

## Hangings of the Greens Service

November 27, 2016

**PRELUDE "Ding Dong! Merrily on High" - Robert Lau**

**Dr. Elizabeth Davis**

### WORDS OF GREETING

Welcome to our celebration of the Advent of our Savior. There are small black books on one end of each pew. We would appreciate your taking a moment to enter your name, address and phone number-- especially if you are visiting with us today.

This morning's service is a little different from our customary worship service. It is intended to re-awaken us to the rich symbolism that greets us everywhere this time of year. It is our prayer that in remembering, or perhaps hearing for the very first time, of the deep meaning and bright promise contained within the symbols of Christmas, this year's celebration may be your most joyful ever.

### READING

Boughs & Garlands

Take the evergreen boughs that are all around us. Against the winter backdrop of bare limbs, brown grass, and bleak skies, the boughs of evergreens are more than just a welcome splash of color-- they are a perpetual reminder that death does not have the final victory. We hang the boughs and garlands of fir, pine, and spruce over our windows and doors to proclaim to all the gift of life that is ours in Jesus Christ.

The boughs are sometimes woven into garlands, taking the form of long chains. We hang the chains as decorations on our walls to remind us of the freedom that is ours in Christ. In so doing, we are faithful to the command of God given us in Isaiah 52 and adapted for us and printed in our bulletins and which I would now invite you to read responsively:

### CALL TO WORSHIP

**Isaiah 52**

Awake, O Zion, clothe yourself with strength.

**Put on your garments of splendor, O Jerusalem.**

Shake off your dust; rise up, sit enthroned, O Jerusalem.

**Free yourself from the chains on your neck, O captive Daughter of Zion.**

For this is what the Lord says: "You were sold for nothing, and without money you will be redeemed."

**How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who say to Zion,  
"Your God reigns!"**

Listen! Your watchmen lift up their voices; together they shout for joy.

**When the Lord returns to Zion, they will see it with their own eyes.**

Burst into songs of joy together, you ruins of Jerusalem.

**The Lord has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem.**

Let us worship God, beginning with a short video featuring Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, as she shares her hope, with her story of how God did the impossible for her...

### ADVENT VIDEO

**"Elizabeth"**

### INVOCATION & THE LORD'S PRAYER

Let us Pray.... Light of the world, we await your return and the coming of the light that will banish our darkness forever. We rejoice that the night is almost spent and that the day of the Lord is upon us. Help us to put off the works of darkness, and to put on the armor of light that we might go boldly forth proclaiming the good news of your eminent return. Open our eyes and hearts to your presence in our lives through the hearing of your word, the symbols of our worship, and acts of love done in memory of Jesus Christ our Lord, 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.

Let us stand together and sing our opening carol, "Come Thou Long Expected Jesus", Hymn #1 in

our Hymnals.

**CAROL**

**“Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus”**

**The Hymnal #1**

**READING**

**Candles**

One of the oldest of all Christian symbols and second only to the cross in the richness of its meaning is the burning candle. Long before Christians began to celebrate Christmas as the day of our Lord’s birth, the candle was used to signify Christ as the Light of the world.

When our lives radiate the spirit of Christ’s loving compassion, we become what the writer of Proverbs described as, “candles of the Lord,” by which the world is made bright with hope and confidence.

In medieval times a wonderful story was told that on Christmas Eve the Christ Child wanders throughout the world, looking for places where He will be welcomed. Those who loved Him, hoping that He might find their homes, placed lighted candles in their windows. The candles we light at this season may suggest to the passing world that He is our guest and that there is room in our hearts for Him.

I would now ask the Smith family to come forward and light the first candle of Advent, explaining as they do its own special meaning.

**LIGHTING OF THE FIRST ADVENT CANDLE**

*Todd, Joanna, Olivia, and Leighton will come to light the first Advent candle and explain its meaning after the reading “Candles”.*

**Leighton:** This Sunday we recall the hope we have in Christ. The prophets of Israel all foretold the coming of Christ, and how a Savior in the line of David would be born a King. They spoke of how He would rule the world wisely and bless all nations.

