

**UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL**  
**Wallace, Idaho**

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

Christmas Eve

December 24, 2020

PRELUDE    *“Hark! the Herald Angels Sing”*

**WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS**

Good evening, my friends. And welcome to Christmas Eve with the United Church of Christ Congregational in Wallace. Never in our wildest imaginings would we have come up with this as a plan for Christmas Eve, but when you consider how many unimaginable scenarios we’ve come up with in the past ten months, this one doesn’t feel all that extraordinary. I’m grateful for the technology that allows us to gather for worship while also doing our part in keeping our friends and neighbors safe from the spread of the virus. I’m grateful for the ten people who have contributed to this service by reading a portion of scripture, lighting a candle or offering the gift of music. I’m grateful for Ben, who continues to develop and expand his video production skills, in his willingness to weave together the pieces of worship into one cohesive whole. And I’m eternally grateful to God who receives what we bring, meets us where we are and knits us together as one through the unifying threads of the Holy Spirit. It is very good to gather together to celebrate the birth of Jesus, and to welcome the Christ child into our lives and our world.

Whether you reached this worship through an email or on the church’s website, it is accompanied by a link to a file that contains all of the words of this service. If you have a way to view two things at once, you’ll find there a unison prayer, a responsive reading, and the words to several carols. When I sing, it’s meant as an invitation for you to sing, and the PDF will give you all of words to the carols.

It is our custom to designate the Christmas Eve offering to the United Church of Christ’s Christmas Fund. It’s a fund that is used to assist and support clergy and long-term lay employees of the church and their families. The money is sometimes used to supplement inadequate pensions, and sometimes to respond to emergencies. COVID has dramatically increased the demands placed on this fund by about 300% over the same 9-month period last year. Pastors in need of assistance when their congregations faced reduced donations and became unable to pay their salaries, chaplains who have been laid off, retired clergy dependent on pulpit supply, so that when those opportunities dried up, their need was greater. It goes without saying that there is no offering plate at the back of the sanctuary this year, but if you are inclined to donate to this fund, either mail a gift to 408 Cedar Street or drop it in the mail slot at the church, to the left of the main door. Just designate it clearly for the UCC Christmas Fund and we’ll get it where it needs to go. And thank you. Every gift makes a difference in someone’s life.

**SETTING UP THE CRECHE**

As we have on each of the Sundays of Advent, we stop by the creche on our way into worship. Not everyone has arrived yet, but the star of the show is finally here: baby Jesus, still red from birth, eyes yet to open, is asleep on the straw. He’s surrounded by farm hands and shepherds, lullabied by the baaing of sheep and cud chewing of cows, with harmony added by a chorus of the heavenly host, a night light provided by the star keeping vigil in the sky. Mom is adjusting in search of a comfortable position while Step-Dad stands guard, alert to every sound, determined to keep his family safe.

I have to tell you that I spent my growing up years in and out of the barn, and while I have seen newborns asleep on the hay, never a human one. Calves, sure, their legs too weak for them to stand.

Even kittens scrambling about here and there, bumping into things, head butting mom for a drink, but not a human baby lying on the straw. I have been to mom's bedside on the day of giving birth, even got to hold my grandson that first day – and it was no small privilege that I was the only visitor welcomed into that sacred space. But this... this birthing day is unlike anything I've ever seen. Such a strange collection of visitors and in such an unlikely place.

My friends, this is the good news of God coming among us. Not in a palace or with a show of force, and with neither pretension or protection. God comes in out of the way places and to the unnoticed and overlooked. Essential workers who live in the shadows, unseen by us until we need something cleaned or collected. The homeless who shuttle between friends' couches and a car's back seat. The newly unemployed who wait on hold, trying to secure benefits, and then move on to a place in line, waiting for a box of food. God comes, planting hope, breathing peace, extending welcome, sharing love, spreading light. God is born among us, and invites us to come and see, come and rejoice, come and worship.

CAROL *“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 bright hosts of heaven above!  
Glory to God, all glory in the highest...

Yea, Lord, we greet Thee, born this happy morning,  
Jesus, to Thee be all glory given;  
Word of the Father now in flesh appearing!...

