

## Worship for Christmas Eve, 2020

### Welcome / Announcements / Joy Gift Offering Announcement

### Lighting the Christ Candle Advent Reading

– Finley Hunter

{Four candles will be lit before service.}

Advent hope moves us; Advent peace stills us; Advent joy stirs us; Advent love leads us, that we might affirm our King Jesus.

It is time we set flame to this Advent affirmation by lighting the Christ Candle. [Light the Candle]

With the lighting of this candle, we offer our prayerful confession – We believe that Jesus is the Son of God. He was born of the Virgin Mary in Bethlehem of Judea. He was the long-awaited Messiah whose coming was prophesied. The same Jesus lives today in our hearts. He deserves our highest loyalty and total commitment. In Jesus Christ our hope is fulfilled; our love is consummated; our joy is complete; and our peace is sealed.

Rejoice, a Savior is born.

A Savior is born, indeed. Joy to the world!

### Call to Worship

All through this season of Advent, we have encountered Hope, Peace and Joy and Love Today we will hear the story of God's wonderful love. Today we will be challenged to believe in all that God can do. Open our hearts, Lord, that we may be ready for your love. AMEN.

### Opening Prayer

Gracious Lord, be the God of our Christmas celebration. We rejoice with the shepherds over the good news of Jesus' birth. We join in the praises of the angelic choir, saying: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom God favors!"

Almighty God, You have favored us with the greatest gift ever given--Your only begotten Son, Light of true Light, God of true God. May we never take this Your gift for granted; may our songs of praise never fade, and may we treasure it in our hearts always and forever. Bless all of us here gathered in worship as well as our loved ones at home. May peace and joy ring in our hearts and reverberate through our communities tonight in the name of Jesus the new-born King. Amen.

### READING # 1

- Emily Hunter

**Luke 1:26-35:** *"In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, <sup>27</sup> to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. <sup>28</sup> And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." <sup>29</sup> But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. <sup>30</sup> The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. <sup>31</sup> And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. <sup>32</sup> He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. <sup>33</sup> He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." <sup>34</sup> Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" <sup>35</sup> The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God."*

### Music

### READING #2

- Norene Newman

**Luke 1:38-56:** *"<sup>38</sup> Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her. <sup>39</sup> ¶ In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, <sup>40</sup> where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. <sup>41</sup> When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit <sup>42</sup> and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. <sup>43</sup> And why has this*

*happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? <sup>44</sup> For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. <sup>45</sup> And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." <sup>46</sup> And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, <sup>47</sup> and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, <sup>48</sup> for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; <sup>49</sup> for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. <sup>50</sup> His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. <sup>51</sup> He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. <sup>52</sup> He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; <sup>53</sup> he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. <sup>54</sup> He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, <sup>55</sup> according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever." <sup>56</sup> And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home."*

## **Music**

### **READING #3**

- David Myers

**Luke 1:67-79:** *"<sup>67</sup>Then John's father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy: <sup>68</sup>"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. <sup>69</sup>He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David, <sup>70</sup>as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, <sup>71</sup>that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. <sup>72</sup>Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, <sup>73</sup>the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us <sup>74</sup>that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, <sup>75</sup>in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. <sup>76</sup>And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, <sup>77</sup>to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. <sup>78</sup>By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, <sup>79</sup>to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."*

## **Music**

### **READING #4**

- Johnnie Quinn

**Luke 2:1-7:** *"In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. <sup>2</sup>This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. <sup>3</sup>All went to their own towns to be registered. <sup>4</sup>Joseph also 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. <sup>5</sup>He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. <sup>6</sup>While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. <sup>7</sup>And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn."*

## **Sermon: "Incarnation as Providence"**

Luke's Gospel provides us with one of our most favorite and most familiar passages of Scripture. The birth of Jesus revealed to us in the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter of the Gospel of Luke comes as the great climax of our entire Advent season.

We build to this momentous moment as we journey through Advent. We groan for his appearance as we hear the Old Testament prophecies. As we hear Isaiah's words, we yearn to recall these words of a child born in Bethlehem. Of a Savior come into the world. For they are the good news of great joy for all the people. Unto us, a son is given!

Perhaps though, in our familiarity with this particular passage from Luke's Gospel, we overlook Luke's larger point. We rush to verses 6 and 7 because they provide for us those warm familiar images which accompany Christmas. In our haste to hear of Christ' humble birth, we may well rush past Luke's emphasis. Notice that the birth of Jesus Christ does take but two verses.

As Luke recounts the birth of Jesus, notice he spends far more words and energy letting us know about a Roman Emperor and his delegate to Judea and some shepherds in a field than he does about the birth of Christ.

We're told of a registration of all people. Emperor Augustus sends out word. Register everyone. And it isn't so that this king can provide for everyone. Roman Caesar Augustus wanted everyone counted so he would know HOW MUCH TAX MONEY he could wring out of his provinces. This registration makes clear the Roman emperor sees people as nothing more than a commodity.

Worse still is the method by which Augustus arranges the whole shebang. Unwilling to trust local authorities, the Caesar requires everyone, even pregnant women, to travel to their home provinces. Again, it isn't because he wanted the Jews to enjoy a joyous homecoming on his behalf. It was because he knew it would be the most efficient way to collect. You see, he knew how well the Jews recorded their genealogies. Caesar knew there would be far fewer "tax-cheats" doing it this way.

