

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL  
Wallace, Idaho

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor



Christmas Eve

December 24, 2021

PRELUDE “Hark! the Herald Angels Sing”

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

- Readings/music are from last year
- PDF – Gretchen’s artwork, words, prayers
- Offering: UCC Christmas Fund: “Last year, donations to the Christmas Fund helped pay for rent for low-income retired ministers and bridged the gap for one active minister’s family when her husband lost his restaurant due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Christmas Fund gifts took care of the unexpected expense of a major car repair, helped a retired minister attend his brother’s funeral, and assisted in paying for daunting medical expenses, prescriptions and groceries.” When money is tight and stress is high, your gift to the Christmas Fund brings relief and hope to the clergy and church employees who have dedicated their lives to serving our churches
- Prayer request: family of Cliff Hinze (Christi’s godfather) who died unexpectedly this week

CALL TO WORSHIP

Through lush farmland and bleak alleys

**sweeps good news of great joy!**

Through empty wants and desperate needs

**blazes a star to light our way.**

Through pounding turmoil and dazing fear

**sounds an angel chorus: Glory to God in the highest; peace to God’s people on earth!**

Receive the news! Follow the star! Heed the angels!

**Through song and silence, word and wonder, let us make our way to Bethlehem.**

Let us worship the Holy One who beckons in an infant’s cry.

(Ann B. Day, *Before the Amen*)

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!...

PRAYER OF INVOCATION (in unison)

**Emmanuel, God-with-us most of all tonight, your light lifts up our hearts, our spirits, and our voices. We give you thanks for your birth long ago and presence with us always. Your hope is more trustworthy than our promises. Your peace is deeper than our prayers. Your joy teaches us to sing even when we want to cry. Your love is wider than the chorus of the galaxies, and yet your Star shines on us now in this community, which tonight has become a manger. Amen.**

(Maren Tirabassi, *Touch Holiness*)

LIGHTING THE CHRIST CANDLE

The Bauer Family

We have gathered at this wreath  
all this Advent season to light candles.

We claim that Emmanuel, God with us  
is Light and Darkness in a world  
that must work and rest  
be generous and self-careful,  
experience tears and laughter,  
in order to share  
both the hurt and humor of others.  
from the deep place of knowing it.

Let us light these candles on this holy night.

I light the candle of hope,  
and hopelessness cannot hide.

I light the candle of peace,  
and expose hatred as fear turned inside out.

I light the candle of joy,  
and everyone is welcome with a smile,  
a moment of beauty or wonder.

I light the candle of love,  
and hands are clasped around the world.

**THIS IS CHRISTMAS**

**The evergreen singing aloud its poem of constant renewal,  
The festive mood spreading lilted magic everywhere,  
The gifts of recollection calling to heart the graces of life,  
The star in the sky calling to mind the wisdom of hope,  
The warmth of candlelight glowing against the darkness,  
The birth of a child linking past to future,**

**The symbol of love absorbing all violence**  
**THIS IS CHRISTMAS** (Howard Thurman)

O Holy God, we light the Christ candle.  
It shines on smiles and tears.  
It shines into the lives of everyone.  
It shines and we remember the story.  
It shines around angels  
who sing for the most vulnerable,  
and guides the long traveling  
of those from far away.

It shines on a manger,  
a child and parents,  
with animals gathered all around.  
It shines on here and now people  
just like Bethlehem long ago.

It can never be extinguished,  
because, Christ, you are tonight's candle,  
and we promise –  
to lift our wicks to tomorrow's flame. Amen.

(Maren Tirabassi, Gifts in Open Hands)

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 Ehrsam  
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

Jennifer 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

"But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart." It's a quiet little sentence tucked in there near the end of Luke's story of the birth of Jesus. I've been aware of it for a long time, but something about it caught my attention and gave me pause this year. What does it mean to say that Mary pondered words – and events – in her heart. I suppose it could be a kind of mental scrapbook into which she tucked all the memorabilia, snapshots, words of wisdom, playful antics, breathtaking sights,

and outrageous visitors that filled up their time in Bethlehem. Something she could go back to and flip through at her leisure over the years.

According to Karoline Lewis, Professor of Preaching in St. Paul, the word “pondered” has another layer of meaning that I’ve never really thought about. The books of the New Testament were written in Greek, and the word used here and translated as “pondered” is *sum balo*; *balo* means “to throw” and *sum* means “with”. (Sermon Brainwave, December 24, 2021) Or in other words, Mary seems to have had a sense of a multitude of things being thrown together, and now it’s time for her to try and make sense of it all in order to figure out what’s next. Lewis says it’s not a matter of silent reflection, but more of an active time to ask, what do we do with all of these things that have been thrown together – and in our direction? What sense do we make of it, and very importantly, where do we go from here?

