# Rice Is Heaven Asian Heritage Month Worship

The term “Asian” indicates inclusive and diverse customs or people came from the region. It denotes broad areas such as East, South, Central, and Southeast Asia, where different cultural heritages are celebrated. The author’s cultural background is Korean. We East Asian people share a similar cultural heritage in which a holistic way of thinking is celebrated among the people.

In the month of May in Korea there are many celebrations to reflect our relationships: Children’s Day (May 5), Parents’ Day (May 8), and Teachers’ Day (May 15). These celebrations remind us we are surrounded by many people who give us joy and growth. In The United Church of Canada, Christian Family Sunday is the second Sunday in May. Beyond our cultural differences, we as a faith community are invited to celebrate the presence of Asian people and learn about their cultural heritages in order to enhance our faith journey together.

To bring Asian heritage into this liturgy, I have taken rice as a symbol of our life together in harmony and yet difference. Rice is the most widely consumed staple food for Asian people, and there are many different kinds of rice. I will elaborate later in the sermon below, but as we eat rice we take the work of heaven, earth, and human beings together. Eating rice is a sacred act. Rice is a symbol of joy and tear and of interconnectedness and community.

### Preparation for the Worship Service

Decorate the altar or communion table with symbols or fabrics to represent Asian countries. Collect many different kinds of rice consumed by Asian people, put the rice into clear individual bowls, and place them on the table. If you have communion on this day, you may want to use rice cakes instead of bread, but be aware that rice cakes can be very sticky. Rice cakes represent the collaborative work of heaven, earth, and human beings.

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## Gathering

### Greetings

I great you in the name of the Triune God:   
Creator, Peace Maker, and Sustainer.

### Acknowledgment of the Land

*Use the acknowledgement of territory your congregation has developed, or consider developing one. To learn more, see “Acknowledging the Territory in Worship” at* [*www.united-church.ca*](https://www.united-church.ca/worship-special-days/indigenous-day-prayer) *(scroll down to Extras).*

### Lighting of the Christ Candle

We light the Christ candle that reminds us of God’s presence in us, among us, and beyond us.

### Opening Hymn (suggestions; choose one)

“For the Fruit of All Creation” (*Voices United* 227)  
“O Lord My God (How Great Thou Art)” (VU 238)  
“Bring Many Names” (VU 268)

### Call to Worship

One: We have come from different places to worship God.

**All: We have brought our own cultural heritages.**

One: We have gathered to seek God’s concern.

**All: We have come together to become peacemakers and community builders.**

One: We open ourselves to God’s wisdom.

**All: We open ourselves to the Holy Spirit.**

One: Come, let us celebrate God’s presence among us.

### Opening Prayer

God of life,  
you sustain us through the harmonious work of heaven, earth, and human beings.  
You enrich community woven by different cultures and traditions.  
Today we come together to celebrate Asian Heritage Month  
in remembering who we are.  
Enhance our joy of journeying together for the common good.  
In the name of Jesus, our companion,  
we pray. Amen.

### Introit

“Come Now, O God of Peace(O-So-So)” (VU 34)

### Sharing the Peace

One: The peace of Christ be with you.

**All: And also with you.**

One: Let us greet one another with signs of the peace of Christ.

## Engaging with Wisdom

### Hymn for Illumination

“Bathe Me in Your Light” (*More Voices* 82, verse 3)  
“Spirit, Open My Heart” (MV 79, refrain)

### Scripture Readings

Colossians 1:15‒18  
Luke 24:28‒32

### Sermon

In Korea, the traditional morning greeting is “Have you had breakfast?” Later in the day the greeting changes to “Have you eaten?” Korean people ask all the time about whether someone has eaten. The greeting can be formal and polite or casual and more intimate, much like “How do you do?” or “Hello?” in North America.

