

Christmas Eve Worship Service

December 24, 2023

Prelude - "Welcome to the Inn"

Welcome

We're glad to see you here on the afternoon of Christmas Eve for this very special service of visual images, scriptural stories and poetry, Christmas carol-singing and candlelight. My name is Rev. Dan Stern, this evening's worship planner along with an outstanding team of lay ministers, who welcome you on behalf of Olympic View Community Church of the Brethren.

Before we begin, a few words of instruction: Since we hope everyone will sing along on the Christmas carols, does everyone have access to a hymnal?

Tonight's Christmas Eve Service will be one of alternating light and darkness. Toward the conclusion of the service, we'll be forming a large circle around the inside of the sanctuary. Please wait until overhead lights are ON before moving about. You'll want to have access to a candle and a hymnal if you want to sing harmony. You can turn "on" your candle with the small switch on the bottom..

Registering Your Presence at This Inn:

Reading Luke 2:1-3

At the time of the birth of Jesus, Cesar Augustus decreed that a census be taken throughout the empire. Everyone was made to travel to his or her own ancestral hometown to be counted. Joseph of Nazareth, a descendant of David, was compelled to go to the city of David called Bethlehem to be registered with Mary, the one to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.

In this faith community, we don't take all our cues from Caesar. Still, we too are being asked to register OUR presence in this city, at this church, at this "inn" by checking your name off on the attendance sheet, or by making sure your name is on it if you are a guest. And especially if you are a guest or attend only infrequently, please also leave an email address or phone number. Because no matter who you are or where you are in your life and faith journey, we want you always to be warmly received and

spiritually nourished here. On this Christmas Eve, may Olympic View Community Church be a home away from home for you.

Reading - Beatitudes for Christmas:

On this blessed eve, Let us worship at the altar of joy, for to miss the joy of Christmas is to miss its holiest secret. Let us enter into the spiritual delights which are the natural heritage of childlike hearts. Let us withdraw from the cold and barren world of prosaic fact, if only for a season; So that we may warm ourselves by the fireside of fancy, and take counsel of the wisdom of poetry and legend

SHANNON:

Blessed are they who have *Imagination* enough to detect the music of celestial voices in the midnight hours of life;

BILL:

Blessed are they who have *Faith* enough to contemplate a world of peace and justice in the midst of present wrong and strife;

SYLVIA:

Blessed are they who have *Greatness* enough to become as little children in this hour;

KRISTI:

Blessed are they who have *zest* enough to take delight in simple things;

GRETCHEN:

Blessed are they who have *Wisdom* enough to know that the kingdom of God is very close at hand, and that all may enter in, who have eyes to see and ears to hear and hearts to understand.

—David Rhys Williams, adapted

Reading - Cheer-ful-est Elephant-Angel-Child

If a cheer-ful-est Elephant-angel-child should sit where his heart-like ears have flown adorable him self tail and all (and his tail's red christmas bow)--and if, when we meet again, little he(having flown even higher) is sunning his penguinsoul in the glow of a joy which wasn't and isn't and won't be words while possibly not(at a guess)quite half way down to the earth are leap-and-swooping tinily birds whose magical gaiety makes your beautiful name—i feel that(false and true are merely to know) Love only has ever been,is,and will ever be,So

--e.e. cummings- *from Complete Poems, 1904-1962*

Reading: "Weight of a Snowflake"

"Tell me the weight of a snowflake," a chickadee asked a wild dove. "Nothing more than nothing," was the answer. "In that case, I must tell you a marvelous story," the chickadee said.

"I sat on the branch of a fir tree, close to its trunk, when it began to snow, not heavily, not in a raging blizzard, no, just like in a dream, without any violence. Since I didn't have anything else to do, I counted the snowflakes settling on the twigs and branch. Their number was exactly 3,741,952. When the next snowflake dropped onto the branch - nothing more than nothing, as you say - the branch broke off." Having said that, the chickadee flew away.

The dove, since Noah's time an authority on the matter, thought about the story for a while, and finally said to herself: "Perhaps there is only one person's voice lacking for peace and justice to come about in the world."