Think about it: once upon a time, Mary had been a young teenager in a small backwater town that nobody had ever heard of. She was engaged to Joseph, but not married yet, and the plan for her future was pretty well laid out. Until one day, when out of nowhere, a stranger shows up at her door saying he’d come straight from God with a message just for her. A message that would not only change her life, but also turn the whole world upside down, while at the very same time throwing every last iota of her future up for grabs. She was as likely to be killed as she was to give birth to the child the angel was announcing, and for some reason even Mary couldn’t fully comprehend, she said yes to all of it. Over the course of the next nine months, she had a whole heap of things to learn about her body and being a mother; she also had a mountain of talking to do with Joseph about this change of plans, where it had come from and what it meant – for both of them. And somewhere in the midst of it all, they learned that the Emperor was flexing his muscles and flaunting his power, ordering all the world – did you hear that?, all the world to go to their hometowns in order to be registered. I caught a new whiff of what that meant when I read that the Nazis, with all their meticulous registration records followed the lead of Caesar Augustus. This was a registration dripping with menace and the heavy handed presence of the oppressor. And oh by the way, it required a young woman on the brink of giving birth to travel 80 grueling miles, either on foot or jostling on the back of a donkey – you tell me which sounds worse. They made it to Bethlehem just as Mary moved into the final stages of labor. And no more had she gotten the baby born and swaddled in the only cloths she could find, and settled him into a feeding trough, when in burst a company of shepherds, fresh from working the graveyard shift out in the fields. They were so excited and flustered, each of them talking on top of the other, bubbling with excitement and bursting with the report of an angel’s announcement of the birth of good news for all the people, a Savior, the Messiah, the Lord, described exactly as they are seeing with their very own eyes right now. And if you can believe it, that was followed by a collection of the best singers ever assembled anywhere, who let loose with a heart busting, spine tingling chorus of promise and grace, the glory of God and the arrival of peace. And there Mary sat, cradling her newborn, while her head swirled with the good news, horror show, waves of upheaval, overwhelming weariness, never-before-witnessed inclusion, and complete disorientation, all while feeling her love for her child well up and surge within her. She took in all of the complicated chaos that had been thrown at her and held it, treasured and pondered it. She savored the miracle of the in-breaking presence of God in her life and in their midst, even as she looked about and asked, what does this mean and what do we do now?

All of that resonates with me this year because of the abundance of concerns and affronts, traumas and frustrations that are consistently and routinely being thrown at us. As much as it pains me to say the obvious, we’re observing our second Covid Christmas, reeling with climbing numbers and scary new variants, still breaking records, all at the point that too many of us are worn out and fed up. And because Covid hasn’t been enough all by itself, we’ve been confronted by record-breaking weather and horrifying natural disasters, increases in violence and racial tension, legislative logjams and a basic incivility toward those who think differently than we do.

What would it mean for us to follow Mary's lead, and take this wild and woolly assortment of things being thrown at us into our hearts so that we can ponder them? Listen to them, learn from them, move forward together from them. Running and hiding, ignoring and denying aren't working any more than fighting and finger-pointing are. So on this night of miracle and wonder, let's join Mary in pondering the words and events, news and realities of our lives. God showed up in Mary's life through the greeting of an angel, the birth of a baby and the arrival of an ecstatic company of ruffians and riff-raff who smelled like sheep. Where is God showing up in our lives? I'm fully confident God is, but probably in unexpected ways as Mary and Joseph experienced. Maybe even redefining just what is impossible and what's not. Or in small, ordinary everyday gestures, like the kindness of strangers who show up in the wreckage of tornadoes, bringing food and clothes, water and gifts. Maybe in the medical staff who show up day after heart-breaking, soul-numbing day to care for the sick. Maybe in the willingness of neighbors to listen and learn, forgive and move forward together. If we will pause and ponder, look with the eyes of wonder and hearts open to the unprecedented, there's no limit to the ways and places in which we will see God intruding into our world and our lives, bringing peace and announcing joy, renewing hope and birthing love. Having seen God's presence and received God's love, we'll also be able to move forward, sharing God's love and light in a world crying out for the gifts the Christ child brings.

#### PASTORAL PRAYER

Will you pray with me?

We have waited for a long time  
for your hope, your joy, your love  
to shine in the darkness of this world, Almighty God.  
Even now, in our gathering here, we await you.  
In our hearts, we still hope that your light will blaze forth,  
banishing the shadows of this world  
and guiding all the people back to you.

Yet you did not come into this world  
in a show of power and glory.  
You did not shine forth for all of creation to behold.  
A tiny spark –  
a newborn baby,  
visible to parents and curious animals.  
A host of angels –  
away from the populated areas,  
singing to migrant workers.  
A sparkling star –  
guiding foreigners to see what neighbors could not.

Open our hearts, merciful God,  
to the sparks of your presence still in this world.  
Open our eyes,  
that we might behold your presence in the least likely of places,  
and among the least likely of people.

God with us,  
kindle your spark within us,  
that together we may shine forth your light,  
we might banish the shadows of this world,

we might be the continuation of the Christmas miracle:  
Emmanuel is in this world,  
God is with us, now and evermore.

Illumine our hearts, gracious God,  
that we might speak anew the words your Son will teach us...Our Father...

(Rev. Eliza Buchakjian-Tweedy, Pastor at First Church Congregational in Rochester, NH.)

PRAYER OF OUR SAVIOR (debts)

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.

Many thanks once again to Gretchen Ehram for the beautiful art for our Christmas Eve worship. Used with her permission.