



Brookline Community Church
December 24, 2020
Reverend Catherine A. Merrill, Minister

Every part of worship has a video, so we've gathered them [together in a play list](#). If you click on "Play All", they'll play from the beginning of the service to the end! And you can just follow along, never clicking on another link. Or you can go through clicking on all the individual links – your choice.

Prelude: *O Holy Night* by Francesco Parrino

[An instrumental piece to help you get settled for worship]

Centering Ourselves for Worship¹:

[Join Sanjay Cherian [in our centering prayer](#).]

God, everyplace is home
when it's holy days –
for roamer and stay-at-home alike —

the hospital gripping the heart-pillow
and watching the IV drip,
after bypass surgery,

the hospice house
with gentle visiting friends,
and Jewish volunteers who come just to smile,

the night with a lonely beer and frozen pizza,
and a story you want to share for just one night,

the prison TV room,
couch-surfing after eviction,
or airport gate awaiting some delay.

¹ Today's open and closing prayers were inspired by Maren Tirabassi's "December 19, 2018 — prayer from 'There's no place like home for the holidays'", Gifts in Open Hands Blog, posted December 19, 2018, <https://giftsinopenhands.wordpress.com/2018/12/19/9738/> (accessed December 12, 2020).

These are more manger
than any fireplace and decorated tree,
 LED sleigh on the roof,
 inflatable Snoopy,
 or even grandma's kitchen
 full of so many scents –

God, you want us to be happy
in a million ways –
so you send these unlikely angels —
 the salvation army ringer with the goat,
 a sad person in the center seat,
 fast-food clerk,
 a nurse on duty because
 there aren't any kids at home,
 a corrections officer who has kids
 but is needed anyway,
 someone in the grocery line,

and suddenly there's so much starlight
We could cry. Amen.

Lighting the Advent Wreath²

Several years ago Cláudio Carvalhaes, professor of worship at Union Theological Seminary, suggested that we lament before we light – naming those things which oppose or diminish hope, peace, joy and love. We name them and then claim the power of that light over them. Today's Advent wreath lighters are Ann Desrochers & John Panto, Melanie Levesque and Cindy Perkins, Erin Sawicki & Rob, Anna & Miles Danckert, Jill, Kevin, Jocelyn and KJ Aitken, and Carol Cherian. [Let us bring light to the darkness.](#)

Leader: In our homes, we gather around wreaths to pray our lost hopes, broken peace, limited joys, and love so hard to find and share, in this season of coronavirus. We affirm that our candles mean we claim the power to call this season Advent when God's light comes into the world and nothing can overcome it.

Lighter 1: We light the candle of hope in the face of continuing to find creative ways to stay connected to our family and friends this holiday season in the face of messages that tell us we are safer and keeping our loved ones safer by staying apart

² The advent wreath lighting liturgy was inspired by Maren Tirabassi's "An Advent Wreath Ceremony for 2020," Gifts in Open Hands Blog, posted October 30, 2020, <https://giftsinopenhands.wordpress.com/2020/10/30/13204/> (accessed November 14, 2020).

- Lighter 2: We now light the candle of peace in spite of the many lives lost due to Covid, those struggling with food security, homelessness, loss of jobs, and friends and loved ones struggling with health issues
- Lighter 3: We now light the candle of joy in spite of missing so many things we thought were essential to a merry Christmas, like parties, photos with Santa, and bonfires with friends.
- Lighter 4: We now light the candle of love even when many things dim our sparkling, like when we cannot be with family at Christmas, or when one of them is having a health crisis, or when fears make us anxious about doing things that used to be common place
- Lighter 5: Let us light these candles again on this holy night. Now there is no place hopelessness can hide, hatred is exposed as fear turned inside out, suddenly everyone can find a smile or a moment of beauty or laughter and hands are clasped around the world.

O Holy God, we light the Christ candle. It shines on smiles and tears. It shines on younger and older. It shines and we hear angels. It shines and we see a manger. It shines and we remember the story. It shines on our world, like Bethlehem long ago. It can never be extinguished, because you are the candle tonight, and we promise to be the candle tomorrow. Amen.

Leader: With the birth of Christ, God's light has come into the world and nothing can overcome it.

Hymn: *O Holy Night* by Rock Church Deaf Ministry featuring Lauren Daigle

[\[Click here\]](#) for a video that will give you someone to sing with. I included this version of our prelude because it made me think about how many different ways there were to worship, especially on this holy night.]

Pastoral Prayer on Christmas Eve:

[Rev. Cath [offers a pastoral prayer.](#)]

Glorious God,
on this Christmas Eve,
we sing beloved carols of Bethlehem,
of shepherds and angels,
of Mary and Joseph,
and the infant Jesus, our Savior.
Is there yet a new song we can sing to you?

A song to be learned from the heavens and the earth:
where the roar of the sea,
the exultation of the fields,
and the joy of the trees
are already raised in a chorus of glad rejoicing,
ready to welcome you.

