**CHRISTMAS EVE service, December 24, 2020**

**zion lutheran church, philipsburg**

**GATHERING**

The Holy Spirit calls us together as the people of God.

**Prelude *Twas in the Moon of Wintertime***

**BELLS OF ZION**

I invite you to gather two candles tonight, one to light now for the duration of the service and another to light during our candle lighting and singing of Silent Night.

**CHRISTMAS LITANY-** Karen Ware Jackson\*

Together we light one candle for Christ. Because the world is broken and the wait is long, but Christ is with us through it all. In a humble manger in a back-water town - a baby, on a convict’s cross - a King. In every heart and every home where hope, peace, joy, and love endure, Christ with us.

“Glory to God in the Highest heaven,” she whispers, “and peace to all on earth.”

So, we light one candle, because it only takes one: Christ with us.

**CALL TO WORSHIP**

Because Christ has been born in the world,

people who walked in darkness now live in great light.

Because Christ was born in the world,

the power to oppress and kill will not stand.

Because Christ has been born in the world, we respond in wonder:

With the angels we sing glory to God, with the shepherds we share the good news, with Mary we ponder the words of this night, and the Word that has come into the world.

**GATHERING SONG*O Come, All Ye Faithful* (ELW 283)**

**ANNOUNCEMENTS**

Welcome to everyone on this Christmas Eve, 2020, where we continue to gather safely from the comfort of our homes as a reminder of our love for one another. This certainly was not how I expected to be celebrating my first Christmas Eve with you all. I have many emotions about not being able to gather together on this the most holiest of nights. Like many of you, I am deeply missing the community and fellowship, the candles and the carols, and the joy and peace present in the Christmas Eve service. But we do this so we can gather next year.

The service will contain a mixture of different voices (including a call and echo version of the Lord’s Prayer in German, thanks to Kathy Kunz for her contribution!) and different instruments, some videos and of course the beloved chimes of our organ. My hope is that many of you are gathering around your laptop or phone or tablet at 7:00, the usual start time of our Christmas Eve service, with your candles prepared and one already lit. I encourage you to dim your lights and relax and enjoy the music, the Word and prayers that will follow. I will be doing the same with my family, so we will all be worshiping together. It reminds me of one of my favourite television show, the Walton’s, where everyone gathered around the radio to listen.

After the service around 8:00, we will have a Goto meeting Happy Hour. Come join in and share some Christmas cheer!

Our Sunday service on December 27th will be a Lessons and Carol Service prepared by the Nith Valley Ministry Area. There will be no coffee hour on December 27.

As we enter the final week of 2020, please remember that Zion relies on your continued support each week to meet our monthly expenses. Thank you to all who support and pray for our congregation. If you have a donation please try to get it to the church before December 29th. One can phone Gwen K to arrange to drop it off at the church. If you need a donation picked up, please call me, or any council member. We give thanks to the Rev. Karen Ware Jackson for the Christmas litany.

**GREETING**

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God,

and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

**And also with you.**

**PRAYER OF THE DAY**

Let us pray.

Almighty God, you made this holy night shine with the brightness of the true Light. Grant that here on earth we may walk in the light of Jesus’ presence and in the last day wake to the brightness of his glory; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

**Amen.**

***CAROL- The First Noel***

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1mItWsC8RtM&t=197s>

**WORD**

God speaks to us in scripture reading, preaching, and song.

**1st READING: Isaiah 9:2-7**

A reading from Isaiah.

2The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined.3You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. 4For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian.  
5For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. 6For a child has been born for us, a son given to us;  
authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. 7His authority shall grow continually,  
and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

**CAROL- *O Holy Night***

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_SpWbLhts-M>

**2nd READING: Titus 2:11-14**

A reading from Titus.

11The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, 12training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, 13while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. 14He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.

**CAROL- *What Child is This***

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lJ_o85Byb-g>

**3rd reading: Luke 2:1-7**

1In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3All went to their own towns to be registered. 4Joseph 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. 5He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. 6While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 7And 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.