So, Mary and Joseph begin their voyage from Nazareth to Bethlehem. It's hilly country between the two towns. The distance from Nazareth to Bethlehem is about 70 miles as the crow flies, but the trails Joseph and Mary had to travel made it about 90 miles, the climb about 1300 feet. It would've taken them more than a week to cover that distance and height. For a woman in her final weeks of pregnancy, this voyage, undertaken only at the behest of a greedy emperor, would have been a terrible burden.

It's in these two images, one of a rich and powerful Roman King, the other, a young couple, humble in means, forced to make a difficult journey, that we begin to see Luke's main emphasis. On one hand we see the human epitome of power in Caesar. On the other hand, we see human pawns in Mary and Joseph, forced to travel at a terrible time in order to comply with the will of Rome.

But in these two contrasting images, we see God's **WONDERFUL AND UNSHAKEABLE PROVIDENCE** at work.

Even though the emperor does what he thinks to be in his own best interest, we who stand 2000 years after the fact see the great irony of the moment for poor Augustus. He's done his best to provide for himself and his kingdom but God has used it all for God's glory.

I hope we all hear traces of the Old Testament here...specifically the Old Testament Joseph, as he speaks to his brothers in the 50<sup>th</sup> chapter of Genesis. There, his brothers seek his mercy for selling him into slavery so many years ago. Joseph simply replies "Even though you intended to do harm, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people."

Remember, Jesus Christ birth in Bethlehem is the fulfillment of Micah's prophecy which reads "But you, O Bethlehem, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days."

So, you see, even though Caesar Augustus intended only to enrich himself and his empire, God used even this selfish deed to preserve a numerous people. What humankind intended for bad, God used to bring everlasting good into the world.

This child Jesus, placed after his birth in nothing other than an animal's feeding TROFF is the JOY of the worlds. As the angel's proclaim to the shepherds, this child Jesus is A SAVIOR." Salvation comes into the world in the most extraordinary and humble means.

And again, through the means of Christ's birth, we're reminded of God's power. If this child weren't the Son of God, we'd worry about him, wouldn't we? After all, I'm not a germ freak but if you told me that you were gonna put Baby Benjamin in a donkey's feeding dish, I think I'd want to get out a couple of gallons of sanitizer just to begin with.

But this is God's Son. The fullness of the father dwells in him. He's the completion of God's plan for our salvation. He's the messiah pointed to throughout the Old Testament. He's the fulfillment of God's Good purposes. So, he comes, born of two humble parents without decent lodging.

It's the very **OPPOSITE** of mighty Caesar Augustus. Surrounded by wealth and opulence, able to move all his subjects about on a whim, the Roman Emperor **IMPELLS PEOPLE** according to meet HIS need. On the other hand, God **GIVES TO PEOPLE** according to **THEIR NEEDS**.

The contrast couldn't be more telling.

The Emperor, the highest of human powers is always working to bring about the best for themselves while God is ever-working to bring about the best for all people.

And in this Baby Jesus, all of our deepest needs were met. You see, God knew we didn't need a political hero to lead us out of bondage to Rome; we needed a savior to lead us out of bondage to sin.

“If our greatest need had been information, God would have sent an educator. If our greatest need had been technology, God would have sent a scientist. If your greatest need had been money, God would have sent us an economist. But since our greatest need was forgiveness, God sent to us a Savior.”

While the world which surrounds us seeks to extract from us all it can, God acts to fill us with all we need. The contrast couldn't be greater.

What God makes known to us through the Christ born in a manger is that he knows our needs and has eternally sought to provide for us. The birth of Jesus Christ assures us of God's loving care for us here and into eternity. And nothing, not empires nor kings nor governments nor armies will ever, ever stand in the way of God's providential hand providing for us and for our salvation. For Christ has come into the world. Any separation between God and Us has been torn asunder. We stand this evening, this Holy Evening, and we remember God's care for us reaches down all the way to us...no matter where we are, no matter what our circumstances this Christmas Eve.

On a Night LONG Ago in the town of Bethlehem, God humbly, meekly, mildly did his most impressive work in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

## Music

### READING #5

- James Harper

**John 1:1-16:** *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup> He was in the beginning with God. <sup>3</sup> All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being <sup>4</sup> in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. <sup>5</sup> The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it <sup>9</sup>The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. <sup>14</sup>And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. <sup>16</sup> From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.”*

### *Celebrating the Sacrament of Holy Communion*

### Lighting of the Glowsticks

### Christmas Blessing

May the God of the angels, who heralded Christ's birth, bring joy to your hearts this day and always.

Hallelujah! May the God of love, who gave his only Son to be born for you, fill your life with love and peace.

Hallelujah! May Emmanuel, God with us, be with you in all your doings and all your celebrations, until he brings you into his eternal kingdom. Hallelujah! And may almighty God, Father, and the Son, and Holy Spirit, bless you now and forever. **Amen.**

### Celebrate Christ's Light as We Leave in Silence: *“Silent Night”*

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