*Florence Nightingale**was the founder of modern nursing. Despite family pressures to marry and live as a conventional wealthy woman, she considered her dedication to nursing to be a response to God’s call to care for the sick. Her success in radically lowering the death rate of wounded soldiers during the Crimean War (1853–1856) led to society’s acceptance of her proposals for better sanitation and nutrition, accurate medical knowledge, and professionally trained nurses.*

**Selected Life Events**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Year | Event |
| 1820 | born in Florence, Italy, to a wealthy British family (May 12) |
| 1837, 1850 | felt called by God to dedicate her life to nursing as a single woman |
| 1850 | visited Pastor Theodor Fliedner’s Lutheran deaconess community |
| 1854–1855 | worked as superintendent of a women’s hospital |
| 1860 | organized a nurses’ training school in London, England |
| 1910 | died in London (August 13) |

## Prelude

## Welcome and Announcements

## Acknowledgment of the Territory

*Please adapt the Acknowledgment of the Territory to fit your specific location and context. For more information, visit the* [*Worship Theme: Indigenous*](https://www.united-church.ca/worship-theme/indigenous) *page and download the resource “Acknowledging the Territory in Worship” found under “Extras.”*

## Opening Hymn

“Mothering God, You Gave Me Birth” (VU 320)

## Lighting of the Christ Candle

## Responsive Greeting

(Also refer to theprayers and resources in the “Service for Healing,” [*Celebrate God’s Presence*](https://ucrdstore.ca/products/celebrate-gods-presence-a-book-of-services?_pos=1&_sid=ca0444f3f&_ss=r), page 640ff.)

One: May God’s love, and the peace of Jesus Christ which passes all understanding, be with you all.

**All: And also with you.**

One: Come, O blessed of my Father, and inherit the kingdom prepared before you.

**All: For I was hungry and you gave me food,**

One: I was thirsty and you gave me drink,

**All:** **I was a stranger and you welcomed me,**

One: I was sick and you took care of me,

**All: I was in prison and you came to me.**

One: Lord, when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?

**All: Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me.**

*—Adapted from Matthew 25:34–40*

## Opening Prayer

Let us pray.

Healer of our every ill: you are the God of compassion, courage, and love.

We give thanks for your servant Florence Nightingale

who, by your inspiration, gave herself in service to those in need.

May we likewise be inspired to follow her example of compassionate service

to give hope to the hopeless, love to the unloved, and peace to the dying;

through Jesus Christ.

**Amen.**

(Also refer to Prayer 32G004, [*Celebrate God’s Presence*](https://ucrdstore.ca/products/celebrate-gods-presence-a-book-of-services?_pos=1&_sid=ca0444f3f&_ss=r)*,* page 641.)

## **The Word**

### Responsive Reading: Psalm 40:5-10

(This was a favourite psalm of Florence Nightingale. You may wish to use the setting of Psalm 40 found on page 764 of VU.)

**Response: I love to do your will, O my God; your law is deep within me.**

Great are the wonders you have done, O Lord my God!

In your plans for us, none can be compared with you!

Oh, that I could make them known and tell them!

But they are more than I can count.***Response***

Sacrifice and offering you do not desire;

you have opened my ears:

burnt-offering and sin-offering you have not required. ***Response***

And so I said, “Here I am; I come. In the scroll of the book it is written of me:

‘I love to do your will, O my God; your law is deep within me.’” ***Response***

I proclaimed righteousness in the great assembly;

I have not restrained my lips, O Lord, you know. ***Response***

I have not hidden your righteousness in my heart;

I have spoken of your faithfulness and your deliverance;

I have not concealed your steadfast love and truth from the great assembly. ***Response***

### Reading: Ezekiel 34:11-16

One: Word of God. Word of life.

**All: Thanks be to God.**

### Hymn

“The King of Love” (VU 273)

### Reading: 1 John 4:10–11, 16, 19

One: Word of God. Word of life.

**All: Thanks be to God.**

### Hymn

“Where Cross the Crowded Ways of Life” (VU 681)

### Reading: Matthew 25:31–46

One: Word of God. Word of life.

**All: Thanks be to God.**

## Reflection

### On the Life and Faith of Florence Nightingale

*by Lynn McDonald, CM, PhD, LLD (Hon.), professor emerita*

(Note: The following reflection is offered for use in churches for the celebration of the bicentenary of Florence Nightingale’s birth, which was in 1820. Observances are taking place throughout 2020 to commemorate her.)