**CAROL- *Away in a Manger (278)***

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pVSoAM7YrxE>

**4th READING: Luke 1: 8-20**

8In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. 12This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” 13And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,14“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!” 15When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” 16So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. 17When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; 18and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. 19But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. 20The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

**CAROL- *Angels We Have Heard in High (289)***

**reflection**

I wonder how the shepherds must have felt on that night so long ago when Jesus was born. Did they know that their lives would be forever transformed? I invite you to close your eyes and imagine yourself as a shepherd in ancient times watching over your flock of sheep at night, keeping them safe from harm. The night is dark, the sky is clear, there is a bright star shining off in the distance and there is a chill in the air. There is a fire going close by to bring some warmth to your weary and sore bones. The cave where you sleep is also nearby. It is not a great place of comfort; you have not slept in a normal bed for months, straw acts as your mattress and some old sheepskins provide a bit of warmth on cool nights. Such is the life of a shepherd in ancient times. It was a dirty, smelly, and solitary occupation. Shepherds were looked down upon in ancient times because they did not follow the Jewish laws of cleanliness, and because of their transient nature, they were not regarded as trustworthy. They were poor and often found themselves at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder. The shepherds lived far off in the countryside, away from the hustle and bustle of Jerusalem where the census was taking place. The census was a tactic by the Roman emperor to collect more taxes from folks, many who lived in extreme poverty and neglect. You as a shepherd are glad to be away from the city where there was so much unrest, chaos, and oppression.

You are contentedly watching your sheep when suddenly a light from above catches your attention. The light is getting brighter and your pulse begins to quicken. The fear inside you is building and you are unsure of what is happening. The light becomes blinding, so much that your eyes naturally close and when you finally open them, something or someone has appeared in front of you. It is an angel! You have heard stories about angels from scripture, but you have never seen one before. You are afraid and wonder why an angel would want to visit a group of smelly shepherds watching over their flocks of sheep in the middle of the night. Suddenly the angel begins to speak saying, “do not be afraid, for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord” ( Luke 2: 10-11). You are still unsure, but no longer as fearful, in fact you feel a sense of calm, peace and excitement as you digest what the angel has said. Suddenly a whole group of angels appear, and they begin to sing and praise God, saying Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace among those whom he favours (Luke 2:14)! Then as suddenly as they appeared, the angels were gone, leaving you and the other shepherds alone in the darkness and beauty of the night.

The other shepherds look at you in disbelief, they cannot believe what just happened right before their eyes. Did angels really appear? And why on earth would angels appear to a bunch of shepherds? Despite the uncertainty, each of you feel drawn to go to the place where the angels said the baby was born, so you follow the star and journey to Bethlehem. You want to see this baby, this Messiah for yourself. When you arrive, you are greeted by Mary and Joseph and a tiny babe sleeping peacefully in a manger. At that moment you are changed, and you believe when the angels said that this was the Messiah, the Savior of the world. This was God made human in the flesh. The shepherds were humbled and amazed that this babe was the good news that would bring hope to a broken and weary world. He would bring equality to all people, and he would be a great sign of joy, peace, and love opposite to the oppression and hate that they lived with for so long. This babe was the promise of God revealed not to kings and queens, or priests and rulers, but to a bunch of forlorn and forgotten shepherds who followed their faith and their hearts. This babe was the good news who was named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father and Prince of Peace. This babe was the light in the darkness, a different kind of king who would bring peace, love, and hope to the world.

The shepherds had nothing to offer the family. They had no wealth or gifts to give them. They did, however, have their testimony to share with all who would listen. And share they did! The shepherds had a new and profound hope for the future knowing that a transformation had taken place, that the world was truly about to turn. The shepherds were transformed, and they left rejoicing, praising, and glorifying God telling everyone the good news.

We are not living in easy times right now. The numbers of Covid cases are rising around us, and another lockdown will begin on Boxing Day. Hospital beds are filling up and the number of deaths are increasing especially within our vulnerable populations. Folks have financial worries and health worries besides the virus. Doctors are seeing large increases in the number of visits and calls to their offices for mental health issues. Some folks are putting up their Christmas trees but just can’t bring themselves to put the on ornaments as they usually do. We are all struggling in some way. So, how in this season of Christmas 2020, do we continue to give glory and praise to God when there is so much struggle, grief, and fear around us? Where do we find the hope that gives us courage to face another day?

The answer is in that tiny babe lying in the manger. The birth of Jesus in ancient times brought hope and light to a world that was filled with darkness. And that tiny babe still comes to us today offering hope in the darkness and worry of this pandemic and all of the other struggles that we are facing. The birth of Jesus Christ offers us peace and comfort in the isolation and loneliness of not being able to gather with family and friends, knowing that we are not alone. We as a church are offered comfort and peace knowing that we cannot physically gather in our beloved church on this most holy of nights, but that the Holy Spirit connects us in love and faith when we pray for one another, when we make a phone call, or send a card. The peace of God is with us in the beauty of an undecorated Christmas tree, in delivering cookies and meals to one another showing our love and appreciation for one another. Nothing, not even a pandemic, can separate us from the love and grace of God.