**Joanna:** Luke tells us that while Herod was King of Judea, there was a woman who was a descendant of Aaron, and righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But she was barren, and was getting on in years. An angel of the Lord appeared to her husband and told him that she would bear a son. And when she had conceived, she said, “This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.”

**Olivia:** As the follower of Christ, we await His return. We light this candle, the candle of hope, to remember that as He came to us humbly in the manger at Bethlehem and gave light to the world, so He is coming again in power to deliver His people. We light this candle to remind us to be alert and to watch for His return. (Leighton lights the 1st candle)

**Todd:** Let us pray... Loving God, we thank you for the promise of the Messiah who came to be the light of the world. Help us prepare our hearts to receive Him. Bless our worship. Help us to hear and do your Word. We ask it in the name of the one born in Bethlehem. Amen.

*The Smiths will return to their seats.*

**SPECIAL MUSIC**

**“Bring a Torch, Jeanette Isabella”**

**Dr. Elizabeth Davis**

**READING**

**The Mistletoe**

From ancient times, various peoples have believed that the mistletoe possessed strange and wonderful powers. Belief in the medicinal benefits of mistletoe have long since vanished, but for Christians, sprigs of mistletoe have come to represent the Great Physician. It brings into our homes a beneficent and healing spirit reminding us of Him of whom we sing:

“Light and life to all he brings, Risen with healing in his wings.”

Most of us though, associate mistletoe with kissing. When in ancient times warriors happened to meet each other under a tree to which mistletoe had attached itself, they dropped their weapons and embraced. From this old belief, coupled with the tradition of the early Christians to greet one another with a holy kiss, people came to feel that at Christmas time the hearts of all should be bound by love and goodwill. When people drop their weapons of pride, stubbornness, and conceit, and embrace under the mistletoe, it would seem that the healing hands of Christ are laid upon their heads in a divine

benediction. In that same spirit, let us share the peace of Christ, one with another.

## **PASSING THE PEACE**

**Leader:** The peace of Christ be with you.

**People:** **And also with you.**

## **READING**

## **The Wreath**

In pre-Christian times a green laurel crown or wreath was a sign of victory in athletic competition or military struggles. Such worldly accomplishments seemed shallow and temporary honors to early Christians. These followers began the custom of placing laurel wreaths on their doorposts to symbolize the greater and more enduring victory of Christ over the powers of darkness and death.

Has this sense of victory become in our hearts and in our worship a diminished thing? We are so fearful and anxious. The challenge of Christmas is to believe again in the triumph of the eternal. The wreath here and on our doors at Christmas should remind us that the crown of life was won for us by Christ in His victory over sin and death. Its unbroken circle should remind us of the love of God for us which abides with us always, the covenant in Christ which will never end, and the eternal joys of heaven which await us.

## **SPECIAL MUSIC**

## **“Joy to the World”**

**Olivia Smith, pianist**

## **READING**

## **The Nativity**

Who doesn't like a Nativity scene with a manger surrounded by adoring animals, amazed shepherds, loving parents, and worshipful kings? Whenever we see a Nativity we find ourselves with Mary and Joseph; with the Shepherds, and with the Wise Men; bowing before the manger, overwhelmed by God's expression of love in coming to us.

God came to us then in a totally unexpected way. But have you considered how he comes to us now? Perhaps as a starving child. Perhaps as a victim of abuse. Perhaps as a prisoner. How was it that Jesus put it? “If you have done it unto the least of these, you have done it unto me.”

This is a different Jesus from the one about whom we sing our Christmas carols. We can cuddle the baby, grow sentimental about him, and pity the poor mother who had to give birth to him in a stable for animals. In Jesus, the Man, the church has on its hands a mature man who makes stern demands, disturbs its smugness, and asks us to rearrange our lives so that we can take up a cross and follow Him. No one thinks ill of a church that is kind to a Baby and honors Him with a beautifully lighted Nativity scene on the church lawn or in the sanctuary, but the church only rises to maturity of faith when it walks the Golgotha slope with a Man whose alleged insanity is the only cure for a world gone mad, and is itself crucified.

