

Christmas Eve Call to Worship

Leader: This Advent we have been waiting – patiently and impatiently – for the Lord. We have named and felt the pain of our longing. But our waiting is over! A Savior has been born. The Messiah, our Lord, is here!

People: The word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. Hope has come! Jesus is born!

We have walked through the darkness of Advent and now, on this Christmas Eve, we welcome the dawn of the light of the world.

God, your light has dawned! This light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it.

In Advent we imagined the waiting of Elizabeth and Zechariah, of Mary and Joseph. We entered into the difficulty and discomfort of Israel's waiting. But now, we rejoice!

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given. He is our Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

In the darkness, in the pain, in the waiting – even there, God was with us. But now, this joyful day, we open our eyes to see it even more clearly and open our hearts to feel it even more fully.

The son is born and his name is Emmanuel, which means God with us. Jesus is with me, even to the end of the age. God is with us!

The lighting of this final candle is the celebratory sign that Jesus is born and God is with us. But we also light this candle in recognition that all is still not right. Jesus will come again and until then we still pray, "Come, Lord Jesus, come."

About that time Caesar Augustus ordered a census to be taken throughout the Empire. This was the first census when Quirinius was governor of Syria. Everyone had to travel to his own ancestral hometown to be accounted for. So Joseph went from the Galilean town of Nazareth up to Bethlehem in Judah, David's town, for the census. As a descendant of David, he had to go there. He went with Mary, his fiancée, who was pregnant.

While they were there, the time came for her to give birth. She gave birth to a son, her firstborn. She wrapped him in a blanket and laid him in a manger, because there was no room in the hostel.

There were shepherds camping in the neighborhood. They had set night watches over their sheep. Suddenly, God's angel stood among them and God's glory blazed around them. They were terrified. The angel said, "Don't be afraid. I'm here to announce a great and joyful event that is meant for everybody, worldwide: A Savior has just been born in David's town, a Savior who is Messiah and Master. This is what you're to look for: a baby wrapped in a blanket and lying in a manger."

At once the angel was joined by a huge angelic choir singing God's praises:

Glory to God in the heavenly heights. Peace to all men and women on earth who please him.

As the angel choir withdrew into heaven, the shepherds talked it over. "Let's get over to Bethlehem as fast as we can and see for ourselves what God has revealed to us." They left, running, and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. Seeing was believing. They told everyone they met what the angels had said about this child. All who heard the shepherds were impressed.

Mary kept all these things to herself, holding them dear, deep within herself. The shepherds returned and let loose, glorifying and praising God for everything they had heard and seen. It turned out exactly the way they'd been told!

When the eighth day arrived, the day of circumcision, the child was named Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived (Luke 2:1–21, The Message).

I read the Christmas story in Luke 2 from The Message paraphrase because the story and the words are so familiar to us that I wanted us to hear them in a fresh way.

Jesus' birth and the announcement of his birth by the angels to the shepherds was a monumental occurrence! The Messiah whom God's people had been waiting on for centuries had arrived at last. The world would never be the same again.

Immanuel, God with us, had finally come on the scene... and yet, a skeptic might ask, "What really changed?" The day after Jesus was born, the sun rose and the sun set in the same way it always had. People got up from their beds and went about their usual daily routines, working jobs, taking care of household chores, caring for children, and preparing and eating meals. One of the main arguments against Jesus being the Messiah was the unspectacular nature of his coming. He came as a baby. He was born to a young peasant woman in a stable with livestock and after his birth was laid in a feeding trough. For the next 30 years, outside of his family, He was barely seen or heard from. Immanuel came, but what really changed?

I won't read the words for us again because I read them two weeks ago prior to our pastoral prayer, but the Christmas carol, "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day," speaks to the incongruity between the darkness and pain all of us feel in our world and the angels' message of "peace on earth to those on whom his favor rests." If we're honest, many of us harbor these same questions today on this Christmas Eve day: "If God is with us and has brought peace to the earth, why is life such a struggle?" "If Immanuel has come, why is there so much darkness and pain in our world?"