The gift of God becoming human some 2000 years ago gives us solace in knowing that God truly understands what we are going through. God knows that we are hurting right now. God knows that some days the pain and grief just washes over us and that we just want some kind of certainty and normalcy back in our lives. The angels calmed the shepherds that night so long ago, telling them not to be afraid, and that promise holds true for us today. My beloved children of God, do not be afraid, trust in the love, grace, joy, and mercy of a loving God who comes to us not just on this holiest of all nights but in every day and every age no matter the struggles we face. Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace among all he favours. Let it be so. Amen.

**CAROL- *While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks by Nigh***

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IgYzJDxxzN8>

**PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION**

Joining our voices with the song of the angels, let us pray for the church, the world, and all who are in need. *A brief silence.*

The shepherds sing and praise God saying, “Jesus Christ is born!” Let your church throughout the world proclaim this good news, over the hills and everywhere. Unite the voices of all your faithful people in songs of praise and rejoicing. Holy Child of Bethlehem, **Hear our prayer.**

Heaven and nature sing, “Joy to the world!” Give respite to flocks, fields, and those who tend them. Come near to us in the beauty of nighttime, the shining of the stars, and the hush of a world at rest. May our wonder at your creation rouse our care for all the earth. Holy Child of Bethlehem, **Hear our prayer.**

The angels sing, “Peace on earth!” Come quickly to still the strife of this world. Hush the noise of war and violence in places of unrest. Inspire leaders of nations to seek lasting peace and sustainable provision for all in their care. Holy Child of Bethlehem, **Hear our prayer.**

Mary sings melodies of comfort to her newborn child. Send relief to all hospital workers who are exhausted and frustrated, bring peace and comfort to long term care workers who too are exhausted and spread thin. Bring rest and reassurance to those facing struggles this night, for all who lie in hospitals beds isolated from family and friends, for those who will die alone. Console all who are in pain from injury, depression, or anxiety. Relieve and heal all who are sick or hurting from all disease including COVID-19 and cancer, heart disease and stroke. We remember Eddy, Elaine, Susie, Ruth, Donelda, Lynette, Barb, Sarah, Alea, Stephanie, Joe, Greg, Tyler, Mary Ann, and those we name in the stillness of our hearts. Holy Child of Bethlehem, **Hear our prayer.**

Love sings through the sound of a new baby’s cry. Bless new parents and expectant parents. Comfort those who long for children, especially those running out of hope or options. Surround families of every shape and size with your love and care. Holy Child of Bethlehem, **Hear our prayer.**

The heavenly chorus sings, “Glory to God in the highest!” We give you thanks for all the saints who have proclaimed your glory in word and deed especially Ruby and Harold. Let us join them this night in joyful praise around your eternal throne. Holy Child of Bethlehem, **Hear our prayer.**

God of mercy, come quickly to us with grace upon grace as we lift these and all our prayers to you, in the name of Jesus. **Amen.**

**PEACE**

The peace of Christ be with you always.

**And also with you.**

**LORD’S PRAYER**

Gathered into one by the Holy Spirit, let us pray as Jesus taught us.

**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 trespasses,**

**as we forgive those**

**who trespass against us;**

**and lead us not into temptation,**

**but deliver us from evil.**

**For thine is the kingdom,**

**and the power, and the glory,**

**forever and ever. Amen.**

**THE GOSPEL OF THE INCARNATION: John 1:1-14**

**1** In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. **2**He was in the beginning with God. **3**All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being **4**in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. **5**The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.**6**There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. **7**He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. **8**He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. **9**The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. **10**He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. **11**He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. **12**But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, **13**who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.**14**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.

*At this time, please light your candles, and join in singing Silent Night.*

**CAROL- *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 your holy face,

with the dawn of redeeming grace,

Jesus, Lord, at your birth,

Jesus, Lord, at your birth.

**SENDING**

God blesses us and sends us in mission to the world.

**BLESSING**

Almighty God, who sent the Holy Spirit to Mary, proclaimed joy through the angels, sent the shepherds with good news, and led the magi by a star, bless you this day+ through the Word made flesh. **Amen**

**DISMISSAL**

Glory to God in the highest!

**Peace to God’s people on earth!**

Go in peace. Share the gift of Jesus.

**Thanks be to God**

**SENDING SONG *Joy to the World (267)***

**POSTLUDE- *Go Tell It On The Mountain***

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wYWvs3t6B3g>

\*Karen Ware Jackson, 2020. Permission is granted for home and congregational use

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