

Sunday, December 31st, 2017
Morning Worship at FPC-Magnolia

PRELUDE

Sharon Ard

“Would you join me in reading the responsive call to worship adapted from Psalm 126 and printed in our bulletins?”

CALL TO WORSHIP

(adapted from Psalm 126)

When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream.

Then our mouth was filled with laughter, & our tongue with shouts of joy;

Then it was said among the nations, “The Lord has done great things for them.”

The Lord has done great things for us, and we rejoiced.

Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like the watercourses in the Negeb.

May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy.

Those who go out weeping, come home with shouts of joy;

And those who go forth bearing seed for sowing, return carrying their sheaves.

Let us worship God beginning with prayer...

PRAYER OF INVOCATION

Let us pray... God of the prophets. God of our dreams and our waking moments, God of our times of weeping and our days of gladness, lead us, we pray, from all that would destroy the best you have placed within us. Lead us toward those times and places where we can grow in the likeness of Jesus. Help us to discern the warnings and the invitations that come from you so our lives may be a beacon to lead others to fulfillment and joy, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Would all of you who are able please stand with me and join in singing our opening hymn, “Joy to the World”, number 40 in our Hymnal.

The liturgist should step back from the microphone for the hymn.

***HYMN OF PRAISE**

“Joy to the World”

The Hymnal #40

After the hymn, the preacher will step into the pulpit and say...

***CALL TO CONFESSION**

God longs to draw us close, to purify our thoughts and clarify our vision. It is God's will and purpose to free us from all that binds us and separates us from Him. Because we cannot be whole apart from God, let us come to confess how broken and needful we are by praying together the prayer of confession printed in our bulletins, pausing at its end for a moment of silent prayer of reflection. Let us pray...

***PRAYER OF CONFESSION**

(In Unison)

Lord Jesus, you have come to be like us and to be with us in the struggles, joys, and sorrows of this earthly realm. We confess that, caught up in the celebrations of the season, we can miss the significance of your coming. Perhaps we do not want to see, for your lordship is a challenge as well as a consolation. We are reluctant to hear your call to transformation and spiritual growth and we resist any effort to reveal our indulgences and hypocrisies. In your love, O God, forgive us; heal us from all that is past so that your truth and joy may be a reality in our lives in the New Year. Amen.

***SILENT CONFESSION**

Pause for about 30 seconds of silence.

***THE ASSURANCE OF PARDON**

Christ became like us to help us in our times of testing. Christ died to lead us to life in all its fullness. We are forgiven, redeemed, and lifted up to new life. Friends believe the Good News!

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

***GLORIA PATRI**

The Hymnal #579

Glory be to the Father, & to the Son, & to the Holy Ghost;

As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, World without end. Amen, Amen.

***PASSING OF THE PEACE**

Our merciful and faithful High Priest, Jesus Christ, invites us to be at one with God, our own best selves, and with others. Let us share the peace of Christ with one another.

The peace of Christ be with you.

And also with you.

Share the peace of Christ with others as you will.

After a few moments, the liturgist will step into pulpit and say...

“At this time I want to invite all of our younger friends to come forward for a Word from the Lord brought to them by Pastor Mike.”

The liturgist will take a seat.

CHILDREN’S SERMON

(All Singing)

***Jesus friend so kind and gentle, little ones we bring to thee;
Grant to them thy dearest blessing. Let thine arms around them be;
Now enfold them in thy goodness, from all danger keep them free.***

Place a moving box in front of the children, and ask them to tell you what goes into such a box. Ask if any of the children have moved recently, and if any will be moving over the holidays. Have them describe what is hard about moving, and what kinds of things make them sad about having to relocate. Let them know that Jesus had to move a great deal when he was little — because his life was in danger, an angel told Joseph to move the family to Egypt (Matthew 2:13). Explain that this move from Bethlehem to Egypt was hard, but then the return from Egypt was difficult as well — the family wanted to go to Israel, but it wasn’t safe, so they ended up going to Galilee (vv. 19-22). Ask the children to describe some of the things that the family of Jesus would have taken with them in their moving boxes. Then point out that they took one thing that was the most important of all, although it didn’t fit into a box: their trust in God. Explain that Joseph and Mary had strong faith in God wherever they were, and at some very important points they received guidance from God and from his angel messengers (vv. 13, 19, 22). Let the children know that moving is always difficult, but good things can happen when we trust in God, and let him lead us. Close by reminding the children to remember their faith, just as the family of Jesus did, whenever they go from one place to another.

As the children leave, the preacher will return to the pulpit to introduce the video.

Every year Americans, go through the process of making New Year’s resolutions. Making them is the easy part. Keeping them.... well, that’s a whole different story. The Skit Guys have a message for us that I think most of us can identify with, along with a reminder of one step most of us leave out, that will help us to be more successful in keeping the resolutions we make.

A NEW YEAR VIDEO

“This Year I Mean It”

The Skit Guys

After the video, the Liturgist will return to the lectern and say...

