



CHRISTMAS EVE WORSHIP

with UCC Westerly

December 24, 2020 @ 7pm
Broadcast live from our sanctuary

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Gathering Music – “Dollar Store Man”

[WORDS & MUSIC: Doug Brummund, ©2020 B.R. Music. All rights reserved.
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PASTOR’S WELCOME

Prelude – “Away in a Manger”

[MUSIC: Steven Scott, based on familiar carols. ©2000, Lorenz Publishing Company. All rights reserved. Reprinted under ONE LICENSE#A-734569]

DEACON’S GREETING

INVITATION TO WORSHIP – *Lighting the Christ Candle on the Advent Wreath*

[<https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/advent-candle-lighting-litanies>]

Reader One: Because injustice and despair threaten to overwhelm us, we pray for hope...
(*Light the first candle*)

Reader Two: Because so many swords have not yet been beaten into ploughshares, we pray for peace... (*Light the second candle*)

Reader One: Because grief and loss weigh so heavily, we pray for joy ... (*light the third candle*)

Reader Two: Because hatred is still so strong, and because people all over the world are suffering, we pray for love ... (*light the fourth candle*)

Reader One: God has come to us as a child. Christ is present in our world. (*light the Christ Candle*)

Reader Two: May the light and fire from these candles burn away everything that is preventing the God of hope and peace and joy and love from being born among us...

Both: Brothers and sisters, be not afraid, even now – even now! The light of Christ is overwhelming the world!

OPENING CAROL – “O Come All Ye Faithful”

[WORDS & MUSIC: John F. Wade with contributions by others. ©Public Domain]

1. *O come, all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant*
O come ye, O come ye, to Bethlehem
Come and behold him, born the king of angels;
Refrain: *O come, let us adore him, O come, let us adore him,*
O come, let us adore him, Christ the Lord.

2. *Sing, choirs of angels, sing in exultation;*
O sing, all ye citizens of heaven above!
Glory to God, all glory in the highest;
Refrain

UNISON PRAYER OF REFLECTION

Always Surprising God, you greet us once more as we gather at the manger this Christmas Eve. We confess it is easy to forget the poverty into which this child of refugee parents was born. We focus instead on singing angels, awestruck shepherds, and kings bringing lavish gifts. May we see beyond all that obscures our vision of the miracle of Your abiding love made flesh in this tiny baby. Help us release our grasp of all that we fear, of all that we worry about, of all that keeps us at a distance from you. Open our hearts, Holy One, to the possibilities of Christmas so that we may reclaim who it is you need us to be at this moment in your history. This we ask in the powerful name of Jesus, Mary's precious son, and yours Amen.

SPECIAL MUSIC – “Sing We Now of Christmas”

Tone Chimes Choir

[traditional French carol, © Public Domain]

A SIMPLE CELEBRATION OF HOLY COMMUNION

Words of Invitation, Explanation and Consecration

Prayer of Thanksgiving and the Lord's Prayer:

We thank you, God, for embracing us at this, Christ's table, on this holy night. May our encounter with the presence of Christ in these elements of bread and cup strengthen our faith, increase our love for one another, and empower us to make visible your truth in our lives. We pray this and every prayer in the name of Jesus who taught us to pray saying... *Our Father...*

CAROL – “Away in a Manger”

[WORDS: Anonymous Luke 2:7 & MUSIC: James R. Murray. ©Public Domain]

- 1. Away in a manger, no crib for a bed, the little Lord Jesus
Laid down his sweet head. The stars in the sky looked down where he lay,
The little Lord Jesus, asleep on the hay.*
- 2. The cattle are lowing, the baby awakes, but little Lord Jesus
No crying he makes; I love thee, Lord Jesus, look down from the sky
And stay by my cradle till morning is nigh.*
- 3. Be near me, Lord Jesus, I ask thee to stay close by me forever,
And love me I pray; bless all the dear children in thy tender care,
And fit us for heaven to live with thee there.*

A MESSAGE FOR CHRISTMAS EVE

Scripture Reading: Luke 2:1-20

Message – “Close by Me Forever”

Joann Spurley, Deacon

Rev. Ruth

SPECIAL MUSIC – “Once in Royal David's City”

Tone Chimes Choir

[MUSIC: Henry j. Gauntlett. © Public Domain]

