

St Paul United Church of Christ

Christmas Eve Service

December 24, 2020

Allen M Fluent, Transitional Pastor

(The traditional Holy Communion Worship Service for Christmas Eve will be conducted in the sanctuary of St Paul Church on Thursday, December 24, at 10:30 in the morning. This unusual early hour will make it possible for those who worship from their homes to receive the video service in time to use it on Christmas Eve. Masks will be required in the church, except when receiving the Communion. If you plan to attend the service at the church, sealed elements for the Communion service (bread and water) and a candle will be provided for you at the church. Those worshipping at home are invited to use whatever bread and drink you have and to light a candle for the service.)

Welcome, Announcements & Prayer Concerns

Prelude (Recording begins)

Jake Rizer

Advent Moment

Interruptions, Interruptions

Paula Weil

I was thinking about how the real Christmas does not take place in a home or a church, or a certain time or in a particular location. It happens in an uninteruptable place - our own human hearts. Hearts that are willing to receive the humble gift of God's love in his son, Jesus.

While the Christmas season can be a little hectic...what with running around, going here and there, visiting loved ones, baking and all the festivities that go on every day up until Christmas Day. I'm not sure how we will cope with it this year. Sometimes we forget, with all these interruptions, the real reason for the season. We should be meditating on why Jesus was brought into this world and we need to plan our response to his awesome gift of love. By doing this, I guarantee you will remember to live this real meaning each and every day of the New Year. Let us pray...

Our Father, up in heaven, we have wandered away from the little holy Christ Child born on this Christmas Eve, and the peace on earth you promised. We have been unmindful of it, not believing we would find it in a simple thing called love.

We've forgotten why you've sent us your only Son, and in arrogance and ignorance it's our will, not thine, be done. O, forgive us, heavenly Father; teach us how to be more kind so that we may judge people with our hearts and not our minds... Oh, forgive us, heavenly Father, and help us to find the way to understand each other and live Christmas every day. Amen.

Merry Christmas to each and every one of you!

Gathering Hymn

“O Come All Ye Faithful”

#182

*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; 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 all 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.*

One: Lord Jesus Christ, during the weeks of Advent we have prepared for your coming by lighting candles of faith, hope, joy and love. And now we have come on this holy night to journey to Bethlehem once more.

All: **May the light of Christ now guide our way, so that we may walk in the presence of God.**

Lighting of the Christ Candle

Liturgist, Paula Weil

When our homes are filled with fragrance of the pine and mistletoe, and we feel the sweet enchantment that keeps faces all aglow, when again we read the story and we know that we believe, then it's time for sacred reverence and the joy of Christmas Eve.

As we light the Advent candles, we remember how the light of Christ has grown within us while we've waited for this time. (4 Advent candles are lit) And now the eve of our Savior's birth has come, and the light that enlightens everyone is coming into the world. "Christmas" means the worship of Christ. Let us therefore remember that Christ is the world's true light. (Christ candle is lit)

***Hymn**

“Away in a Manger”

#205

*Away in a manger, no crib for a bed, the little Lord Jesus laid down his sweet head;
The stars in the bright sky looked down where he lay, the little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay.*

*The cattle are lowing, the baby awakes, but little Lord Jesus no crying he makes.
I love thee, Lord Jesus, look down from the sky and stay by my side until morning is nigh.*

*Be near me, Lord Jesus, I ask thee to stay close by me forever, and love me, I pray.
Bless all the dear children to thy tender care, and fit us for heaven to live with thee there.*

The Word of Prophecy (Isaiah 9:2, 6-7)

*The people who have walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of
deep darkness – on them light has shined....*

*For 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. His 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.

Hymn

“While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks”

#228

***While shepherds watched their flocks by night, all seated on the ground,
The angel of the Lord came down, and glory shone around, and glory shone around.***

***Fear not, said he, for mighty dread had seized their troubled mind;
Glad tidings of great joy I bring to you and humankind, to you and humankind.***

***To you, in David’s town this day is born of David’s line
The Savior, who is Christ the Lord, and this shall be the sign, and this shall be the sign.***

***The heavenly babe you there shall find to human view displayed,
all meanly wrapped in swaddling bands, and in a manger laid, and in a manger laid.***

***Thus spoke the seraph, and forthwith appeared a shining throng
Of angels praising God, who thus addressed their joyful song, addressed their joyful song.***

***All glory be to God on high, and to the earth be peace;
Goodwill henceforth from heaven to all begin and never cease, begin and never cease.***

Scripture Reading

Luke 2:1-20

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

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 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: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and 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 heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”
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.” So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger.*

When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Special Music

“Mary Did You Know?”

Tina Tuck and Paula Weil

Sermon Text:

Titus 2:11-14

Today, I’m sharing with you a text from an epistle many people dislike. It is the Epistle to Titus. This letter was written by an admirer of Paul who lived a generation or so after him. This author used Paul’s name as his pen name in the epistle. There are many good reasons for not liking some things that are said in this writing. It is written to leaders in an early Christian congregation that is struggling to survive in the Roman world and culture. It is filled with advice about morality and practical church leadership, and it seems woefully accommodating toward the repressive practices of Roman society in its day, perhaps because of fear of persecution. But embedded within the cautious advice the epistle offers there are also these words that we have taken as our text for this evening’s meditation:

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. He 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.

