

*Silent
Night*

Three lit white candles are arranged in a cluster against a dark blue background. The candles are lit, with bright yellow and orange flames. The lighting is soft, creating a warm and serene atmosphere. The candles are of varying heights and are positioned in the lower half of the frame, with the text 'Silent Night' above them and 'Holy Night' below them.

*Holy
Night*

Christmas Eve Candlelighting Service

December 24, 2020

PRELUDE:

O Magnum Mysterium

Morten Lauridsen

WORDS OF WELCOME AND GATHERING THOUGHTS

We have come here to celebrate; a child has been born for us.

His name is called Wonderful Counselor, Good Shepherd, Lamb of God.

He is the babe of Bethlehem and the mighty Lord.

His name is called Savior, author of life, bread of life.

He is called friend and guide, and we call him ever lasting life and Prince of Peace and the one who brings love to all humankind.

Let us worship with joyous and thankful praise, God is with us.

CHORAL INTROIT: “Once in Royal David’s City”

CALL TO WORSHIP

The impossible is about to happen in a stable this night, for the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; and those who lived in a land of deep darkness, on them has the light shined!

This is the evening when all of creation stood still and held its breath, for God was doing the most unbelievable, dangerous thing. This is the evening when God embraced humanity from the inside, as one of us, from birth to death.

For in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth. Amen!

OPENING HYMN:

“O Come, All Ye Faithful”

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!

O come let us adore him,

O come let us adore him,

O come let us adore him, Christ the, Lord.

Sing, choirs of angels, sing in exultation,

O sing, all ye citizens of heaven above;

Glory to God, all glory in the highest:

O come let us adore him,

O come let us adore him,

O come let us adore him, Christ the, Lord.

Yea, Lord, we greet thee, born this happy morning;
Jesus, to thee be glory given;
-Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing:

O come let us adore him,
O come let us adore him,
O come let us adore him, Christ the, Lord.

PRAYER OF INVOCATION

Holy God, take us into that night long ago, and in our imaginations, let us marvel at the holy child, worship on bended knee and sing with the angels.

Let us behold the tender care of Mary and the watchful care of Joseph. Let us be blessed by the gaze of the Christ child.

Loving God, when this service has ended, may we be like the shepherds, singing and praising God, for Christ is born again and again, born to set us free, born to give us hope, born to change the world. Let it happen again. Amen.

THE CHRISTMAS STORY

HYMN

“O Little Town of Bethlehem”

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.

For Christ is born of Mary, and gathered all above,
While mortals sleep, the angels keep their watch of wondering love.
O morning stars, together proclaim the holy birth.
And praises sing to God, the King, and peace to all on earth.

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 Emmanuel!

READING FROM THE SCRIPTURES

Luke 2:1-14

2In 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.

8 In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11 to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. 12 This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' 13 And 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 favours!'

MUSICAL SELECTION:

READING FROM THE SCRIPTURES

Luke 2:15-20

15 When 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.' 16 So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. 17 When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; 18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. 19 But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. 20 The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

HYMN: "Infant Holy, Infant Lowly"

Infant holy, Infant lowly, for His bed a cattle stall;
Oxen lowing, little knowing Christ the Babe is Lord of all.
Swift are winging, angles singing, noels ringing, tidings bringing;
Christ the Babe is Lord of all, Christ the Babe is Lord of all.

Flocks were sleeping, shepherds keeping vigil till the morning new;
Saw the glory, heard the story, tidings of a gospel true.
Thus rejoicing, free from sorrow, praises voicing, greet the morrow;
Christ the Babe was born for you, Christ the Babe was born for you.

READING FROM THE SCRIPTURES

Luke 1: 39-55

39 In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, 40 where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. 41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit 42 and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. 43 And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? 44 For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the

child in my womb leapt for joy. 45 And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'

46 And Mary said, 'My soul magnifies the Lord,
47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
48 for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.

50 His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.

51 He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;

53 he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.

54 He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,

55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.'

MEDITATION:

“The Announcement Celebration”

Having a baby is cause for celebration and, in the days before the ultrasound test, it used to carry with it some element of surprise. Would the baby be a boy or a girl?

These days, however, most people don't wait until the child enters the world to announce whether it's a him or her. "Gender reveal" parties are all the rage as people gather family and friends (and social media followers) at a party to show what little bundle of joy they are expecting. Most people agree this began with a simple post on social media in 2008, when a woman named Jenna Karvunidis and her husband cut into a cake revealing pink icing for a girl. She posted about it on her blog, and the idea soon went viral. But since social media makes everything a competition to go a step further, some gender reveal parties have actually gone way off the rails.