Look again at the angel's proclamation to the shepherds in Luke 2:

"Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you: he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

And then the host of angels joined in with the words, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests." Good news. Great joy for all people. A Savior has been born to you. He is the Messiah, the Lord. Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.

Fast forward 30 years to the start of Jesus' public ministry. Those 30 years only move us from chapter 2 to chapter 4 because we're told little of Jesus' life from his birth to age 30. On this occasion, after his baptism and after being tempted by Satan in the wilderness, Jesus returned to his hometown of Nazareth on a Sabbath. He went into the synagogue, and as a rabbi, he was given the scroll to read to the people. Jesus read these words from the prophet Isaiah, found in our Bibles in Isaiah 61:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor (Luke 4:18–19).

Those words were well known to Jesus' audience. They were powerful Messianic words, but what Jesus said after reading from the scroll was even more dramatic. He rolled up the scroll, handed it back to the attendant, sat down, and began his sermon by saying, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21).

Jesus announced Himself as the Messiah, the One who had come to fulfill Isaiah's prophecy. Following that day, Jesus fulfilled those words through his preaching, teaching and ministry. He healed the sick. He raised the dead. He gave sight to the blind. He preached with great anointing and insight. He performed miracles. He freed people from demonic oppression. The favor of God was evident to all who interacted with Jesus.

However, the hope that accompanied Jesus' ministry was quickly snuffed out over two days as Jesus was arrested, tried and crucified on a Roman cross. All seemed lost until Jesus miraculously rose from the grave and began appearing to his followers, assuring them that He was alive. Then Jesus' words about his resurrection and life and our future with God began to make sense. Just six weeks after Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus' ministry of preaching, healing and miracle-working was multiplied many times over on the Day of Pentecost as his Spirit—the Holy Spirit—came in power and took up residence in followers of Jesus who were then empowered to do the work Jesus had done. The world's history over the past 2,000 years has been filled with war, violence, poverty, and hatred, but amidst the

darkness, the light of Jesus has shone brightly. Try to imagine what the last 2,000 years would have looked like if the light of Jesus had been extinguished, if those of us who make up Jesus' Church hadn't been salt and light in our world.

And yet skeptics continue to doubt, and followers of Jesus at times wonder, "Where is the good news, the peace of which the angels spoke those many years ago?" What was the essence of the message the angels brought to those shepherds 2,000 years ago? The angels' message can be summed up in a word: hope. The good news that a Messiah had been born in Bethlehem was a message of hope—hope that God had seen the distress of his people and the brokenness of the world He created, and He answered our cries for help by sending his Son, Jesus, as one of us. Jesus was fully God and fully human.

Hope was rekindled 30 years later on that Sabbath in the synagogue when Jesus boldly declared, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." Hope grew as Jesus demonstrated the arrival of God's kingdom through his teaching, preaching and miracle working. Hope wavered momentarily when Jesus was crucified and placed in a tomb but quickly rebounded when Jesus rose from the grave, demonstrating God's victory over death and sin. Hope grew exponentially at Pentecost when God's Spirit was poured out on all people just as the prophet Joel had prophesied. And today, 2,000 years after Jesus' birth, death, resurrection, and Pentecost, we the followers of Jesus continue to proclaim the message of the angels: "We bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you: he is the Messiah, the Lord. Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

This morning on this last Sunday of Advent, we celebrate Jesus' coming as a baby in the town of Bethlehem. We also look with hope toward Jesus' promised return when all will be made new. As we read in Revelation 21:

Then I saw 'a new heaven and a new earth,' for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God

himself will be with them and be their God. 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.'" He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" (Revelation 21:1-5)

And we wait with hope for Jesus to enter the difficult places of our lives bringing his restoration and healing. Come Lord Jesus, Come! I send you out this morning with these words of comfort and hope from the prophet Isaiah:

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins. A voice of one calling: "In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."
(Isaiah 40:1-5)

Go in the assurance of God's comfort and love, and go in the hope-filled understanding that God is at work in your life and our world to make all things new. Come Lord Jesus, Come!