Florence Nightingale was baptized in the Church of England in the city of her birth, Florence, Italy. Three of her grandparents were Unitarians, but the one grandparent she knew was fiercely evangelical Church of England. Nightingale never identified as a Unitarian but remained in the Church of England, much as she disagreed with its social and theological conservatism. The family attended the Church of England when living in Hampshire, but when in Derbyshire (they had two family homes), they attended Methodist or Wesleyan chapels. Nightingale thought very highly of John Wesley, who features in a sermon she wrote, but which was never preached in her lifetime.

There was a significant Congregational influence in Nightingale’s faith through *The Cornerstone,* a book bythe American Congregational minister and school director Jacob Abbott. It advised the reader “hungering and thirsting after righteousness,” certainly a description of the young Nightingale, to “go to God before you proceed farther and implore His forgiveness for the past, and, in the most solemn and emphatic manner, commit yourself to Him for the future.” The gospel, Abbott wrote, “cannot be understood unless the hearer is ready to comply with its claims.”

 As we commemorate the bicentenary of Nightingale’s birth in 2020, what meaning does her life and work have for us today?

As found in Matthew 25, verses 36 and 40: “I was sick and you took care of me… Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” Paraphrasing Nightingale, when we are nursing the sick, we may actually be sure that Jesus says to us, “I was sick and you nursed me.” She told nurses: “Christ was the author of our profession.”

Nightingale’s faith informed all the work she did as a nurse, public health advocate, and hospital reformer. Her “call to service” is often cited. Not so well known is her experience, the year before, of conversion, influenced by *The Cornerstone* by Jacob Abbott, mentioned earlier.

In other words, Nightingale first gave her life *to* God, and some months later perceived a call *from* God to serve, which she understood to mean to save lives. Nursing was always a means to that end, and could also be done, and often better done, by safer hospital design, administrative reform, and other social measures as better housing and nutrition.

Nightingale’s Lutheran connection occurred during the unhappy time when she felt a call to serve God in nursing, but her family did not allow her to follow it. She was, however, allowed to travel, and she managed two trips to the Lutheran deaconess institution at Kaiserswerth-am-Rhein, the first deaconess institution in the world.

Her first trip was in 1850, for three weeks, enough to give her a glimpse of the life there. For the second, in 1851, she stayed three months, formally enrolled as a deaconess-in-training. There was no nursing instruction there—rather the Bible and pedagogy—but she did get experience in the wards, apothecary, and orphanage. It was challenging and satisfying work, with the camaraderie of dedicated deaconesses. Pastor Theodor Fliedner, the founder of Kaiserswerth, later said of her: “No person had ever passed so distinguished an examination or shown herself so thoroughly mistress of all she had to learn, as Miss Nightingale.” Her first publication, in 1851, was on Kaiserswerth, to introduce it to English-speaking people.

Her deep faith was informed by her knowledge of natural and social sciences and statistics. God made the world and runs it by laws, she believed. We can discover those laws through careful research—meaning rigorous, quantitative, research—and then act to intervene.

God’s creation was good, but things go wrong—disease, crime, destitution, famine, and war. However, we should not pray to be “delivered” from “plague, pestilence and famine,” using the words of the litany, but find out their causes and work to undo them.

Nightingale said it with humour: “I sometimes wondered why we prayed to be ‘delivered from plague, pestilence, and famine,’ when all the common sewers of London run into the Thames.”

God wants *us* to act, and gave us the means, “reason, memory and skill,” to do so. And when we so act, we become God’s coworkers, “working together” in the world (1 Corinthians 3:9). God is the initiator of good but needs us to “second” it.

The reading from 1 John 4 tells us something of Nightingale’s understanding of the love of God. This was a favourite passage: God first loved us, and it is up to us to reflect that love back to a needy and broken world. For her, and for many nurses she mentored, faith was the backbone of their calling to nurse. Her school, however, was secular—for people of all faiths and none, for God’s love is for all God’s creatures.

Nightingale found great meaning in a passage in Exodus 33, where Moses says the Lord, “Show me your glory,” and the Lord said, “I will make all my *goodness* pass before you.” She brought the two thoughts together: The *glory* of God *is* his goodness. God does not want *praise* or burnt sacrifices—but rather for us to co-operate in repairing the damage done to God’s good earth. She wrote:

[God] does not want to be praised, to be adored, to have His glory sung. We can scarcely conceive a good man...wishing it. How inappropriate, then, to Him all this praise!

At a time when most people thought of God as a harsh judge, *her* God was wise and loving and encouraging. Nightingale wanted people to think bigger and better of God. In her Bible, at Romans 12:2, which tells people to be “transformed by the renewing of your minds,” and not conformed to the world, she asked:

Shall we put a limit, which God has not put, to the degree in which even in this world the wonderful transformation shall be wrought upon us? This at least we know, that we cannot expect too much from God.

