

Christmas Eve Candlelight Communion Service

PRELUDE "Sussex Carol"- Dale Wood Dr. Elizabeth Davis

Would you join me in reading responsively, the call to worship printed in our bulletins....

CALL TO WORSHIP

Isaiah 9

There will be no gloom for her that was in anguish.

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;

Those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined.

Thou hast multiplied the nation, thou hast increased its joy;

They rejoice before thee as with joy at the harvest,

As men rejoice when they divide the spoil.

For the yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder,

The rod of his oppressor, thou hast broken as on the day of Mid'ian.

For unto us a child is born, Unto us a son is given;

And the government will be upon his shoulder,

And his name will be called "Wonderful Counselor,

Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."

Of the increase of his government & of peace there will be no end,

He will establish the throne of David, and uphold it

With justice and with righteousness for evermore.

The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

Let us worship God, beginning with prayer....

INVOCATION

Holy God, take us into that night long ago, and in our imaginations, let us marvel at the holy child, worship with the shepherds, and sing with the angels. So bless us by the gaze of the Christ child, that when we leave this place, may we leave like the shepherds, praising God, and sharing the Good News that Christ is born,... born to set us free,... born to give us hope,... born to change the world. Let Him be born in us. Amen.

*HYMN

"O Come All Ye Faithful"

The Hymnal #41

*CALL TO CONFESSION

With our hearts open to God's light & truth, let us confess our sins as we pray together the prayer of confession printed in our bulletins, pausing at its end for a moment of silent prayer. Let us pray...

*PRAYER OF CONFESSION

(In Unison)

God of the Manger and the Cross, our eyes have focused for so long on what is temporary that we cannot see the signs of your everlasting presence and activity. We confess that we have too often squandered our opportunities to share your Word and show your Love to those in need around us. We have allowed our doubts to overwhelm us, our sins to bind us, our fears to freeze us in our tracks. You offer us new dreams, and we succumb to old weaknesses you offer us hope and we choose the comfortable. Our questions are silenced; our petitions, unexpressed; our faith, insufficient; our service, inadequate. Come among us and shine the light of your righteousness upon us exposing our hypocrisies, ignorance, and impotence. Then grant us the grace of your forgiveness so that we may be freed to share the Good News of your coming and our hope we have in your coming again in all your glory. Amen.

*SILENT CONFESSION

*THE ASSURANCE OF PARDON

The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, and manifesting the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own... Friends, believe the Good News!

In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven! Thanks be to God!

*GLORIA

Refrain from "Angels We Have Heard on High"
Gloria, in excelsis Deo! Gloria, in excelsis Deo!

The Hymnal #23

*PASSING OF THE PEACE

We who once lived in darkness have been given light. We who were far off have been brought near. The peace of Christ be with you.

And also with you.

While we remain standing, let us reaffirm what we believe about God becoming flesh to live among us, and proclaimed in the First Chapter of Hebrews.

*AFFIRMATION OF FAITH

Hebrews 1

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs. Amen.

SPECIAL MUSIC

"O Holy Night" - Adolphe Adam

Joanna Smith, soprano

SCRIPTURE READINGS

Luke 2:1-20

Pew Bible, p. 889

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled. This was the first enrollment, when Quirin'i-us was governor of Syria. And all went to be enrolled, each to his own city.

And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.

And while they were there, the time came for her to be delivered. And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

And in that region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, "Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger."

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

When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us."

And they went with haste, and found Mary and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. And when they saw it they made known the saying which had been told them concerning this child; and all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.

But Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart.

And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Our thanks be to God!

COMMUNION MEDITATION

"The First Witnesses"

Tonight we remember and celebrate the birth of our God in the flesh in Bethlehem, an event that changed the world and is still changing hearts and lives today. In the Christmas story, two thirds of the verses focus on the shepherds role in the birth of Jesus. The angels and the light of God's glory don't shine on the manger, but on the shepherds in the field!

At such a history making event you would expect to see Kings, princes, dignitaries. But nothing about this birth is ordinary or as one would expect. This royal nursery, the birthplace of the

greatest king in all of history does not fit the mold either. There are no tapestries covering the windows, because there are no windows.... a wooden feed trough instead of a velvet bassinet cradles the young prince... instead of a golden scepter, the king holds a crudely whittled olive-wood rattle. and the sounds.... instead of a music box playing lullabies, there is only the sounds of cows munching, hooves crunching, a mother humming.