THE INVITATION TO THE OFFERING

Wise people are still invited to pay homage to the Living God who has always given us his best. We are asked to bring our best to meet the needs of our brothers and sisters. In this generous spirit, let us continue our worship with the presentation of our tithes and offerings...

The liturgist will sit down until the Doxology begins to play.

THE OFFERTORY

Sharon Ard

*DOXOLOGY (In Unison)

The Hymnal #592

***Praise God from whom all blessings flow; Praise Him all creatures here below;
Praise Him above ye heavenly hosts; Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.***

After the Doxology, the liturgist will return to the lectern and say...

*OFFERTORY PRAYER

Let us pray... Loving Father, we remember your gracious deeds and praiseworthy acts on our behalf. Thank you for the gift of life, for all you have entrusted to us, for your watchful care over us, for surrounding us with love when loss or suffering would otherwise overwhelm us. Receive the little we bring and magnify it to the glory of Christ, so that all your children may know the blessings of his provision and presence in their lives. Amen.

*AFFIRMATION OF FAITH

“The Apostles’ Creed”

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, His only Son our Lord who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate,

was crucified, dead, and buried; He descended into Hell; the third day He rose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick & the dead. I believe in the Holy Ghost, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

Invite the congregation to... "Be seated," and take a seat.

SPECIAL MUSIC

"Go Tell It on the Mountain"

Joanna Smith, Soloist

After the soloist finishes, the Liturgist will return to the lectern & say....

SCRIPTURE READINGS

Our first lesson this morning is taken from Chapter 31 of the Prophet Jeremiah, beginning at the fifteenth verse. You are encouraged to follow along and you can find the passage on page 679 in your pew bibles. Listen now for the word of God...

"Thus says the LORD: "A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are not."

Thus says the LORD: "Keep your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears; for your work shall be rewarded, says the LORD, and they shall come back from the land of the enemy. There is hope for your future, says the LORD, and your children shall come back to their own country. I have heard E'phraim bemoaning, 'Thou hast chastened me, and I was chastened, like an untrained calf; bring me back that I may be restored, for thou art the LORD my God. For after I had turned away I repented; and after I was instructed, I smote upon my thigh; I was ashamed, and I was confounded, because I bore the disgrace of my youth.'

Is E'phraim my dear son? Is he my darling child? For as often as I speak against him, I do remember him still. Therefore my heart yearns for him; I will surely have mercy on him, says the LORD.

The liturgist will return to his seat either on the chancel or with family or friends in the congregation. Thank you for your service.

Our Gospel Lesson this morning is taken from the second chapter of Matthew beginning with verse thirteen. You are encouraged to follow along and you can find the passage on page 836 in your pew bibles. Listen once more for the word of God...

"Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there till I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." And he rose and took the child and his mother by night, and departed to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, "Out of Egypt have I called my son."

Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, was in a furious rage, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time which he had ascertained from the wise men.

Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah: "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they were no more."

L: This is the Word of the Lord.

C: Our thanks be to God!

THE SERMON

"The Cries of Christmas"

Do you remember a Peanuts comic strip from a many years ago. After Christmas, Lucy mutters, "Rats! Phooey! Everything is hopeless! Who cares?"

Charlie Brown asks, "Lucy, what in the world is the matter with you?"

Again she shouts, "Rats! Phooey!"

The last cartoon shows her walking away only to turn and drop a casual comment to the puzzled Charlie Brown. "Of course you realize," she says, "that I'm just experiencing my regular, post-Christmas letdown."

When we met here last together, all was calm, all was bright. We went home to our families and

slept in heavenly peace-- only to wake up the next day and hear news reports of bombings and murders. Even now, many of us worry about an approaching cold front that may bring with it snow or sleet, broken pipes, and cabin fever.

No sooner is the tree packed up or thrown out and the wrapping paper hauled off to the landfill than the bills start to arrive and parents who got caught up in the Christmas buying frenzy or swept away by the desire to give their loved ones the desires of their heart for Christmas, must face the consequences.

The day after Christmas I got an email letting me know that a good friend from my boy scout days at Camp Pioneer, who later became an orthopedic surgeon in Hot Springs, had just passed away after a long battle with cancer.

It's not so surprising that a humorist once said, "Next to a circus there ain't nothing that packs up and tears out faster than the Christmas spirit."

Just think for a moment about the words that many of us associate with winter. words I associate with winter.

Death. Ice. Hypothermia. Windchill. Snow. Flu. Pneumonia, Black ice. Dead batteries. Frostbite. Thermal underwear. Seasonal affective disorder. Heating bills. Recreational eating. Death.

That's why I don't like winter.

I know there are people in the world who claim to love winter, but how many of them spend their working careers in the South, then retire and move to Minot, North Dakota?

I have heard people say, "But God made winter — it must be good."

There is no mention of winter in the Bible before the Fall. In Genesis we read about trees bursting with fruit and rivers flowing with water and people who didn't even need clothes. Wherever the Garden of Eden was, it clearly was not Milwaukee in January.

The Bible tells us that winter came because someone once did something very, very bad. People have been paying for it ever since. I speak from experience.