Anonymous

Reading: Isaiah 9: 2b-3a & 6:

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness- on them light has shined. . . . Yahweh, you have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy. . . For a child has been born for us, an heir given to us; upon whose shoulders authority will rest. This One shall be called Wonderful Counselor, the Strength of God, Eternal Protector, Champion of Peace.

Reading: A Christmas Prayer

This we know O Lord: Christmas comes early, or it comes late, but it does come. It comes at the bus stop. It comes at the gas station. It comes in the soup line. It comes in the middle of the night. Christmas comes when our eyes wash clear with tears at the sweet tenderness of God. It comes in the still moment when we lay down our whole lives in a small, chilly manger warmed only by the hearts of the lowly, and know the perfect joy that we are home. O Come, Lord Jesus, Come!

***Carol: #212** (*Vs 1 & 3 only*) **"O Come, all Ye Faithful"**

Reading: *Snow in Bethlehem*

DAN:

Thunder rumbles in the mountain passes
And lightning rattles the eaves of our
houses. Flood waters await us in our avenues.
Snow falls upon snow, falls upon snow
to avalanche Over unprotected villages.
The sky slips low and grey and threatening.

SYLVIA:

We question ourselves. What have we done to so affront nature?
We worry, God. Are you there?
Are you there really? Does the covenant you made with us still hold?

BOTH IN UNISON:

Into this climate of fear and apprehension,
Christmas enters, Streaming lights of joy,
ringing bells of hope, and singing carols of forgiveness
high up in the bright air.
The world is encouraged to come away from rancor,
Come the way of friendship.

DAN:

It is the Glad Season. Thunder ebbs to silence
and lightning sleeps quietly in the corner.
Flood waters recede into memory. Snow becomes
a yielding cushion to aid us
As we make our way to higher ground.

SYLVIA:

Hope is born again in the faces of children
It rides on the shoulders of our aged
as they walk into their sunsets. Hope spreads
around the earth. Brightening all things,
Even hate which crouches breeding in dark corridors.

DAN:

In our joy, we think we hear a whisper.
At first it is too soft. Then only half heard.
We listen carefully as it gathers strength.
We hear a sweetness. The word is Peace.
It is loud now. It is louder. Louder than the
explosion of bombs.

SYLVIA:

We tremble at the sound. We are thrilled by its presence.
It is what we have hungered for. Not just the absence
of war. But, true Peace. A harmony of spirit,
a comfort of courtesies. Security for our beloveds
and their beloveds.

BOTH IN UNISON:

We clap hands and welcome the Peace of Christmas.
We beckon this good season to wait a while with us.
We, Baptist & Buddhist, Methodist & Muslim,
say come. Peace.

DAN:

Come and fill us and our world with your majesty. We, the Jew and the Jainist, the Catholic and the Confucian, implore you to stay awhile with us so we may learn by your shimmering light how to look beyond complexion and see community.

SYLVIA:

It is Christmas time, a halting of hate time. On this platform of peace, we can create a language to translate ourselves to ourselves and to each other. At this Holy Instant, we celebrate the Birth of Jesus Christ Into the great religions of the world. We jubilate the precious advent of trust. We shout with glorious tongues the coming of hope. All the earth's tribes loosen their voices to celebrate the promise of Peace.

DAN:

We, Angels and Mortals, Believers and nonbelievers, Look heavenward and speak the word aloud. Peace.

SYLVIA:

We look at our world and speak the word aloud. Peace.

DAN:

We look at each other, then into ourselves, And we say without shyness or apology or hesitation:

SYLVIA:

Peace, My Brother.

DAN:

Peace, My Sister.

BOTH IN UNISON:

Peace, My Soul.

SYLVIA lights all four of the Advent candles- but not the center one

Reading: Luke 2:4-5

Joseph went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.

Carol: "O Little Town of Bethlehem" #191 (vs 1 & 2 only)

Reading: Matthew 1:28-24:

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way: when his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man, and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means 'God is with us'."