Take the case this fall of a gender reveal party in which the family paid for a plane to crop dust a field with 350 gallons of pink water to honor their unborn female child. The plane stalled out and crashed after dumping its shower of pink. In another incident in 2017, a father-to-be started a 47,000-acre wildfire that caused \$8.2 million in damage when he shot his hunting rifle at an explosive target full of blue powder. No one was killed in either of these incidents, but that wasn't the case in October 2019, when an Iowa woman was killed by flying shrapnel when another pyrotechnic gender reveal was inadvertently turned into a pipe bomb.

We can blame this on Instagram or on the fact that we now tend to over-script and over-celebrate most things in life to impress strangers. Can you imagine your great-grandparents taking pictures of their dinner, for example? Whatever the impulse, gender reveal disasters can overshadow the joy of the actual birth of the baby.

The same tendency applies to the Christmas, too. Ostensibly, Christmas is about celebrating the birth of a baby, but we've become so scripted and overzealous in our celebration that we miss the real meaning of the event. Many (if not most) of the people who celebrate Christmas in our culture have only a vague notion that it has to do with

a birth and are much more interested in clogging malls, buying presents, shilling for Santa, and putting elves on shelves. Christmas started out as a fairly simple celebration around the fourth century, but lately has gone viral and burned an explosive swath of consumerism through culture. Somewhere in the midst of it all, people forgot what it was about: the most important reveal in history.

We read the familiar story of Jesus' birth according to the gospel of Luke. Maybe it has become so familiar that we miss the fact that the story was actually a more explosive revelation than anything one might create in their backyard. And yet, when God reveals the coming arrival of his Son, it isn't at a party, nor is it a media event. The reveal takes place in some quiet places: through the words of prophets, in the quiet of a tiny house in the nowhere town of Nazareth to a young girl engaged to be married, to shepherds, societal outcasts, sleeping in fields. God doesn't seem interested in making the arrival of Jesus a media event. Luke makes this clear and, in a way, sets up a contrast between Jesus and Caesar, whom he mentions at the beginning of Chapter 2. Caesar Augustus didn't do anything without making it a media event — the media in those days being heralds and coinage. Augustus had coins minted announcing that he was a "son of god" (in his case, being the adopted son of Julius Caesar, whom Augustus and others considered to be divine in some sense). "Lord" was a title reserved for Caesar, as was "Prince of Peace." Luke makes it clear in telling these announcement stories that Jesus is the true Son of God, the world's true Lord, and the real bringer of peace, but the announcement doesn't take place in the halls of the Roman or Judean government or in the first-century equivalent of social media. The announcement appears in nowhere places to people who are nobodies.

And the announcement isn't just, "It's a boy!" It's an announcement about his purpose. The angel tells Mary that he will be the holy "Son of God" (Luke 1:36). The angel tells the shepherds that he will be their "Savior," who is "the Messiah, the Lord:" the world's true king and Lord (2:12). In Rome, the army would sing their allegiance to Caesar, but in a field outside Bethlehem the angel armies of God declare his praise: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors" (v. 14).

It's the announcement that God had broken into a broken world, not in a heavenly display of fireworks, but in the form of a leaky, burpy, tiny human child. And this baby, fully human and fully divine, born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, will forever redefine humanity. Indeed, the real announcement of Christmas is that, in the coming of Jesus, God has rebooted the human race.

Paul's letter to Titus announces what has been revealed in the coming of Christ in powerful terms. The "grace of God" has appeared in Jesus, and that grace has spread like wildfire, offering salvation to all people (Titus 2:11). In Jesus, God has fully identified with humanity broken by sin and offered us new life, new birth, made possible in his victory over sin in his death and resurrection from the dead. He is the perfect model of humanity, the One who is "truly human" as the Nicene Creed says, who came down from heaven "for us and for our salvation." And as the new model for humanity, Paul says, he enables us in the power of the Holy Spirit to say "no" to the ways of a broken world. Instead, he guides us "to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly" while we wait for another reveal to come: the "blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ" (v. 13). The gift that he brings in his birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension is his self-giving love that can "redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds" (v. 14).

And that's the real surprise revealed on Christmas Eve. Not only is Jesus revealed as the world's true Savior and Lord, it's also the revelation that we, too, can be reborn as men and women who live the purpose and vocation for which we were created. As John puts it, when we receive Christ and believe in his name, we are given "power to become children of God, who were born not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of

man, but of God” (John 1:13). Jesus would tell Nicodemus that becoming a child of God requires being “born from above” and “born of water and the Spirit” (John 3:3, 5).