Nightingale herself acted on this belief.

Perhaps the greatest contribution she made to health care was the introduction of professional nursing into the dreaded workhouse infirmaries. Again, her faith guided her, for God was no respecter of persons, but loved the poor as well as the rich.

Nightingale long wanted to nurse in a workhouse infirmary, but her family would not permit her to nurse anywhere. Even during the Crimean War, she devoted some of her energy to thinking about how to reform those places on her return. She told her friend, the mother superior of the Roman Catholic Sisters of Mercy at Bermondsey, Mary Clare Moore, that she could not keep visiting in workhouse infirmaries, because that only “breaks the visitor’s heart.”

When the opportunity arose to do something serious about workhouses in Liverpool, thanks to the generous support of philanthropist William Rathbone, Nightingale jumped at it. As she explained:

There is no reason whatever why workhouse infirmaries should not be nursed and the sick cared for as efficiently as in the best-nursed hospital.

To her father, she wrote:

We should consider that the same tie really connects us to every one of our fellows as the tie which connects us with God. That to neglect or ill use the imbecile old woman, the dirty child, is the same crime...against the Almighty that blasphemy of God is.

She contended against the portrayal of God as always weighing and balancing our sins against our disadvantages, or listening to Christ, who is always asking him to do what he would not do without such asking! Who would wish to have such a God?

She had a different understanding of the crucifixion, decidedly non-legalistic. She kept a print of Christ crowned with thorns in her bedroom. She complained about a revision of the Bible for children for omitting some of the words of Christ on the cross, on what was “the most important day that ever was in the world,” while Jesus was “the most important person that ever lived.”

The cross of Christ had a “practical meaning,” for Christ “voluntarily” gave himself. Nightingale said, “not in the vulgar sense, as if it were to appease the anger of a perfect Being--but in the sense of willingly incurring any and all sufferings which come in the way of helping to carry out God's will and work.”

The Father had sacrificed Jesus, for even “the irreplaceable, precious one could not be spared.” Nightingale, again, “Oh, may *we* not try to be perfect (in giving) even as the Father in heaven is perfect—in giving Him our best, even as He gave us His best?”

Jesus’s faithfulness and courage gave her courage in her own life when she was confronted with difficulties: “should I say, ‘Father, save me from this hour?’ And immediately, as it were, recollecting himself, ‘but for this cause came I unto this hour.’”

Similarly, she found comfort in the Beatitudes, for nowhere did Christ say: “Blessed are the fashionable, but blessed are the persecuted, that is, they who have to work against fashion and popularity.”

This she often had to do, in working to improve conditions for soldiers during the Crimean War, and after it for decades in civilian life, for the destitute sick of the workhouses—the rich could pay for care—and then for oppressed peasants in India.

She told her mother in a letter in 1872 (just after her birthday): “I only wish for God to make me what *He* wishes—that I may be able to do all He asks of me.”

Nightingale especially liked the hymn, “The Son of God goes Forth to War,” by Bishop Hebert, a *missionary*bishop. She noted that this hymn is not so much warlike, but rather a call for heroic martyrdom, its stanzas ending with “Who follows in His train?” She cited it for people who had given exemplary service, such as the first trained matron in a workhouse infirmary (who died of typhus fever on the job). Nightingale indeed used it to call for more recruits to this dangerous work, and they came. The hymn was sung at her own burial.

In closing, let me read you a letter Nightingale wrote during the Crimean War to the mother of a soldier whom she had nursed.

Barrack Hospital, Scutari

12 April 1855

I am very sorry to have to communicate to you the illness of your poor son, Private John Cope, 95th Regiment, No. 2884. He was admitted here about ten days ago suffering from diarrhea. He was immediately attended to by surgeons, by one of my nurses and myself. He was fed in small quantities and frequently with port wine and arrowroot.

He often murmured, “dear, dear mother!” and tried to say many things to you—that he was well cared for and wanted for nothing—that he had no wish for anything. I sent for the chaplain, who came twice, and both times he was quite sensible and prayed fervently, and said he was quite happy in mind and could follow all that was said.

He spoke little after this, and sank rapidly and died at 2 o’clock on the morning of Easter Sunday, quite quietly and without pain, in the full hope of a resurrection with Him who rose again on that day.

I remain with true sympathy for your grief,

Florence Nightingale

P.S. I would have sent you something of his, but he left nothing.

Nightingale did much of this letter writing late at night. The lamp she carried through the long corridors of the Barrack Hospital got her the name “the Lady with the Lamp.”

I think the light image works for Nightingale at many levels: shining a lamp at the bedside of a soldier, on to the celebration of Jesus as “the light of the world,” and her bringing the light of reason to all her work.

