



Blue Christmas Service

A Night of Hope

December 20, 2020

Johnsville and St. Paul United Methodist Churches

Blue Christmas 2020

Christmas can be a painful time for some. It may be the first Christmas without a loved family member who has recently died; it may be a time that has always been difficult. The constant refrains on radio and television, in shopping malls and churches, about the happiness of the season, about getting together with family and friends, reminds many people of what they have lost. The anguish of the death of a love one can make us feel alone in the midst of celebrating and joy. We need the space and time to acknowledge our sadness; we need to know that we are not alone. We need encouragement to live the days ahead of us. There are times when life is good and beautiful, and celebration is appropriate. But there are also times of distress and loss. During those times we sing sad songs of lament, protest and complaint about the chaos and harshness that life can sometimes be for us. We often feel afraid, angry, ashamed. Putting words to this season can often be difficult. But we do this together in our address to God.

MEDITATION

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; on those who lived in a land of deep shadow a light has shone. For the yoke that was weighing upon them and the burden upon their shoulders, thou hast broken in pieces O God. -Isaiah 9:2, 4

PRELUDE

“Away in a Manger”

GREETING

CALL TO WORSHIP

Leader: Jesus said, “Come unto me all you who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest.” And so we invite each other to this time of peaceful worship. Tonight we come looking for the Christ child.

People: We come, bringing our hurts, our worries and our fears.

Leader: We come seeking relief from pain, anxiety, loneliness and despair. With the psalmist of the Scriptures we say,

People: "O Lord, you are my refuge, my portion in the land of the living, Give heed to my cry, for I am low."

All: We come tonight to rest in God.

OPENING PRAYER

God of Mercy, hear our prayer in this Advent Season for ourselves and our families who hold painful memories of loss, grief, separation or crippling stress. We ask for strength for today, courage for tomorrow and peace for the past. We ask these things in the name of the Christ who shares our life in joy and sorrow, death and new birth, despair and promises. Amen.

Opening Hymn

"Love Came Down at Christmas"

UMH 242

1. Love came down at Christmas,
Love all lovely, Love divine;
Love was born at Christmas;
star and angels gave the sign.
2. Worship we the Godhead,
Love incarnate, love divine;
worship we our Jesus,
But wherewith for sacred sign?
3. Love shall be our token;
love be yours and love be mine;
love to God and all men,
love for plea and gift and sign.

LITANY OF REMEMBERING

Leader: This first candle we light to remember those whom we have loved and lost. We pause to remember their names, their faces, their voices, the memory that binds them to us in this season.

People: May God's eternal love surround them. [A moment of silence.]

Leader: This second candle we light to redeem the pain of loss; the loss of relationships, the loss of jobs, the loss of health. We pause to gather up the pain of the past and offer it to God, asking that from God's hands we receive the gift of peace.

People: Refresh, restore, renew us O God, and lead us into your future.

[A moment of silence.]

Leader: This third candle we light is to remember ourselves this Christmas time. We pause and remember these past weeks and months; the disbelief, the anger, the down times, the poignancy of reminiscing, the hugs and handshakes of family and friends, all those who stood with us. We give thanks for all the support we have known.

People: Let us remember that dawn defeats darkness. [A moment of silence.]

Leader: This fourth candle is lit to remember our faith and the gift of hope which the Christmas story offers to us. We remember that God who shares our life promises has for us a place and time of no more pain and suffering.

People: Let us remember the one who shows the way, who brings the truth and who bears the life.

[A moment of silence.]

1. In the bleak midwinter,
frosty wind made moan,
earth stood hard as iron,
water like a stone;
snow had fallen, snow on snow,
snow on snow,
in the bleak midwinter long ago.

2. Our God, heaven cannot hold him,
nor earth sustain;
heaven and earth shall flee away
when he comes to reign.
In the bleak midwinter
a stable place sufficed
The Lord God Almighty, Jesus Christ.

3. Angels and archangels
may have gathered there,
thronged the air;
but his mother only,
in her maiden bliss,
worshiped the beloved with a kiss.

4. What can I give him, poor as I am?
I would bring a lamb,
if I were a Wise Man,
I would do my part,
yet what I can I give him:
Give my heart.

SCRIPTURE Lesson: PSALM 88

A Song. A Psalm of the Korahites. To the leader: according to Mahalath Leannoth. A Maskil of Heman the Ezrahite.

¹ O Lord, God of my salvation,
when, at night, I cry out in your presence,

² let my prayer come before you;
incline your ear to my cry.

³ For my soul is full of troubles,
and my life draws near to Sheol.

⁴ I am counted among those who go down to the Pit;
I am like those who have no help,

⁵ like those forsaken among the dead,
like the slain that lie in the grave,
like those whom you remember no more,
for they are cut off from your hand.

⁶ You have put me in the depths of the Pit,
in the regions dark and deep.

⁷ Your wrath lies heavy upon me,
and you overwhelm me with all your waves.

Selah

⁸ You have caused my companions to shun me;
you have made me a thing of horror to them.