OUR RESPONSE TO GOD

Acknowledgement of Gifts & Offerings* Doxology *“Praise God from whom all blessings flow;
Praise Christ all creatures here below; Praise Holy Spirit, Comforter; One God, Triune,
whom we adore. Amen.”* [©Public Domain]

A CHRISTMAS PRAYER AND THE BLESSING OF THE CRECHES

CAROL with Candle-lighting -- "Silent Night"

[WORDS: Joseph Mohr & MUSIC: Franz Gruber. ©Public Domain]

{Please light a candle for each person at home while you are singing to invite the light and love of Christ into the world.}

1. *Silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright.
Round yon virgin, mother and child, Holy infant so tender and mild,
Sleep in heavenly peace, sleep in heavenly peace.*
2. *Silent night, holy night, shepherds quake at the sight;
Glories stream from heaven afar, heavenly hosts sing Alleluia!
Christ the Savior is born, Christ the Savior is born!*
3. *Silent night, holy night, Son of God, love's pure light;
Radiant beams from thy holy face with the dawn of redeeming grace,
Jesus, Lord, at thy birth, Jesus, Lord at thy birth.*

A PRAYER OF BENEDICTION

[adapted from *Touch Holiness*, Duck & Tirabassi, ©1990, The Pilgrim Press, p. 240]

On this holy night, hold on to the truth that God is in our future calling us; that God is in our past forgiving us; that God is in the present loving us. There is no greater gift, no greater blessing. Go out and be God's blessing to the world so hurting and broken. Be as Christ to everyone you meet. Amen.

CLOSING CAROL – "Joy to the World"

[Arrangement by Franklin Ritter, based on the tune ANTIOCH by G.F. HANDEL. ©2000 Lorenz Publishing Company. All rights reserved. Reprinted under ONE LICENSE#A-734569]

1. *Joy to the world, the Lord is come! Let earth receive her King;
Let every heart prepare him room, and heaven and nature sing,
And heaven and nature sing, and heaven, and heaven, and nature sing.*
2. *Joy to the world, the Savior reigns! Let all their songs employ;
While fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains, repeat the sounding joy,
Repeat the sounding joy, repeat, repeat, the sounding joy.*
3. *He rules the world with truth and grace, and makes the nations prove
The glories of his righteousness, and wonders of his love,
And wonders of his love, and wonders, and wonders, of his love.*

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*December 23, 2020*

*In Our Own Image*

Today is the day before Christmas Eve and, as a local church pastor, I am looking at a "to-do" list that is way longer than I can possibly get done. I am someone who functions well from "to-do" lists most of the time, but I confess that when it comes to December and the week OF Christmas, my lists too often cease to be helpful. Instead, they raise the specter of all that I will NOT be able to get done unless I forgo sleep and other frivolities of life - like wrapping Christmas presents for my own family. In my younger years in ministry, I would do both - complete the church "to do" list and the one for home because who needs to sleep on Christmas Eve but I am no longer that young, nor am I that foolish. I learned the hard way that the most difficult challenge of Christmas week is not getting everything done but rather holding on tight to what really matters as Christmas unfolds. That is a question we each must answer for ourselves as we make Christmas in our own image each year.

When it comes to Christmas, one of the things most noticeable to me this year is the extent to which people have been sharing on social media their unique spins on Christmas. Christmas trees, outside lights and even creches or nativity scenes are appearing on the internet in an almost constant stream. This is most likely because we can't invite anybody over to see our decorations otherwise. I have especially enjoyed seeing the huge variety of creche scenes being shared this year - international ones from countries all over the world, each one more beautiful than the last; humorous ones featuring everything from moose to snow angels to Peanuts characters; uniquely creative ones featuring every manor of artistic style and subject matter standing in for the holy family. I continue to marvel at how something as simple as a refugee family settling into a rough outdoor structure for the night inspires so much creativity, but it does, more so every year.

