

Brookline Community Church
December 24, 2021
Rev. Catherine A. Merrill



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: [Advent – The Christ Candle by Steelehouse Media](#)

Call To Worship¹

Leader: Eternal God, from the tabernacle of heaven to the poverty of a stable,

**All: your radiant light shines forth in a tiny baby wrapped in rags;
such humble Love astounds us.**

Leader: In Jesus you have become one with us

All: that we might become one with you.

Leader: Open our hearts to joyfully receive his love

**All: that he may be born in us, and we in him,
through Christ our Lord.**

Leader: Let us go now to Bethlehem and make known what we have been told.

¹ Today's Call to Worship, Advent Wreath Lighting and Prayer of Joys & Concerns are from Brian Wren, *Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany: Liturgies and Prayer for Public Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008).

Lighting the Advent Wreath

The Advent wreath is shaped in a ring. It shows the circle of God's unbroken love. Each week we will invite a "family" to light the candles in the wreath. This week the church's musicians will light the candles to bring us together in the warm light of God's love.

Lighter 1: The Gospel of Luke tells what happened on the night when Jesus was born:

When the angels had left them ...
the shepherds said to one another,
"Let us go now to Bethlehem,
and see what has taken place,
which God has made known to us."

Lighter 2: In those days, shepherds did not count for much.

But God chose shepherds
to welcome and honor Jesus.
We light the Christ candle
to praise Jesus Christ, who comes to all of us,
beginning with the least and the last.

(Light the first candle)

Lighter 1: Living Christ, give us faith to trust you,
hope to follow you,
love to live for you,
wisdom to know you,
and joy to adore you.

All: We trust you, we love you, we praise you. Amen.

Hymn: [The First Noel by CelebratingHolidays](#)

If you have a favorite hymn you'd like to include in our worship service, just send it along and I'll look for a good place for it.

[Children's Message \(for kids of all ages\):](#)

What's your favorite Christmas light?

[Pastoral Prayer:](#)

God of love,
You are the source of our life.
You have created us to know you and love you,
and today we praise and thank you
for all the ways you have taken
to convince us of your love.

Thank you, above all,
that you humbled yourself to be one of us
to convince us of your love.

Thank you for everything that Jesus said and did
to show what a human life can be
when you are fully in it –
from birth to death, from cradle to cross.

Thank you that Jesus, like us,
did not come from nowhere
but from a family, a tradition, and a people
where you were loved and known.

Thank you, also, for people and traditions
that have shaped us, loved us,
made us what we are
and tried to give us confidence to love.

We confess with sorrow
that in spite of everything you have done
to convince us of your love,
we resist you so strongly, so deeply.
Turn us toward you and each other.
Help us to put you first
in all our decisions.
Make us trustworthy, faithful and true.

With the confidence that you love us and cherish us,
We pray for other whom you love.

We pray for all who have been so hurt, oppressed, or abused,
That they cannot believe they are lovable
Or trust in other people's love.
Give them hope and heal their wounds.

We pray for your church throughout the world
And for this congregation.
Make every church a safe and trustworthy community.

We pray for our world.
Curb the violence that springs from failure to love
And destroys love and trust
Build love and respect for every person.

Loving God, draw together our prayers, silent and spoken,
As we show our trust in your love
By joining together in the prayer of Jesus:

Let us pray the Lord's Prayer together:

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: Angels We Have Heard on High by Reawaken Hymns

Scripture Reading: Psalm 96:1-6, 11-13

O sing to the LORD a new song;
sing to the LORD, all the earth.
Sing to the LORD, bless his name;
tell of his salvation from day to day.
Declare his glory among the nations,
his marvelous works among all the peoples.
For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised;
he is to be revered above all gods.
For all the gods of the peoples are idols,
but the LORD made the heavens.
Honor and majesty are before him;
strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.
Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;
let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
let the field exult, and everything in it.
Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy
before the LORD; for he is coming,
for he is coming to judge the earth.
He will judge the world with righteousness,
and the peoples with his truth.

Anthem: "Hope Was Born This Night" by Sidewalk Prophets

Scripture Reading: Luke 2:1-20

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:

You'd think it would be hard to get lost going home. Unless you are kind of new to the Brookline/Mason area, and you've just led one of the first joint services over at the Mason church, on Ash Wednesday, in February, in a snow storm, after dark, and you head down Valley Road and forget there was that turn from Depot Road that will lead to Brookline Road which magically turns into Mason Road and by the time you're sure something isn't quite right you find out there's absolutely no cell phone signal and Google maps couldn't be less interested in helping you out. So you stay on the larger roads until you bump into 495 and you've never been so grateful in your life to drive from Fitchburg to Andover. Or maybe that is just me. But I never missed the turn onto Depot Road again.

Home is a funny place, because it's not always a building. Sometimes you get lost going home because of death or divorce, addiction or inattention. Sometimes the building is right where it has always been, but the home-y-ness is gone. At this time of year, there's an awfully big world telling us that we should go home for Christmas. We should be together with family. We should have lovely presents in perfectly tidy and clean homes, in matching holiday sweaters, with exquisitely cooked meals. Everyone's healthy and fit, and our finances are perfectly in order, and no one's exhausted or over stimulated and there are no tears. Again, maybe it's just me, but part of why I wear my Harry Potter minister's robe on Christmas Eve is so I only have to iron the collar and cuffs of my shirt. Because that is all I can manage at this point.

Psalm 96 says we're supposed to sing a new song to God (Psalm 96:1). And, oh, I want to. Because I am so ready for the Lord to come and have God's loving judgment come to the earth. But on the other hand, if I can't even iron an entire shirt for Christmas Eve, when I've known the date since approximately last Christmas Eve, how am I going to be ready for God to come again?