When a baby is born in our world, a call goes out to let members of the family or a couple's BFF's that a blessed event is taking place, and before you know it, the waiting room is full of friends and family, waiting to be the first to "oo-oooh and ahhhh" at the baby and to congratulate the new parents.

But in the birth at Bethlehem the first call was made not to friends or family, but to total strangers-- a bunch of ordinary shepherds who had come straight from work to see the baby that they heard about from a group of angels. The first names in the guestbook are not those of dignitaries, ambassadors, ministers, or even friends and family, but of guys no one knew, and who had questionable reputations, just shepherds, the first century equivalent of garbage men on the social scale.

Yes, there was a time when shepherds were well thought of. shepherding was a noble profession. Abel was the first to have this job, followed by Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses and of course, Israel's own greatest king to that point, David. God identified Himself as a shepherd and called us His sheep.

By the time we come to the first century however, shepherding has lost its luster. Shepherds made up the lowest class of people, coming in just ahead of the lepers. In the Talmud, which is a collection of interpretations and insight from the rabbis, we read these words: "No help is to be given to heathen or shepherds."

Shepherds were considered ceremonially unclean. Because of the nature of their work they were unable to attend any religious services.

Because their flocks needed to move around constantly in search of new grass and fresh water, they never stayed in one place for long, leaving the Shepherds no time for making friends or even contacts. Shepherding is a lonely, dirty job, and does not attract people with better options.

Because their sheep were unbranded, there were frequent disputes over the ownership of some of the members of their flock with other local farmers or shepherds. They were often accused of stealing from others and of confusing "thine" with "mine."

Shepherds were regarded as so untrustworthy that they were forbidden from serving as witnesses or providing testimony in court.

Yet these are the ones that God chooses to witness the birth of His Son, the Savior of humankind.

Mary captured this in her song recorded in *The Magnificat*: "He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble." Paul said it this way, "Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth...He chose the lowly things of the world and the despised things...so that no one may boast before Him." ([1 Corinthians 1:26-29](#))

And from tonight's Gospel reading: "And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over the flocks at night." They were so committed to their career that they never left their work. They not only worked the third shift, they pulled the first and second as well. Shepherding was a 24/7 deal for them. Saying that they were keeping watch is also to say they kept faith with their flock. And notice that God came to them where and while they were working. He met them right where they were.

These shepherds didn't just accept and enjoy the message they received, **they acted upon it.** Look at [Luke 2:16](#): "So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger." The word "hurried off" means they left in haste. This is pretty amazing in itself because

shepherds normally did nothing quickly. They were patient men, accustomed to moving slowly through the pastures.

So they went and saw. And check out this irony. Unclean shepherds went to a smelly stable to see the Holy of Holies lying on a bed of hay. Given their location, it is likely that the sheep they were watching were not their own, but the property of the priests at the Temple. These were the animals supplied for purchase to those who wanted to offer a sacrificial offering of a lamb for their sins. So shepherds who looked after the Temple lambs were the first to see the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. They're on their way to see the Lamb whose purpose it is to put them out of a job.

Having seen, they left and shared. They didn't pull up a bale of straw and make themselves comfortable. They didn't hang around the manger because they knew that they were now managers of the message. Notice that the message they shared had nothing to do with seeing the angels and there's no reference to either Mary or Joseph: "When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child." We're here today because they couldn't keep quiet.

That's why the announcement went first to the shepherds. They didn't ask God if he was sure he knew what he was doing. Had the angel gone to theologians, they would have first consulted their commentaries. Had he gone to a group of preachers, they would have labored unendingly over getting the message just right, with just the right words. Had he gone to the pillars of the community, they would have looked around to see if anyone was watching. Had he gone to the successful, they would have first checked their calendars.

So he went to the shepherds. Men who didn't have a reputation to protect or an ax to grind or a ladder to climb. Men who didn't know enough to tell God that angels don't sing to sheep and that messiahs aren't found wrapped in rags and sleeping in a feed trough.

A small cathedral outside Bethlehem marks the supposed birthplace of Jesus. Behind a high altar in the church is a cave, a little cavern lit by silver lamps.

