

THE NATIVITY OF OUR LORD - CHRISTMAS EVE

December 24, 2020

ST. PAUL'S LUTHERAN CHURCH, FALLS CHURCH, VA



PRELUDE *Sussex Carol* Setting: Daniel Burton

CALL TO WORSHIP #382 st. 1, 4, 5 *We Praise You, Jesus, at Your Birth*

- 1 **We praise You, Jesus, at Your birth;
Clothed in flesh You came to earth.
The virgin bears a sinless boy
And all the angels sing for joy.
Alleluia!**

- 4 **The Light Eternal, breaking through,
Made the world to gleam anew;
His beams have pierced the core of night,
He makes us children of the light.
Alleluia!**

- 5 **The very Son of God sublime
Entered into earthly time
To lead us from this world of cares
To heaven's courts as blessed heirs.
Alleluia!**

INVOCATION

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

INTROIT (from Psalm 98)

Oh sing to the LORD a new song, for he has done marvelous things!
His right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him.

The LORD has made known his salvation;
He has revealed his righteousness in the sight of the nations.

He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel.
All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God.

PRAYER

Let us pray. O God, because you once caused this holy night to shine with the brightness of the true Light, grant that we who have known the mystery of that Light here on earth may come to the full measure of its joys in heaven; through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

- 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***

Refrain

**O come, let us adore Him,
O come, let us adore Him,
O come, let us adore Him,
Christ the Lord!**

- 2 Highest, most holy,
Light of Light eternal,
Born of a virgin, a mortal He comes;
Son of the Father
Now in flesh appearing! *Refrain***

- 3 Sing, choirs of angels,
Sing in exultation,
Sing, all ye citizens of heaven above!
Glory to God
In the highest: *Refrain***

BIDDING PRAYER

Beloved in Christ, at this Christmastide let it be our care and delight to hear again the message of the angels, and in heart and mind to go even unto Bethlehem and see this thing which is come to pass, and the Babe lying in a manger. Let us read and mark in Holy Scripture the story of the loving purposes of God and the glorious redemption brought us by this Holy Child. But first, let us pray for the needs of the whole world; for peace on earth and goodwill among all His people, for unity within the Church He came to build, and especially in this congregation. And because this would rejoice His heart, let us remember, in His name, the poor and helpless, the cold, the hungry, and the oppressed; the sick and those who mourn, the lonely and the unloved, the aged and little children; all those who know not the Lord Jesus, or who love Him not, or who by sin have grieved His heart of love. Lastly, let us remember before God all those who rejoice with us but upon another shore, and in a greater light, that multitude which no man could number, whose hope was in the Word made flesh, and with whom in the Lord Jesus we are one forevermore.

Into your hands, O Lord, we commend all for whom we pray, trusting in your mercy; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

OLD TESTAMENT READING – Isaiah 9:2-7

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.
You have multiplied the nation;

you have increased its joy;
 they rejoice before you
 as with joy at the harvest,
 as they are glad when they divide the spoil.
 For the yoke of his burden,
 and the staff for his shoulder,
 the rod of his oppressor,
 you have broken as on the day of Midian.
 For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult
 and every garment rolled in blood
 will be burned as fuel for the fire.
 For to us a child is born,
 to us a son is given;
 and the government shall be upon his shoulder,
 and his name shall be called
 Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
 Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
 Of the increase of his government and of peace
 there will be no end,
 on the throne of David and over his kingdom,
 to establish it and to uphold it
 with justice and with righteousness
 from this time forth and forevermore.
 The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

QUARTET O Little Town of Bethlehem

- | | |
|---|--|
| <p>1 O little town of Bethlehem,
 How still we see thee lie!
 Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
 The silent stars go by;
 Yet in thy dark streets shineth
 The everlasting light.
 The hopes and fears of all the years
 Are met in thee tonight.</p> | <p>3 How silently, how silently
 The wondrous gift is giv'n!
 So God imparts to human hearts
 The blessings of His heav'n.
 No ear may hear His coming;
 But in this world of sin,
 Where meek souls will receive Him, still
 The dear Christ enters in.</p> |
| <p>2 O morning stars, together
 Proclaim the holy birth,
 And praises sing to God the king
 And peace to all the earth!
 For Christ is born of Mary,
 And, gathered all above
 While mortals sleep, the angels keep
 Their watch of wond'ring love.</p> | <p>4 O holy Child of Bethlehem,
 Descend to us, we pray;
 Cast out our sin, and enter in,
 Be born in us today.
 We hear the Christmas angels
 The great glad tidings tell;
 O come to us, abide with us,
 Our Lord Immanuel!</p> |