OPENING PRAYER (in unison)

**We admit it, O God: That in a time such as this, it can be harder than usual to open our hearts to the wonder of your love. In a time such as this, it can be harder to feel the joy. Thank you for reminding us that Christ comes for such a time as this. Thank you for understanding that in such a time as this, we need you all the more. Thank you for the promise of the Christ Child, come to us again. Amen.**

LIGHTING THE CHRIST CANDLE

Rick and Dena Shaffer

Because God so loves the world,

**This beautiful and broken world,**

This divided and distanced world,

**This warming and burning world,**

This lost and hurting world,

**God's love is made flesh.**

For such a time as this,

**A child is born unto us.**

For such a time as this,

**The light of Christ shines upon us.**

In a stinky stable turned birthing room,

**New visions of family and community are born.**

By the surprising subversion of God's in-breaking love,

**The burden of injustice is thrown off.**

Through the ages-old song of angels and shepherds,

**God's glory is proclaimed.**

On this holy night, the one we've been watching for is here.

**On this holy night, the time we've been waiting for is now.**

Let us rejoice together!

**Glory to God in the highest, and peace and goodwill to all.**

*The Christ candle is lit.*

**ALL: FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS, THE CHRIST CHILD COMES TO US. FOR SUCH AS TIME AS THIS, GOD'S LOVE IS BORN IN US. JOY TO THE WORLD!**

SONG "O Holy Night"

Kasey Haig, Handbells

FIRST READING Isaiah 9:2-7

Alice Holmes

The people who walked in darkness

have seen a great light;

those who lived in a land of deep darkness—

on them light has shined.

You 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.

For 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.

For all the boots of the tramping warriors

and all the garments rolled in blood

shall be burned as fuel for the fire.

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.

CAROL "O Come, O Come Emmanuel"

O come, O come, Emmanuel, And ransom captive Israel,

That mourns in lonely exile here, Until the Son of God appear.

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel Shall come to thee, O Israel!

O come, Thou Dayspring, come and cheer Our spirits by thine advent here;  
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night, And death's dark shadows put to flight...

SECOND READING Luke 1:26-38

Rick Ehram

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

SONG "One Child"

Indy Behrendt, Flute

THIRD READING Luke 2:1-7

Mike Branstetter

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.

SONG "Good Christian Men, Rejoice"

Geoff O'Meara

FOURTH READING Luke 2:8-20

Penny Derbyshire

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.

CAROL *“Angels We Have Heard on High”*

Angels we have heard on high, Sweetly singing o’er the plains,  
And the mountains in reply Echo back their joyous strains.  
Gloria in excelsis Deo. Gloria in excelsis Deo.

Shepherds, why this jubilee? Why your joyous strains prolong?  
Say what may the tidings be, Which inspire your heavenly song?...

FIFTH READING John 1:1-14

Jenniffer Carrico

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave 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.

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.

CAROL *“Joy to the World”*

Joy to the world! The Lord is come; Let earth receive its 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 earth! The Savior reigns; Let us our 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.

MEDITATION

Monday afternoon I was leaned up against a pew at the church, listening to Rick and Dena light the Christ candle, when I was suddenly overwhelmed by the power of the words they were reading: this beautiful and broken world, this divided and distanced world, this warming and burning world, this lost and hurting world. The enormity of the pain of these days washed over me and took my breath away. From images of people fleeing their homes as fires exploded all around them, combined with the consumption of rain forests and koala bears, to the staggering pace with which we’re setting new COVID records for confirmed cases, hospitalizations and deaths (323,000 and counting) and people’s insistence in getting on with their lives regardless, to log jams and political posturing that have stalled relief packages for 7 months, to racial tensions and election accusations, to the senseless shootings of scores of both innocent bystanders and police officers, and the individual stories of broken hearts and empty chairs, lonely holidays and shattered dreams. The pain is endless and overwhelming. But that’s

only part of what stopped my heart on Monday; the other part is that those phrases, beautiful and broken world, divided and distanced world, warming and burning world, lost and hurting world, were bracketed by statements of God's love. Statements which told me everything I need to know about why we're gathered together tonight, and precisely what it is we're celebrating.