So today, we have gathered to hear some good news, and what do we get-- Herod killing little babies and driving the Holy Family into exile. What a horrible conclusion to this beautiful Christmas story -- the slaughter of the innocents.

But that's the way life is.

We live in a violent world, a world where life can be hard and cruel.

Maybe that's why the story of the manger scene appears side-by-side with the story of a paranoid tyrant named Herod the Great would slaughter innocent infant boys for no more reason than the had been born in Jerusalem. Always across the manger falls the shadow of the cross.

The real story of Christmas is one in which good and evil are both shown for what they are. That is the kind of world we live in a cruel world where crime, poverty, drug-addiction, gangs, hunger, discrimination and a host of evils threaten to overwhelm society and whose evil even impinges upon the kind of secure, happy life that we would provide for those we love.

It has always been so. We get so caught up in parties, gifts, family togetherness, that we forget why Jesus came and just WHO it is that has come to us. It was not to angels, but to real, suffering, easily pre-occupied, fallen, flesh-and-blood folk like us.

An old legend tells a story about a time when all the angels were gathered about the heavenly throne of God for a discussion. Things were in a mess down on earth. The creator had become terribly concerned about the state of the creation: wars, fighting, famine, bloodshed all over.

"I've tried everything," God complained. "I have spoken to them some of the most beautiful words they could ever hope to hear. Think of the glorious psalms, the hymns, the poetic passages of Isaiah. They love to read about peace and goodwill, but they don't like to live it!"

God continued, "Then I sent them the prophets. Prophets like Isaiah. They love Isaiah, the promises of release from their sufferings, freedom from their exile. But do they follow the precepts of the prophets about justice and righteousness rolling down like waters? Never!"

There was widespread discussion of the sad state of affairs on earth. Many of the angels - Gabriel,

Michael, and others had been on earth on many an occasion. They had seen for themselves the sources of God's lament and shared God's concern.

"I think the only thing left is for one of you, a member of the heavenly court, to go down to earth. Live with them, not just for a moment, but every day. Get to know them, become one of them, live with them, let them get to know you. Only then will heaven be truly communicated to them. Only then will they take notice of the great gap between the way they have been living and the way they were created. Only then will we be able to reveal to them who I created them to be."

The angels stood around in awkward silence. They had been to earth before, to deliver messages from God or to effect some momentary intervention in human affairs. They weren't about to volunteer for long-term duty in such a murderous, difficult place.

The silence lasted for an eternity. Finally, God himself broke the silence. Quietly, determinedly, but without any sense of resignation and no bitterness, God said, "Then I will go."

And when he had arrived, evil Herod summoned all his minions and lackeys, armed them with destruction in their left hands and death in their right hands, and ordered them to put an end once and for all to this new king, this new source of goodness and hope and love, this source of light and life for all people in all ages. But try as he might, he failed.

Our gospel today is a sad, unusually bloody story. It tells of a frightened flight to Egypt in great haste. A poor refugee family flees for its life. All this is against a background of a horrible slaughter of innocent Jewish boy babies, one of the many that would afflict God's chosen people down through the ages.

There was brutal death long ago in Bethlehem as the cries of children pierced the air innocent children, victims of a king's insanity & selfishness.

But one child was saved, carried off to Egypt. And one day, many years later, that child would become a victim himself, but **His** death would be different. He died on a cross, not for His own sins, but for the sins of others.

And because Jesus became the sacrifice for our sins, death was defeated. Yes, there is death in our world, but God so loved the world that He sent His Son to overcome it.

Death is real, & it will always be here, just as suffering is here, & uncertainty is here. But this is the message of Christmas, "God takes away the sting of death, because Jesus Christ conquered death & has given us victory over it." It's true! This world is not our home, & the grave is not our goal.

Let me tell you another, final, Christmas story.

A preacher's family had started putting up a nativity scene in their front yard. All of them were carrying out the little figures to put in the nativity scene. Finally everything was in place Mary & Joseph & the manger & the baby, & angels & shepherds & all the barnyard animals.

Then little Scott came out carrying one of his favorite toys, an inflatable figure of a fierce Tyrannosaurus Rex dinosaurs. In comparison to the other figures it was an enormous thing, towering over them all, and certainly not something to have in a nativity scene.

His Dad said, "I tried to tell him, 'Scott, you have to take that back because it doesn't belong there. Dinosaurs existed thousands of years before the baby Jesus, and it just doesn't belong there looming over the baby Jesus.'"

But little Scott insisted, so they finally put it there behind all the other figures a fierce dinosaur hovering over the manger & everything else.

Then he said, "As we stood back and looked at it, it dawned upon us that maybe that dinosaur was saying more than we realized-- that over each of us there is this menacing character that threatens to rob us of all our joy & peace & cheer."

Step outside and you can almost hear the cries of the poor, the sick, the lonely. Which is why we need to go forth from this place and proclaim the good news of Jesus birth. Go! Tell it on the mountain, over the hills and everywhere! Jesus Christ is born and that baby in the manger is stronger than all the dinosaurs in your life or mine.

PASTORAL PRAYER