Even if no ear may hear your coming,
help us hear the music of creation.
Then, with the whole cosmos,
we will sing of your salvation,
declare your glory,
and in a crescendo of praise, bless your name:
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father,
Prince of Peace! **Amen.**

[\[The Lord's Prayer\]](#)

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 trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.

Hymn: *Somewhere in Your Silent Night* by Casting Crowns

[\[Click here\]](#) for a video that will give you the lyrics and someone to sing with.]

Scripture Reading: Luke 2:1-20

[Luke 2:1-20 [read for you](#)]

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.

Reflection on the Scripture:

[\[The video of the reflection.\]](#)

Do not be afraid the angel says (Luke 2:10). But sitting in the car waiting for my mom to finish at the dentist, where you stay with your mouth open with someone so close you can feel the warmth of their body, I am afraid. Standing in the grocery with someone wearing some kind of face shield hanging off the brim of her hat, something that isn’t a mask at all, I am afraid. Watching the hospitalization rates rise and rise and rise, I am afraid.

2020 has been a tough year. Everyone has their own take on why that’s so, but we’ve all felt it. Having to be so separated from the people we love has been hard. It has been a tough year. And it has been a year of fear. This year, I’m going to ignore anyone saying, “Do not be afraid,” because Jesus calls me to live in the real world, and the pictures I’ve seen from the ICUs tell me to be afraid.

But then I think *in those days when a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered, those days of the first registration, taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria* (Luke 2:1,2), those days were full of fear too. A registration was bad news. More taxes were coming, more military service.³ All the local leaders, like Herod, were trying to prove to the Emperor how valuable they were, so the regular people were about to be squeezed even harder. Disease was common and medicine poor, look at all the healing Jesus did and how much of it was considered miraculous. The real world back then was a fearful place. So telling people not to be afraid, probably seemed even more out of touch with reality than now.

³ Douglas R. A. Hare, “Christmas Eve, Exegetical Perspective, Luke 2:1-14, (15-20)” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 1*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 117.

The people who were most afraid were the people who had suffered the most under the current set up. The people who had paid the taxes and fought the wars and suffered the most diseases were the people who were the most afraid. They were the people who needed something new, something different, something other than more of the existing uses of power. And it was to those people, those essential workers whom everyone took for granted and never really saw, those who worked the night shift, outdoors, in the fields, those people were the ones that God sent a new thing to.

The old order had left nothing but darkness.⁴ The song from the angels releases energy that the old order can neither generate nor prevent from spreading. People are sung to, people sing, and they are transformed. The hopelessness that kept them silent is shattered, and they sing. They may not be able to explain the light or what it means or what they can see in the light. They may not be able to formulate a logical argument, present a soundbite that can be boiled down to a chyron that runs on the bottom of the cable news screen. But they feel the amazement, the newness. And they return to their work glorifying the God who interrupted the unbroken darkness of history. They return to their normal life praising God who created a new order for them, the people the old order had discarded as irrelevant. God told them, the little people, about the new king, the king Rome did not anticipate and Herod could not stop, who would begin a new history, who would put an end to all the old royal histories that were leading nowhere but darkness.⁵

Back in those dark days, when all the world should be registered, the angel appears and shares the message about not being afraid, about good news of great joy, about the birth of the Messiah, the Lord (Luke 2:9-11). The night shines with God's glory and suddenly there's a whole host of angels singing (Luke 2:12). But what I am touched by, reading this ancient story today, in our year of fear, is that the shepherds, even though they were terrified by the angel (Luke 2:9), they were also curious about this baby, *wrapped in bands of cloth, lying in a manger* (Luke 2:12).

So maybe *do not be afraid* is not as much of a command to not be afraid in a year where fear is entirely appropriate, but to go ahead and be afraid. Just be other things as well. Be afraid and be compassionate. Be afraid and be creative. Be afraid and be outraged. Because the terrified shepherds decided to go the Bethlehem and *see the thing that had taken place* (Luke 2:15) no matter how frightened they were.

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), 104.

⁵ Brueggemann, 103.

They go and find *Mary and Joseph and the child lying in the manger* (Luke 2:16) and they say what they know about this child. Probably not terribly coherently. Probably interrupting each other with irrelevant details. Probably getting to the middle and then having to go back to the beginning because they forgot something. But once they've told their story, Mary ponders, everyone else is amazed, and the shepherds head home singing (Luke 2:18-20). They are afraid and they are curious and they are telling what they know. And it leaves people thinking deeply about what is really going on in the world, amazed that such a new thing could be happening, and singing.

And I get that, because singing is probably the only way to convey this thing that their fear and their curiosity allowed them to learn. These people that society dismissed have seen the new king, the new kingdom. There is something new happening in their world, and it is going to keep rolling forward. There is no limit to the consequences of the new king being born in that stable in Bethlehem. It will echo on forward to the end of time. It will change everything. The shepherds don't know how. They just know that it is so.⁶ They return to their normal lives, return to the fear that fills their year, but they return to their normal lives singing.