This is the good news that can’t be contained in a cake or blown up with fireworks. It’s the good news of the gospel that is revealed in Jesus Christ. It’s the good news that it doesn’t matter where you came from, where you were born, what the circumstances were; it doesn’t matter what your past looks like, what sins you’ve committed, what hurts and brokenness you have in your life. The good news is that Christ has come to offer you a new birth, a new beginning. His grace makes it possible for you to be forgiven, your life to be transformed; you can be made new! All you must do is receive him and let his grace and love catch fire in your life.

The Savior of the world has been revealed and laid in a manger. His coming, humanity and purpose were quietly revealed centuries before by prophets like Isaiah, who celebrated him as a child “born for us, a son given to us” who is the “Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father” and the true “Prince of Peace” who establishes the reign of God’s kingdom (Isaiah 9:6-7).

And that Savior reveals to us how we, too, can be revealed as people made new by his sacrificial and forgiving love.

That’s worth celebrating! No explosives required.

PASTORAL PRAYER AND THE LORD’S PRAYER

Our loving God: We thank you for giving us a chance once again to celebrate the birthday of your Son. We remember with awe the signs of his arrival: the glorious singing of the angels, the beckoning twinkle of the star, the hushed stillness of the night. We praise you for all who welcomed him: for sturdy, reliable Joseph; for beautiful, gentle Mary; for the shepherds, confused, but openhearted; for the wise men, astonished and deeply moved; and even for the cattle who looked on curiously and shared their home with him.

Father, we pray that our hearts may always be open, not just to the Christ child, but to all your children -- of all ages, all nations, all colors, of all diverse backgrounds. As you sent Jesus, not just to his own people, but to all the world as the bearer of the Good News of your love, so let us carry the Good News into a divided and hurting world, beginning with our own families, congregation and community. Make the spirit of Christmas linger in our hearts throughout the year, that we may freely and happily share your gifts with others.

We pray for those who have never heard the story of Jesus: that they may have a chance to hear it and to respond to his loving claim. We pray for others whose lives at this time are so filled with hate, violence and fear that they are unable to believe in your love. We pray especially for children -- in distant lands, but also in our land and nation to whom the day will bring nothing but more hunger, more dirt, more abuse. Help us to help them, so that their suffering may be relieved and their spirits lifted with hope. Be close to those who are separated from loved ones this night so that no one will feel lonely or isolated.

Reduce everywhere the murderous noise of war, so that the whole world may enjoy the stillness of Christmas Eve and clearly hear the song: “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth, peace, good will among the people.”

We offer this prayer in the name of the Lord Jesus, the Christ, our Savior, who was to teach us to pray to you by 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.

THE ARRIVAL OF THE CHRIST LIGHT

MUSICAL SELECTION: “O Holy Night”

LIGHTING OF THE CHRIST CANDLE

Jesus Christ is the Light of the World. Christ comes to dispel the darkness, to give us life and to shine as a beacon of salvation to the world. Christ’s light is an eternal flame that sets ablaze hope, peace, joy and love in the heart of every believer. Let us celebrate Emmanuel, God with us, the Light of the World!

Jesus says, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life” (John 8:12).

We receive the lit Christ Candle this Christmas Eve, proclaiming that Christ, the Light of the World, cannot be hidden, cannot be extinguished and cannot be overcome, for our Savior born this day comes to conquer evil, sin and death for all time.

Holy God, we are profoundly grateful for the life and light of your Son, our Savior, Jesus the Christ. We acknowledge the darkness in our world and in our own lives, and we ask for mercy and courage to become people of light. Shine into the hidden recesses of our hearts, exposing what needs to be forgiven, healed and made whole. Restore us to walk faithfully with you. With all the heavenly hosts, we praise you for this most precious gift of light and life, Jesus our Redeemer. Amen.

CANDELIGHTING SERVICE *with the singing of “Silent 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.

HYMN

“Joy to the World”

Joy to the world, the Lord is come! Let earth receive her King;
Let every heart prepare Him room,
And Heaven and nature sing, And Heaven and nature sing,
And Heaven, and Heaven, and nature sing.

Joy to the world, 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.

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.

CHRISTMAS BLESSING AND BENEDICTION

Walk softly, as you go through Christmas,
That each step may bring you down the starlit path, to the manger bed.
Talk quietly, as you Speak of Christmas that you shall not drown out
the glorious song of angels with idle Talk and Merriment.
Kneel reverently as you pause for Christmas, that you may feel again
The Spirit of the nativity, rekindled in your soul.
Rise eagerly, after you have trod the Christmas Path,
That you may serve more fully, the one whose birth we hail.

CHORAL RESPONSE:

“Good Christian Men, Rejoice”

POSTLUDE:

In Dulci Jubilo

JS Bach BWV 729

Rollstone Congregational Church

United Church of Christ

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