I am shut in so that I cannot escape;

⁹ my eye grows dim through sorrow.

Every day I call on you, O Lord;
I spread out my hands to you.

¹⁰ Do you work wonders for the dead?
Do the shades rise up to praise you?

Selah

¹¹ Is your steadfast love declared in the grave,

- or your faithfulness in Abaddon?
12 Are your wonders known in the darkness,
or your saving help in the land of forgetfulness?
13 But I, O Lord, cry out to you;
in the morning my prayer comes before you.
14 O Lord, why do you cast me off?
Why do you hide your face from me?
15 Wretched and close to death from my youth up,
I suffer your terrors; I am desperate.*
16 Your wrath has swept over me;
your dread assaults destroy me.
17 They surround me like a flood all day long;
from all sides they close in on me.
18 You have caused friend and neighbor to shun me;
my companions are in darkness.

Homily and MEDITATION

Pastor Shari McCourt

Christmas is a difficult time of the year for many. We are surrounded by bright colors, carols, all the advertisements, and Christmas specials in which everyone is happy; and every problem is solved within a few minutes. It can be too much!

I was watching the Charlie Brown Christmas special based on the book by Charles M. Schulz. In the first scene or first page of the book, Charlie Brown says to his friend, "I think there must be something wrong with me, Linus. Christmas is coming, but I am not happy. I just don't feel the way I supposed to feel. I just don't get Christmas." Sometimes this time of year, with everything around us can make it feel worse.

The lack of feeling of joy when it seems as though the rest of the world is ecstatically happy is more common that we might know. Psalms are the oldest texts in the Bible. They are interesting texts because for the most part they are songs which are prayers to God. Many of them have been used in worship for as long as we might know. Our reading this evening from Psalm 88 is one of the saddest laments. It contains an array of human emotions that include betrayal, grief, despair, abandonment, hopelessness, desperation, and fear that is colored in total darkness. And yet the psalmist expressing all of these emotions is talking to God in anger, and desperation.

Where do we turn when the weight of life's challenges are upon us? No matter what is happening in your life or the life of someone you love or care about deeply who is struggling, I want to tell you that you are in the right place. In the midst of life's challenges we need to come together as a community and look toward hope.

There are so many forms of grief and loss. Tonight I am called to talk to you about the theology of grief and suffering. Many of you here have shared your stories with me of the pain that grips your body, or the body of a loved one. Many of you have lost a loved one recently or in years past through death, break up of a relationship, they moved away, or maybe there was an unresolved disagreement. Some of you have experienced an illness or cancer, or accident or maybe your body is aging and you can't do so many of the things that you used to do.

Many of us suffer, grieve, wonder where God is in the midst of our grief, and suffering. Jesus himself knows suffering and grief. He took it on himself for our sake and salvation. When we suffer, Jesus suffers with us. His Spirit is always with us. We are not alone.

My favorite book of the Bible is the Gospel of John that helps us to understand how Jesus could possibly be present with us when we suffer. John 1:1-5, and verse 14, says, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. ¹⁴And 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." God through the person of Jesus took on flesh and was born into the world as we were born of a woman. Jesus walked on this earth experiencing life as we experience it with all of the joys, challenges and everything in between. Before Jesus began his ministry, he had a "real job", and worked with his father Joseph as a carpenter. Jesus was fully human and yet fully Divine.

God loves us so much that God through Jesus put on flesh to experience life with us and show us the way! Jesus is Emmanuel! God with us! In the midst of the whole of life and death God is with us. It is okay just like the psalmist to be angry with God when we suffer, and yell back in the midst of our pain. "Where are you O God?" It is the midst of those heart felt prayers that we may see where God through Jesus is right there beside us.

During this service, we take time to remember that Christ was born even, and especially for these times. His light is there for everyone. No one is to be left out or left behind. Remember that his light shines in the darkness and the darkness, the sadness cannot overcome it. May the peace of Christ reign in all of our hearts and homes this Christmas. He is our hope, and the light in the midst of our darkness. Amen.

RESPONSE TO THE WORD

Leader: The God of strength moves within us;

People: the God of courage hears our distress.

Leader: The God of hope reveals wholeness to us;

People: the God of healing touches us when we are broken.

Leader: When the pain overwhelms us, when the burden is too heavy,

People: we turn to our God, who is sustaining and redeeming.

Leader: When there is loneliness, when there is isolation,

People: we turn to our God, who is loving and present.

Leader: For God created us, redeemed us and sustains us, and we are not alone.

All: Lead us in your ways, O God, and bring us your healing touch. Amen.

OUR LORD'S PRAYER

Closing Hymn

"Silent Night, Holy Night"

UMH 239

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,
heavenly 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.

4. Silent night, holy night,
wondrous star, lent thy light;
with the angels let us sing,
Alleluia to our King;
Christ the Savior is born,
Christ the Savior is born.

Benediction

Postlude

"Still, Still, Still"

Peace be with you

*A Contemplative Service of Healing and Hope
for those who are hurting this Christmas*

Sunday, December 20, 2020