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

HYMN #376 Once in Royal David's City

- 1** Once in royal David's city
Stood a lowly cattle shed,
Where a mother laid her baby
In a manger for His bed:
Mary was that mother mild,
Jesus Christ her little child.
- 2** He came down to earth from heaven,
Who is God and Lord of all,
And His shelter was a stable,
And His cradle was a stall;
With the poor and mean and lowly
Lived on earth our Savior holy.
- 3** For He is our childhood's pattern,
Day by day like us He grew;
He was little, weak, and helpless,
Tears and smiles like us He knew;
And He feels for all our sadness,
And He shares in all our gladness.
- 4** And our eyes at last shall see Him,
Through His own redeeming love;
For that child so dear and gentle
Is our Lord in heav'n above;
And He leads His children on
To the place where He is gone.
- 5** Not in that poor, lowly stable
With the oxen standing by
Shall we see Him, but in heaven,
Set at God's right hand on high.
Then like stars His children, crowned,
All in white, His praise will sound!

THE CHRISTMAS GOSPEL Part 1 Luke 2:1-7

And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria. And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city.

And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; because he was of the house and lineage of David; to be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her first born son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.

HYMN #372 sts. 1, 2, 6 O Jesus Christ, Thy Manger Is

- 1 O Jesus Christ,
 Thy manger is
My paradise at which my soul reclineth.
 For there, O Lord,
 Doth lie the Word
Made flesh for us; herein Thy grace forth shineth.**

- 2 He whom the sea
 And wind obey
Doth come to serve the sinner in great meekness.
 Thou, God's own Son,
 With us art one,
Dost join us and our children in our weakness.**

- 6 The world may hold
 Her wealth and gold;
But thou, my heart, keep Christ as thy true treasure.
 To Him hold fast
 Until at last
A crown be thine and honor in full measure.**

THE CHRISTMAS GOSPEL Part 2 Luke 2:8-14

And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, 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, good will toward men.”

HYMN #380 Hark! The Herald Angels Sing

- 1 Hark! The herald angels sing,
"Glory to the newborn King;
Peace on earth and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled!"
Joyful, all ye nations, rise,
Join the triumph of the skies;
With the_angelic host proclaim,
"Christ is born in Bethlehem!" *Refrain***

Refrain

**Hark! The herald angels sing,
"Glory to the newborn King!"**

- 2 Christ, by highest heav'n adored,
Christ, the everlasting Lord,
Late in time behold Him come,
Offspring of a virgin's womb.
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see,
Hail the_incarinate Deity!
Pleased as Man with man to dwell,
Jesus, our Immanuel! *Refrain***
- 3 Hail, the heav'n-born Prince of Peace!
Hail, the Sun of Righteousness!
Light and life to all He brings,
Ris'n with healing in His wings.
Mild He lays His glory by,
Born that man no more may die,
Born to raise the sons of earth,
Born to give them second birth. *Refrain***

THE CHRISTMAS GOSPEL – Part 3 (Luke 2:15-20)

And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. And all they had heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them. (KJV)

HYMN #378 Break Forth, O Beauteous Heavenly Light

- 1 Break forth, O beauteous heav'nly light,
And usher in the morning.
Ye shepherds, shrink not with affright,
The day of grace is dawning.
This Child, though weak in infancy,
Our confidence and joy shall be,
The pow'r of Satan breaking,
Our peace with God now making.**

- 2 O dearest Child, whom I adore,
Whose grace surpasses measure,
My Brother, whom I cherish more
Than earth with all its treasure:
Haste from Thy manger to depart,
O come and dwell within my heart;
With joy will I receive Thee,
A cradle there will give Thee.**
- 3 All blessing, thanks, and praise to Thee,
Lord Jesus Christ, be given:
Thou hast my Brother deigned to be,
Thou Lord of earth and heaven.
Help me throughout this day of grace
To praise Thy love and seek Thy face;
And when I stand before Thee
Forever to adore Thee.**

SERMON

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus. Amen. Dear friends in Christ:

The Christmas celebration, as you know, includes many wonderful expressions of our faith and our hope. And one of the best is the singing of Christmas carols – many of which you know well, and some that you probably don't.

This year as I was doing my preparations for tonight's sermon, I found that my thoughts kept returning to the most popular Christmas hymn of all - *Silent Night*. One reason for this, I know, is that the singing of this hymn is always one of the highlights of the Christmas Eve service – one of the highlights of the year, in fact – and this year its singing would present some problems. Prior to singing we always pass the light from the Christ Candle to one another. How would that work in this year of the pandemic? How would we pass the light without potentially passing the virus too? And how would we sing without doing this too?