The Sermon:

Have you ever thought that the way of Christian living is made difficult by the circumstances of our world? In a world where success of some kind is the measure of a human life, we find it difficult to explain to someone the Christian teachings about humility and the impulse to help others advance in the world, even at the cost to ourselves. Sometimes, people see the relevance of those teachings when they are applied to the sacrificial care a mother gives to her children; sometimes we think about the sacrifice a soldier makes for the people back home. But in the general course of human affairs, we award our praise to success rather than sacrifice much of the time. And the sad truth is that sacrificing mothers are seldom recognized on the cover of Time; and the soldier who has given much often finds himself or herself unappreciated when returning home with wounds of body and soul.

Even gods do better in the marketplace when they are successful. If you listen to the message of so many popular mega churches today, you’ll hear that common strain of promised worldly success coming through. It is the vocabulary of the “awesome God” who will bring me through the crises of life, and who helps me believe in the possibilities that are mine in a society and nation that rewards hard work or exceptional skills or chosen people. What a terrible thing it is to fail in such a world, and in the eyes of such a god. What a foolish thing it seems to disbelieve, when believing is all it takes to succeed in life!

In the success driven world, what good is a god who enters our humanity in poverty and humility and never aspires to more of life's worldly treasures? How preposterous to commit one's life to a god who was born in a peasant hut and laid in a feeding trough! "Shepherds, why this jubilee?" we might well ask, as does the familiar hymn.

But this we can celebrate: though the true message of our faith may never attain the level of popularity that the prosperity gospel has achieved over the last few years in our society, it is for us nonetheless the truth that empowers us to live a joyous and compassionate life.

Joy enters our hearts at Christmas, because, if we listen carefully, the story we tell at this time of year reveals to our hearts that essential truth we may have long forgotten that we need, but that draws us spiritually home again. The anonymous author of the Letter to Titus reminds us what this truth of Christmas is, and what it means for us:

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.

This is the awesome truth of faith that is clothed in the Christmas story: The grace of God has appeared in a child who is born in Bethlehem, in poverty. He has stolen our hearts, as we have seen the vast contrast between his innocence and the evil complicity of the worldly powers that were destined to do him harm. That contrast, that is so apparent to us in the story, has led us to see the innocence of the child as godly born; and the moment that recognition became clear to us became the first instant of our redemption from the dark world that is driven by conquest over others, and the beginning of our new life in the fellowship of God's grace. This grace, bestowed upon us when God was revealed in weakness, has encouraged us to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives and to renounce worldly passions, even in a time when the world seems to reward the passion for worldly accomplishment ahead of all these things: in a world where success means everything, we have found that we need the empowerment of the grace of God to put aside our impulse to be first so that we can care for others, to put aside our personal sense of security so that we can let others in, to put aside our habit of storing up treasures so that others can have enough, and to put aside our personal desires for revenge or retribution so that all can share in the gifts of God's grace.

This is the authentic Christmas message. It is a recipe for peace, as yet unprocessed by any nation. If the institutions of the world seem deaf to the message, and peace remains a distant dream, remember that it is a message that the powerful and wealthy of Jesus' day did not want to hear. And a hungry child in a desolate land seems still to be the least concern of global politics and finance. Meanwhile the brash noises of a competing gospel spread a different word across our world. Many will ask themselves this evening whether the Gospel of the child of Bethlehem is practical in our day.

But tonight, right now, we can only decide what is practical for us – what form of truth we choose to trust, what way of life we choose to follow, what dreams for the world will be our dreams, and what will be the purpose of our own earthly journey. The world of today's politics and commerce seem far from the Bible's 'New Creation,' but we have heard a story that tells us we have a choice about how we'll live. We only have to look at the child, and decide.

*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.*

*How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given!
As God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven.
No ear may hear his coming, but in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive him still the dear Christ enters in.*

Sacrament of Holy Communion

The sacrament of Holy Communion is the church's celebration given to us by Jesus himself. In it we remember him and celebrate our faith that the Spirit of Christ inhabits the Body of those who follow his Way and who gather to share in the fellowship of his love.

The place of Jesus' birth is Bethlehem, and the meaning of that name is "house of bread." As we eat this Communion meal together, may we remember Jesus, the Bread of Life for us, and as we share in drink, may we be reminded of Christ the Vine, in whom the branches live, and Christ the Living Water, in whose presence we will never thirst.

Let us be in prayer:

O God, who brings salvation to our hearts, we rejoice in you. We give thanks for the joy we know on this holy day as we celebrate the peace we have found in your works of grace. May the gifts of food and drink in this Communion meal be to us the body and blood of Jesus Christ our Lord, and as we partake of them, may we remember that we belong to one another because you have made us one.

We lift up before you our friends and neighbors who have special needs today, especially those who are sick in body and in spirit, those who are lonely, those who are grieving, and those who may be in harm's way. In this time when it is difficult to touch, we pray that all may feel the touch of your Spirit in their lives.

We pray in the words of Jesus:

**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 debtor.
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**

This is the body of our Lord Jesus Christ. Take and eat. Do this in remembrance of him.

This is the new covenant in the blood of Jesus Christ our Lord. Take and drink. Do this in remembrance of him.

O holy God, we give you thanks for this your sacrament of grace. We thank you for the holy child whose birth we remember tonight, for the fulness of your love that is revealed in him, and for every person who is gathered at this table, whether in this sanctuary or in the various places where we live. May the holy child of Bethlehem live in our hearts, and may our hearts be open to your calling to serve a needy world. Amen.

***Closing Hymn #186**

“Silent Night! Holy Night!”

#186

(As the hymn is played through, the light from the Christ candle will be used to light the individual candles held by members of the congregation. As the light is brought to you, please tip your candle to receive the light. Passing the light to others, hold your candle vertical, so that it does not drip wax.)

***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.***

Benediction

Now may the peace of God that passes all understanding keep our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

Postlude