Reading: "Love Poems to God"

Love Poems to God by St. John of the Cross

*If you want,
the Virgin will come walking down the road
pregnant with the holy,
and say...*

*"I need shelter for the night, please take me inside your heart,
My time is so close."*

*Then, under the roof of your soul, you will witness the sublime
intimacy, the divine, the Christ
taking birth forever,*

*as she grasps your hand for help, for each of us
is the midwife of God, each of us.*

*Yes, there, under the dome of your being does Creation
come into existence eternally, through you, woman, dear pilgrim -
the sacred womb of your soul,*

*As God grasps our arm for help, for each of us is
His beloved servant
never far.*

*If you want, the Virgin will come walking
Down the street pregnant
With light and...sing.*

-St. John of the Cross from *Love Poems to God* translated by Daniel Ladinski

Solo w/ Piano & Guitar: “In the Bleak Midwinter”

Reading: Matthew 1:25

When Joseph awoke, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took Mary as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had born a son, and he named him Jesus.

Reading: “Mary, Nazareth Girl”

Mary, Nazareth girl, what did you know of ethereal beings with messages from God? What did you know of men, when you found yourself with child? What did you know of babies, you, barely out of childhood yourself? God-chosen girl, what did you know of God that brought you to this stable, blessed among women? Could it be that you had been ready, waiting, listening, for the footsteps of an angel? Could it be there are messages for us if we have the faith to listen?

Reading: Jacob Trapp’s Sonnet

I who have knelt before no gods this year. Have sudden need to kneel me in the snow. When round me like the rush of wings I hear The midnight chimes and caroling, I know I am not meant to live on cynic's dole, To speak the mocking word, and wear disdain; As one who wears behind a mask a soul, As parched for beauty as a drought for rain. I, who have lived insensible of loss, Now kneel in wonderment of light that fills A waiting world--from Bethlehem the cross, And gentleness that walked forgotten hills. . .How long ago: Ah, me! How dull we are! How slow of heart, how blinded by a star!

Reading: Luke 2: 6-7

While Joseph and Mary were in Bethlehem, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, for there was no room for them in the inn.

Reading: Luke 2:8-12

In that region, there were shepherds living in the fields / keeping watch over their flock by night. / Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid, for see- I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: / to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.”

Reading: Luke 2:13-14

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among all, with whom God is well pleased.

*** Carol: "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing" 201** *(vs 1 & 3)*

Reading: Luke 2:15-20

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

*** Carol: "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear" 195** *(Vs 1 & 2)*

Reading: "Practice Hope"

Dare to practice hope. Dare to let the assurance steal upon you that something is coming, something greater, deeper, not merely more, but more so.

This is not cheap optimism that can be bought in any market, nor a careful figuring of odds that can always be beat, nor mindless abandon.

I mean attentiveness to the dense but dappled energy that rises within. I mean willingness to be taken up, to be wielded deftly in this rough world by an art that is beyond you.

You are a thread in a tapestry too large for you ever to see, a single leaf in springtime. Practice hope: let summer unfurl itself in you and then, only afterward, will you know that miracle of which already you are a living sign.

-Steven Garnaas-Holmes

Reading: "First Coming" by Madeleine L'Engle

Poem: "First Coming" by Madeleine L'Engle

(Lights out)

Reading: A Litany of Darkness & Light

Dan: We wait in the darkness, expectantly, longingly, anxiously, thoughtfully.

Gretchen: The darkness is our friend. In the darkness of the womb, we have all been nurtured and protected. In the darkness of the womb, the Christ-child was made ready for the journey into light.

(Both): YOU ARE WITH US, O GOD, IN DARKNESS AND IN LIGHT.

Gretchen: It is only in the darkness that we can see the splendor of the universe: blankets of stars, the solitary glowings of distant planets.

Dan: It was the darkness that allowed the Magi to find the star that guided them to where the Christ-child lay.

(Both): YOU ARE WITH US, O GOD, IN DARKNESS AND IN LIGHT.

Dan: In the darkness of night, desert peoples find relief from the cruel, relentless heat of the sun.

Gretchen: In the blessed desert darkness, Mary and Joseph were able to flee with the infant Jesus to safety in Egypt.