In Canada, a mother may ask her children just come home from school if they’re hungry, or a friend may ask a schoolmate if they’ve eaten because they themselves are hungry and want to eat, so they’re hoping the answer is yes, but it’s never the greeting question. In Korea, however, it is. When I was young and living in a village, I would hear the greeting, “Have you eaten?” many times a day. If my answer was no, inevitably food would be served. I could have my meals at many different people’s homes, not because my parents did not feed me but because we considered our neighbours family. Children in a village were fed by all and any villagers. The villagers raised all the children together.

When Asian people gather together for a meal, along with other dishes they usually share a bowl of rice since rice is the most widely consumed staple food for Asian people. Even as we human beings are all different, so is rice—different in length, shape, colour, texture, and aroma. But beyond the differences there is one commonality in rice—it gives life. For more than half of humanity in the world, rice is life.

The Korean poet Kim Ji-Ha says in his poem, “Rice is heaven; 밥이 하늘입니다.” The poem, frequently used as a grace at meals, goes like this:

Rice is heaven,  
Because heaven cannot be possessed by one  
Rice must be shared with each other.  
Rice is heaven.  
Just as together we view the stars in Heaven,   
Rice must be shared by all.  
When rice is eaten  
Heaven enters the body.  
Rice is heaven.  
Ah-ah! Rice must be shared!

This poem reflects Asian people’s holistic thinking of life as interconnected or interdependent. Heaven, earth, and human beings have to work together to produce a bowl of rice. A bowl of rice on our table is the collaborative work of heaven’s sunshine, cloud, rain and thunderstorm, of mother earth’s nurturing embracement and of human labour. A bowl of rice embodies heaven, earth, and human labour.

For East Asian people, rice is an embodiment of peace. Peace in Chinese characters—(平和), in Mandarin Hépíng (和平), Heiwa in Japanese and in Korean (평화)—all meaning to eat rice (和) together equally (平). Since rice is such an embodiment of our interconnected, interdependent life, it is supposed to be shared together. Since “heaven cannot be possessed by one” alone, “Rice must be shared with each other.”

In Paul’s letter to the Colossians Jesus is presented as an embodiment of God’s wisdom to his followers to empower those who are living under a realm of domination. Jesus is a sacrament of God’s presence. For Asian people, eating rice is a sacred act. When I was young our meal tables were rather serious: Laughing and joking were not allowed. In a bowl of rice there is the universe—the people’s joy and tears—an endless chain of work. So, eating rice is a sacred act.

In one post-Easter story in Luke, two of Jesus’ followers and a stranger—we now know him as Jesus—are journeying from Jerusalem to a village named Emmaus. As they reach Emmaus, the stranger is about to leave them, but they say to him, in wonderfully evocative words, “Stay with us, for it is evening and the day is far spent.” They sit down at table together, and the stranger takes bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to them, and then, Luke tells us, they recognize him. When Jesus breaks the bread, the memory of him doing that with his disciples brings them to recognize him. They remember the meals with the crowds of people beside the lake and many more meals with the poor.

For Asian people, sharing meals has been a common ritual, particularly among agricultural societies. In our sharing of meals together, there is peace. In our sharing of meals together, there is community. Whether a communal or an individual ritual, eating rice is a sacred act. So, the greeting in Korea, “Have you eaten?” is a helpful reminder that people are checking up on each other’s well-being. We are not alone, we are all connected—heaven, earth, and other human beings—in a sacred act. “Rice is heaven.”

## Giving Thanks

### Offertory

“For the Gift of Creation” VU 538“Grateful” (MV 182)

### The Sacrament of Communion with Rice Cakes (optional)

## Going into the World

### Commissioning Hymn

“Draw the Circle Wide” (MV 145)  
“With the Wings of Our Mind (뜨거운 마음)” (VU 698)  
“Deep in Our Heart” (MV 154)

### Commissioning and Benediction

One: We are different but we are connected as a family of God;

**All: We go with God, who calls us to love and serve others.**

One: We are to called to build our community;

**All: We go with God who calls us to seek justice and resist evil.**

One: We go into the world with respect in Creation;

**All: We go into the world to celebrate God’s presence.**

### Sung Blessing

“May the Love of the Lord (惟愿神的爱)” (MV 218)  
“Amen” (MV 225)

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