For me, this bicentenary is a good time to give thanks for the life and faith and work of Florence Nightingale.

Amen.

## Hymn

**“**At the Name of Jesus” (VU 335)

or

“The Son of God Goes Forth to War”

(Note: “The Son of God Goes Forth to War” was written by Reginald Heber in 1812. As stated in the sermon above, this hymn was a favourite of Florence Nightingale’s and was sung at her funeral. The text and music can be found online on [Hymnary.org](https://hymnary.org/text/the_son_of_god_goes_forth_to_war).)

## Prayers of the People

(Note: The response at the end of each intercession can be either spoken or sung—refer to “Healer of Our Every Ill,” VU 619, refrain.)

**Response: Healer of our every ill, light of each tomorrow,**

**give us peace beyond our fear, and hope beyond our sorrow.**

Healing God, we give thanks for nurses and all who work in health care and medical professions. Continue to sustain and support their life-giving dedication and courage. ***Response***

Compassionate God, you are the spirit of gentleness, raise up in us all a sense of dedication and a passion for justice to care for those on the margins of society and those in particular need. Make us mindful that we are all differently abled and that all have a place at your table. ***Response***

Inspiring God, in the spirit of Florence Nightingale open our eyes to new ways of service and give us the courage to pursue them, neither fearing the unknown nor clinging to the ways of the past. ***Response***

Liberating God, we remember all those in prisons, hospitals, care homes and refugee camps, that those who live in them find human dignity, healing and respect. ***Response***

All seeing God, we pray for all those affected by any pandemic or disease, including: COVID19, tuberculosis, malaria, Ebola fever, HIV/AIDS. Bless the efforts of all who seek to bring healing: researchers, caregivers, civil servants and political leaders. ***Response***

Living God, we remember before you the ill, hospitalized, those awaiting surgery and those recuperating, especially those who are on our hearts and named at this time, silently or aloud…. (*Pause for people to add their own petitions.)* ***Response***

Comforting God, we pray for those who will die today, and those who will mourn their passing. Unite us in communion with the faithful of every time and place, until the consummation of all things. ***Response***

Committing to become a part of the answer to our prayers, let us pray as Jesus taught us:

## The Lord’s Prayer

*(Say together the Lord’s Prayer or another version of the Prayer of Jesus found on page 916 of VU.)*

## Offering

### Hymn

“Healer of Our Every Ill” (VU 619)

### Prayer

God of grace,  
we know you want justice rolling down like water.  
Accept these gifts from our hands,  
which we cast upon the waters of your love,  
a generous ever-flowing stream  
feeding the hungry and  
helping those in need.  
Accept these gifts for the work of your church.

**Amen.**

Blessing

May the God whose will for us is healing and wholeness,

grant us joy and comfort, strength and peace.

**Amen.**

(From “Service for Healing,” [*Celebrate God’s Presence*](https://ucrdstore.ca/products/celebrate-gods-presence-a-book-of-services?_pos=1&_sid=ca0444f3f&_ss=r)*,* page 651.)

or

One: Let us go forth now, praising God, whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine.

**All: Thanks be to God. Amen.**

*—Ralph Carl Wuschke was the minister at Bathurst United Church and the University of Toronto’s Ecumenical Chaplaincy from 2000 to 2018. He is currently the pastor at First Evangelical Lutheran Church in Toronto, ON and a supporting chaplain for the Student Christian Movement (SCM) at Ryerson University.*

—*Lynn McDonald is a professor emerita of sociology at the University of Guelph and a former Member of Parliament (1982–1988). For more background on Florence Nightingale’s Christian commitment see these works by Lynn McDonald:*

* [*Collected Works of Florence Nightingale*](https://www.wlupress.wlu.ca/Series/C/Collected-Works-of-Florence-Nightingale), Wilfrid Laurier University (WLU) Press
* [*Florence Nightingale's Spiritual Journey*](https://www.wlupress.wlu.ca/Books/F/Florence-Nightingale-s-Spiritual-Journey-Biblical-Annotations-Sermons-and-Journal-Notes)*,*vol. 2, WLU Press
* [*Florence Nightingale's Theology: Essays, Letters and Journal Notes*](https://www.wlupress.wlu.ca/Books/F/Florence-Nightingale-s-Theology-Essays-Letters-and-Journal-Notes)*,*vol. 3, WLU Press
* [*Florence Nightingale: A Very Brief History*](https://spckpublishing.co.uk/florence-nightingale)*,* Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK)
* Papers and sermons on the [Collected Works of Florence Nightingale](https://cwfn.uoguelph.ca/spirituality/) webpage.