## **SPECIAL MUSIC**

## **“Gesù Bambino” - Pietro Yon**

**Joanna Smith**

## **READING**

## **The Manger**

One part of the Nativity scene has assumed a meaning that transcends all other symbols, because it has become the preeminent symbol of God's humility in taking on human flesh and dwelling among us. In the midst of the suffering and misery of this world, what sign is there that God loves us in spite of how things may appear in the world around us? Isaiah tells us:

“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Emmanuel.”

Emmanuel--more than just a name, it is a promise that God IS with us! Does the image of a beautiful newborn child lying in a dirty feed trough unsettle us? It should shock us no less than the idea of God; timeless and all-powerful, beyond the reach of human suffering and pain; taking on human flesh to be betrayed, humiliated, and crucified by the very creatures He would save.

Why God chose to send his son into our world as a baby of humble birth, born in miserable surroundings, we do not know. What we do know is that the manger should serve as a reminder that God has reached out to all people including the poor and wealthy, the simple and the wise, the powerless and the powerful. All who found him knelt in humility before him, knowing that God is possible because he came to us, at our level.

**SPECIAL MUSIC**  
**READING**

**“Away in a Manger”**

**The Handbell Choir**  
**The Holly**

Much of our for the nativity story may be explained by our natural and normal love of all that attends the entry into our world of a baby. But only five miles beyond Bethlehem, where loving hands gently laid the Child in a manger, lies Jerusalem, where cruel hands nailed the body of our Savior upon a cross. As we stand by the crib, our eyes should be uplifted to His cross.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if, in the midst of our joyous Christmas festivities, there were some symbol or token which would remind us that the baby grew into all the fullness of God made flesh and gave his life to remove the pain of sin and death from our lives?

Long ago faithful Christians in Northern Europe brought into their churches and homes just such a reminder -- branches from the holly tree. The sharp points on the leaves became symbols for the crown of thorns pressed upon the head of our Lord on the day of his crucifixion, and the bright red berries were representative of His blood which was shed for the remission of our sin.

The span of days between Christmas and Easter is, like the miles between Bethlehem and Jerusalem, very brief, but in those two hallowed days is mirrored the full life of Him through whom we claim abundant life.

**CAROL**

**“The Holly and the Ivy”**

The holly and the ivy, now both are full well grown,  
Of all the trees that are in the wood, only holly bears the crown.

The holly bears a blossom as white as lily flower;  
And Mary bore sweet Jesus Christ to be our sweet Savior.

The holly bears a berry, as red as any blood;  
And Mary bore sweet Jesus Christ to do poor sinners good.

The holly bears a prickle, as sharp as any thorn;  
And Mary bore sweet Jesus Christ, on Christmas day in the morn.

**READING**

**The Christmas Rose**

The Christmas rose is not a rose as we know them. It is an evergreen member of the Hawthorn family common to Central Europe that blooms in the dead of winter, usually during the week of Christmas.

A great deal of myth has developed around this Christmas flower over the years. According to legend, the Christmas rose, also known as the Glastonbury thorn, is connected with Christ's death as well as his birth. It is said that soon after the death of Christ, Joseph of Arimathea came to Britain to spread the message of Christianity. He travelled with his staff. Being tired, he lay down to rest and he pushed his staff into the ground beside him. When he awoke, he found that the staff had taken root and begun to grow and blossom. He left it there and it has flowered every Christmas and every spring. The original thorn eventually died but not before many cuttings had been taken. It is one of these cuttings that is in the grounds of Glastonbury Abbey today. Castaway fragments are said to take root wherever they fall.

However appealing this story may be, there is a more common and enduring legend of the flower's origin. According to the tale, a young shepherd maiden named Madelon listened intently as three wise men from the East, told her the story of a new king who had been born in a stable in the nearby town of Bethlehem and who would one day give his life to save humankind. They showed her the wondrous gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh that they were bringing him.

She so wanted to see him and to take him a gift, but, alas, she was a poor child and had nothing to bring. Her despair bore fruit in tears.

An angel saw her distress and brushed the snow away from the ground where her tears had fallen. Miraculously, everywhere a tear had fallen, a beautiful white flower had sprung to life. White was the color that represented purity and holiness. Delighted, the young shepherdess gathered the roses into a bouquet, accompanied the wise men to the stable, and presented them to the baby. When the baby Jesus touched them, the roses were ever after tinged with pink and red. The color of red indicates giving of one's self for a holy and loving purpose .