That's when I think we need to look at the shepherds. They had an awfully big world telling them that the Emperor Augustus was in charge, and the most important thing was getting your name written down in the right place so you could be taxed. They had an awfully big world telling them that God was on God's throne, somewhere far away, among the stars. They had an awfully big world reminding them that people were paying attention to all the wrong things, to idols they had made all by themselves, and that the Prophet Isaiah was right when he said that God's people had forgotten where their manger was, that God's people couldn't find their way home.

The angels show up and say, "Hey, listen up. There's another story inside the one the big world is telling you." The emperor's story might have gotten a little family on the road from Nazareth to Bethlehem. But look what's in that manger in Bethlehem. God kept God's promise to be with us, in this life, in this big world of emperors and taxes. So the shepherds go take a look. And they find the sign the angels mentioned, *the child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger* (Luke 2:12).

And the shepherds tell Mary and Joseph what they had been told. And the shepherds tell other people, because *all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them* (Luke 2:18). But the shepherds don't try to persuade or argue or convince.² They just say what they saw. Heaven and earth meet in obscure places, not in the halls of power.³ Yes, a savior was born in the city of King David, but he wasn't born in a palace. The light came to the dark fields, to the dim room in Bethlehem, because God longs and has always longed for us to know and love God.⁴ God helped us find the manger we had lost, that we couldn't seem to find our way home to. God made it possible to find our way home in the middle of the crazy story the awfully big world was telling us. The shepherds just said what they saw.

² Amanda Brobst-Renaud, "Gospel: Commentary on Luke 2:1-14, (15-20)", Working Preacher "Lectionary Commentaries for December 24, 2018, Christmas Eve: Nativity of Our Lord", <https://www.workingpreacher.org/?print-all=29241%2C29238%2C29239%2C29237> (accessed 1 November 2021)

³ Sarah Henrich, "Gospel: Commentary on Luke 2:1-14, (15-20)", Working Preacher "Lectionary Commentaries for December 24, 2021, Christmas Eve: Nativity of Our Lord", <https://www.workingpreacher.org/?print-all=50869%2C50871%2C50872%2C50873> (accessed 21 November 2021)

⁴ Henrich.

Maybe that's all we need to do to go home. Say what we see. Not in the crazy story of the awfully big world. But when we see light in the dark fields, when we find the manger we were looking for in an out of the way stable. When we hear a new song about hope being born this night, or when we hear the earth rejoicing, the sea roaring, the fields exulting and the forest singing for joy (Psalm 96:11-12). When we realize we can turn away from the idols that say everything has to be some kind of unnatural perfection for Christmas to be real. When we find ourselves in an obscure place where we love and are loved, where we forgive and are forgiven. Maybe with biological family, maybe with family we have made ourselves. We say what we see in this world where God is waiting for us in a manger. Where God is waiting for us to come home to love.

And, sure, maybe we'll need to go through Fitchburg to find our way home. But let's go home singing a new song or an old song about the God who is always there for us, in the world we live in, far away from the craziness of the awfully big world full of useless idols. Let's go home to the manger full of light and love. And let's tell each other and everyone else what we saw.

Hymn: [O Holy Night by Martina McBride](#)

[Prayer of Dedication for the Gifts We've Been Given:](#)

God of every good gift, we thank you for your greatest gift, your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

In this season when so many gifts are given and received, we pray that you will receive the gifts we offer now. Use them according to your purposes and plans, bringing your good news of great joy to all people; through Jesus Christ, our Savior. Amen.

[A Prayer to Send us Back Out into the World](#)

Leader: Go in peace.
May the love that made the stars,
be your guiding light.

**All: May the love revealed in Jesus
be your hope and inspiration;**

Leader: May the love of the ever-present Spirit,
give you courage, joy and hope,

All: now and for ever. Amen.

Postlude: [Silent Night by NeedToBreathe](#)

Here ends our worship, now let our service begin.

Christmas Eve Household Prayer: Morning

Prince of Peace, On this morning before Christmas, I pray for an abiding sense of your peace, in my life and in the lives of those I love. I pray, too, for peace to come into every troubled heart, home, and community. This day may be rushed and busy, as it must have been in Bethlehem long ago. Let there be peace enough in my heart and mind to receive your good news, in light; in word; in song; in the faces of others. In peace, help me to treasure the blessings of this day and ponder your wondrous love. Amen.

Christmas Eve Household Prayer: Evening

Wonderful Counselor, As Christmas Eve draws to an end, I ready myself to close my eyes and sleep, to rest in the peace and confidence of your love. May all the weary world lie down in peace, confident that your love will break the darkness as surely as the sun rises each new morning. Thank you for memories that warm me this night. I praise you for the gifts that have blessed and sustained me all day. I entrust myself and those I love to your care, until we wake in the morning light of Christmas joy—to greet Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Christmas Day Household Prayer: Morning

God of small things, you came among us as a tiny and vulnerable baby open to all who met you. Teach us to care for the quiet and tender places in our hearts and in those of others as we nurture your compassion in our world. Amen.

Christmas Day Household Prayer: Evening

Creator of the stars of night, we give you thanks for the love you have shared with us this day in the celebration of the birth of Christ. Blanket us in peace this night as you comfort all in need. Amen.

Questions for Reflection

Isaiah names the one who will come to rule: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Do these names for God, made known in Jesus Christ, describe your own experience of God? Is there a particular time when God seemed especially near to you as one of these names? This Christmas Eve, as you reflect on the circumstances in the world, which name for God would you choose to call upon in prayer?