You can enter the main edifice and admire the ancient church. You can also enter the quiet cave where a star embedded in the floor recognizes the birth of the King. There is one stipulation, however. You have to stoop. The door is so low you can't go in standing up.

The same is true of the Christ. You can see the world standing tall, but to witness the Savior, you have to get on your knees.

So ...

while the theologians were sleeping
and the elite were dreaming
and the successful were snoring,
the humble shepherds were kneeling.
kneeling before the very One every heart aches to see.

They were kneeling in front of Jesus.

And because of their witness, we may kneel beside them.

THE PASTORAL PRAYER

Let us pray.... Gracious God, once more we have heard your great good news for all people. All our hopes have been fulfilled and we have seen your glory in the babe at Bethlehem.

Having seen your light, having heard your word, having praised your name, help us to take this good news of great joy to all people. Open our hands and hearts to receive and serve you as our King, and then open our mouths so that we may become your witnesses, sharing the love you have revealed to us, and the hope you bring to all people.

To the sick, may we speak words of healing and hope.

To the lonely, may we be signs of God's loving presence.

To the poor, may our acts of kindness offer assurance that God's love is free gift for all.

To the disbelieving, may our lives be confirmation that God really is with us, in the flesh, in places like Nazareth, and right here in Magnolia.

Be known to us now, we pray, in the bread and cup. Consuming these elements may we take you in and offer you the highest place in our lives. Take command of our minds and hearts that we may be totally and forever devoted to Christ, who taught us to pray saying....

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done; On earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.

*HYMN

“Hark! The Herald Angels Sing”

The Hymnal #31

THE SACRAMENT OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

The Invitation

Come - this is the table of the one who was born in Bethlehem for us. Come and receive the gift that he offers us - his body broken and his blood poured out - that we may be made whole.

The Words of Institution

On the night in which we was betrayed, Jesus took the bread and broke it and gave it to his disciples saying, "take, eat, this is my body, broken for you.". In like manner, when the meal was done, Jesus took the cup, and after giving thanks, offered it to his disciples saying, "take, drink, this is my blood, the blood of the new covenant for the forgiveness of sins. As often as you do this, do it in remembrance of me."

These are the gifts of God for the people of God.

The Distribution of the Elements

Communion will be served tonight by intinction, Starting with those in the front pews, each worshiper is asked to come forward by way of the center aisle, receive a piece of bread, dip it in the cup, place it in his/her mouth, and return to your seat by way of the outside aisles. If you would have difficulty coming forward, please remain in your seat and the elements will be brought to you.

The Prayer After Receiving

Empower us by your Spirit, O God, to be Christ's presence in the world even as Jesus was and is God-with-us. Give us courage to speak his truth, to seek his justice, and to love with his love. Keep us faithful in your service until we are received into the everlasting peace and joy of your eternal realm. Amen.

THE SHARING OF THE LIGHT

The ushers will pass the light from their candle to those seated on the center aisle. It is important that lighted candles not be tipped. Once your candle is lit, you are asked to pass the light of Christ to the person seated next to you. As the light from candles is passed from one to another, worshipers are asked to keep lit candles erect and to dip only unlit candles.

THE LITANY OF LIGHT

(adapted from John 1)

In the beginning was the Word,

And the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

He was in the beginning with God.

All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing was made.

What has come into being in him was life,

And the life was the light of all people.

The light shines in the darkness,

And the darkness did not overcome it.

The true light, which enlightens everyone, has come into the world.

And to all who received him, he gave power to become children of God,

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.

The lights will dim as the preacher lights his candle from the Christ Candle

In the gospel of John Jesus tells his followers, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life."

The candlelighters will light their candles from his candle while the preacher continues reading....

But later he would pass the torch to those who had received the good news saying, "You are the light of the world. Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."

As they then share their light with those on each side of the inside aisle, he will continue...

Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God."

But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.

Would you join with me in singing our closing hymn as together we bear the light and love of Christ into the world...

*CAROL

"Silent Night, Holy Night"

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.

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!

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.

Silent night, holy night, wondrous star, lend thy light;
With the angels let us sing, Alleluia to our King;
Christ the Savior is born, Christ the Savior is born!

*THE BLESSING

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep YOUR hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God, and of Jesus Christ our Lord, through the power of the Holy Spirit. And may He bring you the most blessed, and merry Christmas ever. Amen.

*THE POSTLUDE

Dr. Elizabeth Davis