So, yes, do not be afraid, or do not be only afraid. Be afraid and be curious. Come to the stable in Bethlehem and peek in the manger. See the new king, born for you, bringing the light that the darkness cannot overcome (John 1:5). Be afraid and curious and come and see this new thing that will change the world forever. And go back into your normal life, maybe a little afraid, because we live in times of fear. But also singing, of the hope that was born this night. Amen.

Hymn: *Hope Was Born This Night* by Sidewalk Prophets

[[Click here](#) for a video that will give you the lyrics and someone to sing with.]

Prayer of Dedication for the Gifts We've Been Given⁷

[[Let's pray together.](#)]

Because God so loved the world,
God sent the Son into the world.
In response to this good news of great joy,
we offer songs of praise, gifts,
and acts of service.

⁶ Walter Russell Bowie, "The Gospel According to St. Luke: Exposition Chs. 1-6," in vol. 8 of *The Interpreter's Bible: The Holy Bible in the King James and Revised Standard Versions with General Articles and Introduction, Exegesis, Exposition for Each Book of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1955), 59.

⁷ The church's financial obligations continue. If you are able, please mail your offering to: Brookline Community Church, PO Box 507, Brookline, NH 03033.

Great God, accept what we offer
as we wait in hope for your coming again.
Use all that we have and all that we are
as you bring light in every darkness,
ease heavy burdens,
and turn our endless warring
into your endless peace.

In Christ's name, we ask it. Amen.

A Prayer to Send us Back Out into the World

[\[Let's pray together.\]](#)

God, everyplace is home
when it's holy days –

In the coming days and weeks,
help us to make our home everywhere we are

In our house,

In the places where people still have to go when they go to work

The grocery store, the ER, school, the transfer station

In the lonely places, where it is just us and our thoughts

Help us to see your light there
And share your light there
with all the angels and shepherds
dressed up like regular people.

Help us to share the starlight
The candlelight
The midnight tears

So everyone knows the Babe has arrived
And Emmanuel, God is with us, is with us
Now and forever,
In our laughter, our tears and our star light.
Amen.

Hymn: *Silent Night* by the Brookline Community Church

[\[Click here\]](#) for a video that will give you someone to sing with, possibly your former self! You may notice me stopping to release my microphone cord that got snagged on a pew. Wireless microphones still have wires.]

Here ends our worship, now let our service begin.

Video Christmas Present:

Lighting All the Advent Wreaths [[Click here](#) and watch to the end!]

Postlude: *Believe in Christmas* by Darren Espanto

[[Click here](#) for a video that will give you the lyrics and someone to sing with. The song was written this year and there are some nice moments that reflect the pandemic.]

Many thanks to everyone who contributed to the service:

Jill, Kevin, Jocelyn & KJ Aitken
Bob & Linda Ashton
Peter & Donna Bretschneider
Carol Cherian
Sanjay Cherian
Howard Clements
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Sawicki
Ann Desrochers & John Panto
Marjorie & David Drake
Rena Duncklee

Bill & Nancy Dunbar
Marcia & Clarence Farwell
Alison & Clyde Ferrell
Barbara Haskell-Higgins
Jocelyn Jones
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John Nicholson
Cindy Perkins & Melanie Levesque
Amy Razzaboni
Maddie, Kier & Cora Shaklee
Candy & Tony Tiner

Christmas Eve Household Prayer: Morning

God of hope, peace, joy, and love, this day is so full! For children, this day is one of excitement and anticipation; for others, this day is filled with responsibilities and activity. Some are traveling this day to be with family or friends, while others spend the day quietly and alone. Be with us in all our varied circumstances and moods. I pray that I, and all those within my circles of care, will be especially attentive to the angels' good news: that you have come to dwell among us in Jesus Christ, full of grace and truth. In this is our great joy. Amen.

Christmas Eve Household Prayer: Evening

Loving God, this night holds so much for me — people and places from long ago are brought near in memories redeemed; my present companions, as well as present cares, are held in tenderness. Lord, I would hold the whole world in my hands, turning it round and round, so that your light would shine everywhere on everyone with hope and peace.

As it is, I utter this prayer instead — my little light in the shades of night: Hold those I love and all the world in your sure and tender hands, as a mother holds her newborn child. Let your face shine upon us with peace. Gather up the past, the present, and the future into your eternity, where all is reconciled and you are all in all. In the name of him who was born this night, Jesus, who is Christ the Lord. Amen.

Christmas Day Household Prayer: Morning

Eternal God, as I celebrate the birthday of Jesus, may I sing of your love all the days of my life, for you have made me your child forever. In Christ I pray. Amen.

Christmas Day Household Prayer: Evening

Lord, I give thanks for the blessings of this day (which I now name), and I ask your forgiveness for the places where I have failed to reveal your love (which I now name). I give thanks that you have become one of us, that I may become more like you. As I sleep this night, may your goodness shape me to more lovingly reflect your light in the world. Amen.

Questions for Reflection

In Isaiah's prophecy in chapter 9 and the birth narrative in Luke 2, the glory of God is described as a light shining in the darkness. On this eve of Christmas, where is there a deep need for God's light to shine with love, with hope, or with peace in your life; in the life of someone you love; or in a troubled part of the world? What is your prayer for light in this darkness?