Beyond the logistical issue, I know I was also thinking of that song because of how beautifully and how efficiently it describes the nativity scene. This fall, our Sunday morning Zoom fellowship gatherings have included a poem, and through our study and discussion of these I have grown in my appreciation of good verse. *Silent Night* very impressively includes the idea of silence in each of its three stanzas while also managing to tell the whole story of that night – parts of which weren't so silent. A nice effect!

Through further study I've discovered that the song stands within centuries of Christian artists and writers who have also expressed the idea of silence when capturing the scene. "Silence" is certainly an appropriate word to describe the experience of that small, simple family – gathered by themselves, away from their home, relegated to a stable, exhausted from the travails of birth. But even more, it captures the wonder of a scene which leaves us silently speechless as God's own Son and love's pure light casts forth its radiant beams and ushers in the dawn of redeeming grace.

The song really is amazing. There's a reason it's so popular. Why wouldn't I think of it in preparation for this night?

And yet, this year I'm sure there was one more reason I thought of it.

Like most of us, I've experienced a lot more silence this year than I am used to. Because of the awful pandemic, I haven't had many gatherings with friends. And I haven't gone to concerts. I haven't gone to choir rehearsal. I haven't gone to live sporting events. I haven't gone to full and bustling restaurants. We didn't hold our family reunion. There was no in-person graduation ceremony for our son. Etc.

There were a lot of things I didn't get to do. And there were a lot of things you missed as well. Missing them brought about a silence. And not a good silence.

Yes, we had sound coming from the video screen and the home speakers and the telephone and the headphones. And it helped. In many cases it even sufficed quite well. But not in every case. In some cases – many in fact – it just wasn't the same.

At church, the silence has been deafening. Normally on Sundays we are saying hello, checking in, interacting in Sunday School or Bible Class, sharing an activity of music or service. This year we've had to cut way back. I haven't seen or talked to many of you in months. When we do connect, our conversations are usually short. You haven't been able to talk with each other like you normally do either. We've tried to facilitate fellowship. There's been contact. But not with everyone. And not at the same level.

In reading the nativity text again this year, one line that hits me hard is "and there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night." I worry that this shepherd – me – hasn't kept adequate watch over his flock during this long night of the pandemic. I've made choices, come up with alternate strategies... and pray that they've been sufficient.

One of those choices – made on good advice, I believe – is to stop singing when we worship together. I know you get to see me singing on our recorded services, but it's not the same as singing with the full congregation. And I've spent a lot of time in the church sanctuary with our extra on-site services, and these are all done without singing. Let me tell you, it's hard for Lutherans to give up singing! It seems weird to gather without it. Just like it seems weird to sing along with a video. But we've all done what we need to do. And made our adjustments.

These adjustments have no doubt led us to appreciate certain things in new ways. The phrase "meditate on the text of the hymn" has been added to our liturgical directions – and I've found that as much as I didn't like such silent meditation at first, I now consider it to be a very good thing.

Likewise, times of quiet without a text can be nice too. And it makes me wonder if perhaps embracing a little more silence in our time together would be beneficial.

If the silence in the life of the church has brought both challenges and blessings, then the silence that occurs in the rest of life certainly brings both as well. Especially challenge. Consider, for instance, how the pandemic has forced each of us to make new and difficult choices pertaining to safety. This has

been incredibly challenging – each day deciding what is essential and what is not, what needs to change and what can stay the same, where we can go and where we can't, who we can see and who we can't, etc. Many of these choices are excruciating because of the pain they involve. We worry about whether our choices might lead to our illness or the illness of others. And, on the other hand, we worry about whether our choices for safety will cause us to fail in other ways. It occurs to many of us that the treatments we choose might be worse than the disease.

And, if that isn't enough, we worry too about what others will say about our choices. We've observed that amidst the silence caused by the voids of our lives many people fill those voids with their angry accusations. We see it in the daily news. We see it on social media. We definitely saw it in our political process this year – possibly more than ever before. As a result, at a time when we need to be communicating with one another more than ever, we now choose silence because we don't want to reveal a choice that another might find unacceptable or share an experience that someone may question.

I hold out hope that the very difficult choices we are all being forced to make right now will teach us to be more gracious toward others. At least that is my hope and my prayer. But even if we do grow in grace, I am still concerned about the silence.

In the midst of this concern, I guess I find myself craving the kind of silence that comes from the singing of *Silent Night* on Christmas Eve. This is the silence where we are quiet but also expressive. Where we can speak of silence but raise our voices. This is the silence where we stand alone before God in the darkness but also join with others singing the same song. It is the silence where we can be calm but also bright. It is the silence where we sleep in heavenly peace.

This year's singing of *Silent Night* will be different. Maybe you'll sing it to this video. Maybe we'll get to sing it in our small group outside at the church. Although as I'm writing this sermon, I see that the forecast that night is for rain. Whatever happens, it will be a different kind of *Silent Night* moment than most of us are used to.