You see, there was a time more than 2,000 years ago when creation was in a world of pain. Different story but similar pain to what we know today. There were occupying armies and political practices that stomped the breath out of the lives of ordinary people; even the faith that had liberated them from slavery in Egypt had become a rigid set of rules and obligations, with precious little gift or grace available to the faithful. Violence and greed were rampant, the walls between insiders and outsiders were impenetrable, the weak and vulnerable taken advantage of, the disabled and elderly cast off and left to fend for themselves. God tried prophets and kings, warnings and threats, disaster and destruction, even miracles and wonders and nothing worked. Nothing seemed to get through to the people, and the pain just kept getting worse. Finally, in frustration and exasperation, God said, that's it. They won't listen to anybody else; I'm going myself. And so God came – in Jesus.

The Creator of the Universe and the One who existed before anything else was even imagined, much less created, the One with all power and might, wisdom and strength, set all of that aside and came to earth as a fragile newborn child. The Maker of Heaven and Earth bypassed palaces and fortresses and became the son of a peasant mother and carpenter father who lived in a backwater town that was little more than a bump in the road. God took on human skin and bones, became a baby boy and placed himself and his well being into the very hands of the people who had made such a mess of things. Sounds like an incredible gamble to me, but God knew what the people were made of, knew about the beauty and kindness, compassion and love that had been planted into the people from the very start, and believed that if anybody or anything could tap into that love and kindness it was a baby.

I don't know if it started immediately in the stable, but it makes sense to me that it might have. The angels appear to have known where to go and who to recruit in order to bring together people open to wonder and mystery. They went to the shepherds, spoke their piece and then launched into a version of the Hallelujah Chorus never heard before or since. The shepherds headed for town as fast as their legs could carry them, and when they burst in on the family of three they were still overflowing with excitement about the visit of the angels and the splendor of the song. In that moment, when the weary and overwhelmed were visited by the outcast and simple, their eyes fixed on the child, the story echoed in their heads and their hearts broke open. Such an unlikely cast of characters, such a humble beginning, such a mysterious opening to an unprecedented flow of love.

God with us, in the person and life of Jesus. God with us, still, in the simple and the ordinary, the every-day and unseen, the out of the way and unnoticed. God with us in simple acts of kindness, whether it's 900 cars paying it forward at one Dairy Queen in a small town in northern Minnesota or people making money available so restaurants can stay open, staff members can work and people can eat, or one stranger offering kindness to another. Meals given, rides offered, tea bags mailed, phone calls made, kindness extended, love shared. In those moments and so many more just like them, God is with us, God's love is made flesh, God's light is shared. Thanks be to God.

#### PASTORAL PRAYER

Will you pray with me?

When the world was dark and the city was quiet, you came. You crept in beside us. And no one knew. Only the few who dared to believe that God might do something different. Will you do the same this Christmas, Lord? Will you come into the darkness of tonight's world; not the friendly darkness as when sleep rescues us from tiredness, but the fearful darkness, in which people have stopped believing that a

pandemic will end or that food will come or that government will change or that the Church cares? Will you come into that darkness and do something different to save your people from death and despair?

Will you come into the quietness of this town, not the friendly quietness as when lovers hold hands, but the fearful silence when the phone has not rung, the letter has not come, the friendly voice no longer speaks, the doctor's face says it all. Will you come into that darkness, and do something different, not to distract, but to embrace your people?

And will you come into the dark corners and the quiet places of our lives? We ask this not because we are guilt ridden or want to be, but because the fullness our lives long for depends on us being as open and vulnerable to you as you were to us, when you came, wearing no more than diapers, and trusting human hands to hold their maker. Will you come into our lives, if we open them to you and do something different?

When the world was dark and the city was quiet you came. You crept in beside us. Do the same this Christmas, Lord. Do the same this Christmas.

(revised from *Cloth for the Cradle*, Wild Goose Worship Group)

PRAYER OF OUR SAVIOR (debts)

And hear us as we offer the prayer that Jesus taught, saying: Our Father...

SHARING THE LIGHT

Jesus has been born, and the Light of God shines in the darkness, that all might see by its light and feel its warmth. Let us receive that light now into our own lives, and share it with one another.

SONG "Silent Night"

Kasey Haig, Handbells

CAROL "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.

BENEDICTION

The Word has become flesh and dwelt among us.  
Let Christ's light shine in the darkest corner of your life.  
Let Christ's love shine in the darkest corners of our world.  
God is with us. Alleluia. Amen.