The photo above is of items from my own creche sets here at home. At the top is a miniature creche scene I bought from SERRV years ago, its origins somewhere in Indonesia, I think. The little round Baby Jesus is from my beautiful creche scene from Haiti. That one has lots of little figurines and even a coconut carved into a stable. And

then, finally, the traditional 1960's Baby Jesus from the creche set I grew up with. It came to me when my parents sold the family home to retire to Maine and, I confess, even though Jesus' ethnicity is completely wrong, I love this creche set. I still remember my mom buying it back in the early 1960's at, of all places, Sears and Roebuck. I remember bringing it home and unpacking it, carefully placing all the pieces on the wide windowsill in the living room. And I remember the moment when mom and I realized that two of our kings were exactly the same. We had two kings dressed in red and carrying gold, one king dressed in green carrying frankincense and no king bringing myrrh. Mom, being an over the top perfectionist, went absolutely ballistic. She immediately tried to take it back to Sears in exchange for a complete set. Barring that she wanted them to allow her to swap one of our red kings for a purple one but Sears had already sold out of the creche sets entirely. Her only option was to return the entire set for credit or keep it. I begged her to keep it and she did, as long as I was aware that henceforth and forevermore it would be my job to set it up and take it down each Christmas because she could not handle two identical kings. I agreed and I have now been setting up that creche set for 50 years and I absolutely adore my identical twin kings. Truly, it would not be Christmas without them.

The ways we celebrate Christmas change as the years slip by us. The way we decorate and celebrate when we're young and just starting out is different from the traditions which emerge as we age and perhaps children enter the picture. This in turn morphs once again when the children grow up and move on to build lives and Christmas traditions of their own. When you reach the later decades of life, the eight-foot live tree in the family room often gives way to a lovely artificial tree of the tabletop variety. Other decorations gradually slip away, inventory at yard sales or perhaps just wearing out after years of loving use. Dear ones, Christmas traditions change because we are always changing. We are always growing into new people, different people, as the tides of life carry us along. We are especially aware of these changes this year, I think, because of the Covid restrictions that will, hopefully, keep us safe at home, embedded in our own Christmas celebrations. Family traditions of big gatherings and "progressive" celebrations moving from house to house to visit scattered loved ones just cannot happen this year. And that hurts. A lot. Yet even this is a blessing because if we are honest, we have to admit that all the Christmas craziness of previous years, all the road trips to visit family and friends crammed into one 48 hour timeframe, were not always anticipated with joy. By the time Christmas would roll around, exhausted adults would sometimes look longingly at their own cozy living rooms when they realized it was time to pack up to visit whoever was first up on the annual Christmas pilgrimage tour. The children would fuss, tempers would fray but everyone would soon pile into the car, off to family gatherings soon to be saturated with happy memories.

We can't do that this year. Some people will anyway, of course, and that is why Covid is still the huge problem it is. But, hopefully, most of us will put the wellbeing of

the human family above our own wants and desires and stay home for Christmas this year. So, the question for us then becomes, how might we receive this unique gift this year to remake Christmas once again in the midst of this new and temporary reality? We do this every year anyway when you stop to think about it. Christmas is always a blend of the traditions celebrated within the context of the ever shifting realities of life as it moves forward from year to year. What might be your Covid Christmas tradition that begins this year? Maybe you bought one of those crazy toilet paper Christmas tree ornaments? Or maybe you could dig out one or two of the recipes for some Christmas goodie you usually have to travel to enjoy, realizing you can actually make it yourself. Voila! New Christmas tradition created! The possibilities for this year are only as limited as you make them.

Dear ones, I urge you to let go of your sadness and your fears and worries as this Covid Christmas will soon be upon us all, like it or not. Dare to find joy in this moment along with hope for the future. Dare to become the peacemaker and purveyor of love to all those who are hurting so much this year. Even a phone call can make a huge difference to someone feeling so alone. And, please, please remember that Christmas has never really been about all the layers of gifts and decorations and scrumptious foods our traditions have built up over the years, the ones we miss so much in this Covid moment. Truly, Christmas is now and has always been about that tiny baby in the creche set, whatever he might look like in your house. Christmas is about remembering that he was created out of pure love in the image of God, and so are each of us. Christmas is about the grace of God reborn anew in our hearts each year, and all the possibilities for a better world that grace makes possible. Merry Christmas, dear ones, this year and every year.

*NOTE: This is an excerpt from a weekly column I post to Facebook each Wednesday. I am sharing it with you today as food for thought for Christmas. Carol will send along the Christmas Eve sermon next week to those requesting it.*