In the first verse of the second chapter of the *Song of Solomon* it is written, “*I am the rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys*”. In Isaiah 35:1, “*The dessert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose...*”

Whatever legends may have developed about its origins or its meanings, this truth remains: The sight of a Christmas rose has always lifted the hearts of those who dwell in cold and darkness with a reminder of the life and beauty and joy that await us all at the coming of Christ into our lives.

**CAROL**

**“Lo, How a Rose E’re Blooming”**

**Choir Ensemble**

**READING**

**The Christmas Tree**

At the beginning of the reign of King David, when Jerusalem had been recaptured and peace restored, into the desolation that had once been a proud city, the ark of the covenant was brought. Signifying as it did the abiding presence of God, tangible visible evidence of God's love and faithfulness for God's people, the people were moved to praise God and to sing songs of thanksgiving. Among the songs they sang was a psalm composed by David containing the lines, “Let the trees of the forest sing for joy, for the Lord comes...”

Two thousand years later, in the midst of the trials and perils of the Reformation, Martin Luther walked home from church. Saddened by the strife within the church and unsure of the outcome of the movement he had begun, Luther trudged along the familiar path praying for a sign of God's presence with him in the ordeal and a reason to hope that all would be well. As he walked that moonlit night among the trees that stood as bare skeletons amidst a desert of snow, his eyes left the shadows and caught sight of a lone evergreen, pointing majestically upward to the throne of Heaven. Beyond it he saw the thousands of stars sprinkled upon the sky like diamonds upon black velvet. The tree was a reminder to him that God's love is also ever green, a remembrance that there is something that lives even when we are surrounded by death. It proclaimed to a dark and weary world that the light of God's love is as broad and as constant as the stars.

Wishing to share this sign of hope and promise with his family, he took home a small tree, hung lighted candles at the tips of its branches, and established the most persistent and universal of all Christmas symbols -- the Chrismon tree.

The many symbols with which we decorate the tree, hanging them as fruits from its branches, are known as Chrismons -- symbolic representations of Jesus Christ. The star recalls the light of the world and reminds us to carry the message of the Gospel throughout the world. The crown represents the Prince of Peace, the King of Kings, the Lord of Lords. The grape reminds us of the blood of the new covenant and that we are fruit of His vine. The anchor reminds us of the God who is steadfast and faithful, showering mercy upon all generations. The Scroll represents the Word of God-- the Word by which all that is was brought into being... the Word which became flesh and through which all people have been redeemed.

Some now associate the Chrismon tree with the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden. May this tree become a means by which we rediscover the Source of life and hope. May it become a means by which we may anticipate that most joyous of all festivals, when beneath the Tree of Life, we shall look upon Him whom we have seen before in only a dim and reflected glory.

**CAROL**

**“O Christmas Tree”**

**Dalene Baer, Violinist**

**READING**

**The Poinsettias and The Star**

The poinsettia is a plant of exquisite beauty. It also symbolizes the shining star that led the Wise Men to the manger at Bethlehem. As Magi of old were guided to the crib of Mary's child, so have Christians of every generation been directed through their pilgrimages in life. The hand of the Eternal

will bring us to green pastures and still waters, beyond the valley of the shadow of death, for always, the Psalmist reminds us, "The steps of a good person are ordered by the Lord."

Stars speak of other worlds. Their radiance comes from afar. They testify to a realm beyond our own. Above our busy lives, over our doubts and fears, there is a Spirit which presides and counsels, plans and guides.

Stars are constant and dependable. We can predict the movements of the heavens with great accuracy. Like the stars high in the heavens, God challenges our inconstancy by His dependability. How good it is to know that God is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow!

Stars shine most clearly at night. God's little lanterns remind us that when we are overwhelmed by clouds of despondency and when our lives are shrouded in nights of fear, it is then that we see most clearly the light of God's truth and love. Jesus is the bright and morning star, the one whom Zacharias proclaimed, "the dayspring from on high that has visited us, to give light unto them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the pathway of peace."