But of course, the moment is always a little different each year. There was the year that you dripped candle wax and got distracted. There was the year you were the acolyte and worried about making a mistake. There was the year you were angry and in a foul mood. There was the year that your grandfather, or your mother, or your spouse had died and wasn't there by your side. There was the year when your child announced: "I'm no longer going." There was the year that you and your new friend spent Christmas together for the very first time.

The beautiful moment that is the singing of *Silent Night* is always different. But its beauty remains.

And, more importantly, the Lord is always there at that moment. His glories are streaming from heaven afar all the way into your heart. His beams of light are radiating from his holy face onto yours. The heavenly hosts surround you singing "Alleluia! Christ the Savior is born!"

Christ our Savior came to save us from our sins and give us peace – with God and with one another – as the angels announced. Christ would do this through his ministry. He would do it through the cross.

The Christmas Gospel concludes with Mary treasuring all these things and pondering them. This is something we are called to do too on this night. For as we ponder and remember and give thanks – our silent nights become holy nights. And God gives his greatest gift once again.

May God be with you always - in the name of Jesus our Savior. Amen.

HYMN #384 Of the Father's Love Begotten

- 1 Of the Father's love begotten
Ere the worlds began to be,
He is Alpha and Omega,
He the source, the ending He,
Of the things that are, that have been,
And that future years shall see
Evermore and evermore.**
- 2 Oh, that birth forever blessèd,
When the virgin, full of grace,
By the Holy Ghost conceiving,
Bore the Savior of our race,
And the babe, the world's Redeemer,
First revealed His sacred face
Evermore and evermore.**
- 3 This is He whom seers in old time
Chanted of with one accord,
Whom the voices of the prophets
Promised in their faithful word.
Now He shines, the long-expected;
Let creation praise its Lord
Evermore and evermore.**
- 4 O ye heights of heav'n, adore Him;
Angel hosts, His praises sing.
Pow'rs, dominions, bow before Him
And extol our God and King.
Let no tongue on earth be silent,
Ev'ry voice in concert ring
Evermore and evermore.**
- 5 Christ, to Thee, with God the Father,
And, O Holy Ghost, to Thee
Hymn and chant and high thanksgiving
And unending praises be,
Honor, glory, and dominion,
And eternal victory
Evermore and evermore. Amen.**

NICENE CREED

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father. Through Him all things were made. For us and for our salvation He came down from heaven; by the power of the Holy Spirit He became incarnate from the virgin Mary, and was made man. For our sake He was crucified under Pontius Pilate; He suffered death and was buried. On the third day He rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and His kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son. With the Father and the Son he is worshiped and glorified. He has spoken through the prophets. We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

OFFERING *Bring a Torch* Setting: Lani Smith

PRAYERS OF THE CHURCH

Let us pray.

Lord God Almighty, we come before You on this most holy night in awe at the wonder and majesty of the incarnation. The Savior of the nations has come! With joy we greet our newborn King!

Let the proclamation of His birth sound forth throughout the world. Lead and empower us, as witnesses of your grace, to share the good news that he has come to bring hope and healing, and that in his birth You have signaled the beginning of a new creation.

Strengthen our faith and keep us in your care. Sustain us through your gifts of word and sacrament. Remind us that though we live in a world wracked by the ravages of sin the final victory is Yours. And help us to live as your holy people.

O God, as you make us glad by the yearly festival of the birth of your only-begotten Son Jesus Christ, grant that we, who joyfully receive him as our Redeemer, may with sure confidence behold him when he comes to be our judge; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

HYMN #363 *Silent Night*

- 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,
Heav'nly 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.**

PRAYER

Ah, dearest Jesus, holy Child,
Prepare a bed, soft, undefiled,
Within my heart, that it may be
A quiet chamber kept for Thee.

BENEDICTION

And now may the blessing of Almighty God
Father, Son and Holy Spirit
be and abide with you forever. Amen.

HYMN #387 Joy to the World

- 1 Joy to the world, the Lord is come!
Let earth receive her King;
Let ev'ry heart prepare Him room
And heav'n and nature sing,
And heav'n and nature sing,
And heav'n, and heav'n and nature sing.**
- 2 Joy to the earth, the Savior reigns!
Let men 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 No more let sins and sorrows grow
Nor thorns infest the ground;
He comes to make His blessings flow
Far as the curse is found,
Far as the curse is found,
Far as, far as the curse is found.**
- 4 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, wonders of His love.**

POSTLUDE Joy to the World Setting Ronald Nelson

Those serving:

Violin: Shaw-Hwa Yang

Trumpet: Amelia Jansen

Quartet: Tamara Brown, Melissa Hecht, Aaron Jansen, Mark Shaltanis

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