(Both): YOU ARE WITH US, O GOD, IN DARKNESS AND IN LIGHT.

Gretchen: In the darkness of sleep, we are soothed and restored, healed and renewed.

Dan: In the darkness of sleep, dreams rise up.
God spoke to Jacob and Joseph through dreams. . .

(Both): GOD IS SPEAKING STILL! YOU ARE WITH US, O GOD, IN DARKNESS & IN LIGHT.

Dan: In the solitude of darkness, we remember those who need God's presence in a special way - the sick, the unemployed, the bereaved, the persecuted, the homeless, those who are demoralized and discouraged, those whose fear has turned to cynicism, those whose vulnerability has become bitterness.

Gretchen: In the darkness, we remember those who are near to our hearts - colleagues, partners, parents, children, neighbors, friends. We thank God for their presence and ask God to bless them in all they do - at home, at school, as they travel, as they work, as they play.

(Both): YOU ARE WITH US, O GOD, IN DARKNESS AND IN LIGHT.

Dan In the solitude of darkness, our fears and concerns, our hopes and our visions rise to the surface. We come face to face with ourselves and with the road that lies ahead of us. And in that same darkness, we find companionship for the journey.

BOTH WE KNOW YOU ARE WITH US, O GOD, YET WE STILL AWAIT YOUR COMING. IN THE DARKNESS THAT CONTAINS BOTH OUR VULNERABILITY AND OUR EXPECTANCY, WE WATCH FOR A SIGN OF GOD'S HOPE.

Sing: ***Gloria, 204*** (lights up)

****Gloria, gloria in excelsis Deo!
Gloria, Gloria, alleluia, alleluia!***

**All are invited to quietly form a large circle around the sanctuary.
Please take your candles with you.**

**Once in a circle, you may await the lighting of your candle from the person next to you.
After all candles are lit, overhead lights will once again be dimmed.**

Reading: Hush

BILL: (“Hush” by Lucinda Hynett): Shhh. Can you hear it? An expectant silence, a hushed anticipation, as if the very galaxy is holding its breath. There are truths even the stars know, like darkness, like loneliness, and how the night can be a living thing. And how once, long ago, the night waited in wonder along with the darkness and the loneliness, for the sound of a baby’s cry, for the miraculous to come down to the earth mundane.

***Carol: “Silent Night” 193**

Reading: “The World Still Knows” by Ann Weems

DAN: (Reading “The World Still Knows” by Ann Weems): The night is still dark... the world still knows its Herods. But it also still knows men and women who pack their dreams safely in their hearts and set off toward Bethlehem, faithful against all odds, undeterred by fatigue or rejection, to kneel to a child. And the world still knows those persons wise enough to follow a star, those who do not consider themselves too intelligent, too powerful, too wealthy... to kneel to a child. And the world still knows those hearts so humble that they’re ready to hear the word of a song ... and to leave what they have, to go... to kneel to a child. The night is still dark, but by the light of the star, even today we can still see... to kneel to a child.

Reading: “The Work of Christmas

SHANNON: The Work of Christmas by Howard Thurman- When the song of the angels is stilled, when the star in the sky is gone, *when rulers and wise men return to their homes*, when the shepherds are back with their flock, the work of Christmas BEGINS... to find the lost, *to heal the broken*, to feed the hungry, to release the prisoner, to rebuild the nations, to bring peace among brothers and sisters, *to make music in the heart*.

Prayer “Most Amazing Word” by Madeleine L’Engle

Dan: Thank you, God, for being BORN! You, who first invented birth (universe, galaxies, the earth). When your world was tired and worn, You came laughing on the morn. Thank you, most amazing Word, for your silence in the womb, where there was so little room, yes the still small voice was heard throughout a planet dark and blurred. Merry Christmas! Wondrous day! Maker of the universe! You the end, and you the source: come and share in human clay and, yourself, to show the Way. Amen.

Dan: THE LIGHT SHINES IN THE DEEPEST NIGHT- AND THE NIGHT WILL NOT OVERCOME IT. THANKS BE TO GOD, AMEN, MERRY CHRISTMAS, AND GOODNIGHT!

Postlude