**CAROL** "We Three Kings of Orient Are" (vss. 1&5)

*The Hymnal #66*

**READING**

**The Gifts of Christmas**

Christmas is about giving. The Magi brought gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. God so loved the world, that he gave his only son, that whosoever would believe in him would have eternal life. Yet our modern celebration of Christmas has become notable more for its veneration of Santa Claus and the commercialization of giving, than for the gift of the Christ Child.

The real prototype of our modern Santa Claus was the fourth century bishop of Myra in Asia Minor, St. Nicholas. Legend tells us that he was a man of considerable wealth, who gave himself to the work of the Lord. In so doing, he generously bestowed his wealth upon the less fortunate, preferring to receive no credit for his benevolences. To maintain his anonymity, he visited the homes of the poor under the cloak of darkness. When the Dutch came to America, and shared the legend of St. Nicholas with their new countrymen, their Dutch pronunciation, Sant Nikolaas, was mispronounced as Santa Claus.

It is possible for us to reclaim all that is good in our tradition of Santa Claus, the gift giver. There is much to recommend holding on to its meaning. The giving and receiving of gifts at Christmas is the most normal and natural way we have of expressing our genuine sense of joyfulness. When our giving is like that of St. Nicholas, and we give with no thought of what we will get, then we come closer to the spirit of our Savior who gave himself completely to us.

In remembrance of God's priceless gift to all of us, let us now gratefully give of ourselves as we continue our worship with the presentation of our tithes and offerings:

**OFFERINGS TO GOD**

**Offertory**

**Dr. Elizabeth Davis**

"What Shall I Give to the Child in the Manger?" - Douglas E. Wagner

**\*Doxology**

*The Hymnal #592*

**\*Offertory Prayer**

Eternal God, whose gift of love we can never repay, we offer these symbols of our gratitude. As we exercise our own generosity, make us sensitive to the sisters and brothers you call us to love. May our gifts and prayers lift us all to a new awareness of the fullness of your grace. Amen.

Let us remain standing and reaffirm our Christian faith using the words of the fourth chapter of Paul's letter to the Galatians, beginning at the fourth verse. The words are printed in our bulletins. Let us say what we believe...

**AFFIRMATION OF FAITH**

**Galatians 4:3-7**

"When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. Therefore, because we are His children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" Therefore we are no longer slaves, but sons and daughters, and heirs, through God."

**\*BENEDICTION**

**“Merry Christmas”**

None of us could possibly imagine the number of times in the coming days and weeks we will greet and be greeted by others with the words, “Merry Christmas”. No other greeting seems quite as appropriate; anything less than these words would indicate that the spirit of Christmas had passed indifferently by.

Our word “merry” suggests mirth, gaiety, and jollity. It speaks of fellowship, high spirits, and lightheartedness. All of these are a part of the blessing that we extend to our friends. But centuries ago, the word “merry” had other connotations as well. It meant peacefulness and blessedness. Today, we need both meanings.

Merry Christmas should be said as a prayer more than as an offhand salutation. When we say Merry Christmas, we are hoping that the spiritual peace of God may rest upon the lives and homes of our friends, and that through such a blessing they may find real joy and release from life’s heartaches. Therefore, let your “Merry Christmas” greeting be a prayer for Divine benediction.

Our prayer for all of you is that you will have a Merry Christmas, with this Christmas bringing God into your life and an awareness of Christ’s presence into your hearts. Would you stand to receive the benediction:

May love of God the Father, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be upon you and bring to you and all you love a very Merry Christmas...Amen.

**\*CONGREGATIONAL RESPONSE TO BENEDICTION**

“God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen”

God rest you merry, gentlemen, let nothing you dismay.  
Remember Christ our Savior was born on Christmas Day,  
To save us all from Satan’s power when we were gone astray.  
O tidings of comfort and joy, comfort and joy;  
O tidings of comfort and joy.  
Now to the Lord sing praises, all you within this place,  
And with true love & brotherhood each other now embrace;  
This holy tide of Christmas all others doth deface.  
O tidings of comfort and joy, comfort and joy;  
O tidings of comfort and joy.

**\*POSTLUDE**