

THE WORSHIP OF THE LORD

December 21, 2023

The Longest Night Service

PRELUDE

Karen Sawyer and Clyde Patterson

Jesus, Jesus, Rest Your Head

arr. John Innes

GREETING

Rev. J. Kenneth Byrd, Jr.

CALL TO WORSHIP

Officiant: In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.
All things were made by God, and without God nothing came to be.
What came to be through God was life, and this life was the light of the world.

**All: The Light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness has not overcome it.**

*CAROL

(86) *O Little Town of Bethlehem*

St. Louis

THE FIRST READING: Ecclesiastes 3:1-11

Brenda Viverette

PSALM 22 (ESV) (Responsive)

Rev. Byrd

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from helping me, so far from the words of my groaning?

**O my God, I cry by day but you do not answer,
and by night, but I find no rest.**

In you, our ancestors trusted. They trusted and you delivered them.

**It was you who brought me from the womb,
you who kept me safe on my mother's breast.**

Since my mother bore me, you have been my God.

Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help.

God does not despise the affliction of the afflicted.

God does not hide from me.

When I cry to God, God hears me.

Thanks be to God.

Psalms 23 (in unison)

**The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul.
He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.
Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff, they comfort me.
You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.**

**Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.**

THE SECOND READING: Isaiah 40:1-2, 12, 27-31

Healon Smith

*Carol

(106) *Infant Holy, Infant Lowly*.....W ZLOBIE LEZY

LITANY OF REMEMBRANCE

Mary John Matthews: We light this first candle to remember those
whom we have loved and lost.

We pause to remember clearly, their faces, their voices, their bodies.

We embrace and give thanks for the memories

that bind them to us in this season of expectation,

when all Creation waits for the Light.

All: We remember them with love.

May God's eternal love surround them.

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.

A period of silence

Susan Edwards: We light this second candle to remember the pain of loss:

loss of relationships, loss of trust, loss of jobs,

loss of health, loss of faith, the loss of joy.

We acknowledge and embrace the pain of the past,

O God, and we offer it to You,

asking that into our wounded hearts and open hands

You will place the gift of peace, shalom.

All: We remember that through You all things are possible.

Refresh, restore, renew us, O God, and lead us into Your future.

O come thou Wisdom from on high, who orderest all things mightily

To us the path of knowledge show, and teach us in her ways to go

Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.

A period of silent reflection

Jack Sieber: We light this third candle to remember ourselves this Christmas time.

We pause and remember the past weeks, months,

and for some of us years, that have been heavy with our burdens.

We accept and lay before you, God, the sharpness of memory,

the sadness and grief, the hurt and fear, the anger and pain.

We accept and lay before you the ways we feel we have fallen

short, and the times we have spent blaming ourselves, and you,

for all that we have suffered.

We accept and lay before you the time we have walked alone,
in darkness; and in knowledge of our own mortality.

**All: We remember that though we have journeyed far,
and that, while lost, we may have turned away from the light,
the light itself has not failed.**

We remember that though winter be upon us

and though the night be dark,

with the turning of the Wheel the dawn will come,

and dawn defeats the darkness.

O come thou day-spring, come and cheer our spirits by thy advent here

Disperse the gloomy clouds of night,

and death's dark shadows put to flight

Rejoice, rejoice Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.

A period of silent reflection.

Susan Frazier: We light this fourth candle to remember faith, the gift of light and hope
that God offers to us in the stories of Hanukkah and of Christmas, which both also
began in abandonment, insecurity, and humbleness, in a time of war and in a poor
stable. We remember that the loving God who kept the light shining in the temple and
who came to share this life with us promises us comfort and peace.

**All: We remember the One who shares our burdens, who shows us
the way to the Light, and who journeys with us into all our tomorrows.**

O come desire of nations, bind in one the hearts of all mankind

Bid then our sad, divisions cease, and be thyself our King of Peace

Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.

A period of silent reflection.

A TIME OF PRAYER

Rev. Byrd

Leader: God of wisdom, we come to you this Christmas Season
tired, in turmoil, and in pain.

As the nights have grown longer, so has darkness grown

and wrapped itself around our hearts.

In this season of longest night, we ask your healing blessings

upon all that we carry in our hearts sorrow we fear may never end,

wounds we cannot even put into words.

Lord, hear our prayer,

All: And in Your merciful love, answer.

Leader: God of mercy and compassion, there are those among us who are
grieving over what might have been. Death or loss or terrible hurt has
changed our experience of Christmas. We remember that once it was a
special day for us, too, but someone or something has gone away from

us in this life. We have lost a beloved, a job, a goal, a cause, a dream. We find ourselves adrift and alone. We are weary from the journey, and we have found no room at the inn. We come to you seeking rest, and peace, and shelter from the storm.
Lord, hear our prayer.

All: And in Your merciful love, answer.

Leader: God of grace, in the spirit of the season, grant us all that we need to comfort us as we journey through this Christmas season. We ask that you shelter and sustain all those of us, both here and throughout the world, who wander or want or weep or are heavy laden, that we may be lifted up in courage and journey on in Thy peace.
Lord, hear our prayer.

All: And in Your merciful love, answer.

Leader: God of love, in this Christmas Season we embrace and offer up to you all that used to be which is now lost to us, and cannot be again. With celebration all around us, memories of what was, and fears of what may be, weigh heavy on our hearts. Please hold us close in your embrace, be near to us this night, until the light returns and morning comes.
Lord, hear our prayer,

All: And in Your merciful love, answer.

Officiant: Keep watch, dear Lord, with those who work, or watch, or weep this night, and give thine angels charge over those who sleep. Tend the sick, Lord; give rest to the weary, bless the dying, soothe the suffering, pity the afflicted, shield the joyous; and all for thy love's sake.
Amen.

*CAROL

(103) *Away in a Manger*

MUELLER

THIRD READING: Luke 2:1-7

Rev. Byrd

OFFERING OF LIGHT

Officiant: One celebration observed in this season tells how a few brave fighters, defending their temple, had only enough oil to light the sacred lamp for one day, but it burned eight days until relief arrived. We as Christians celebrate how in a little hill town a homeless couple with tax problems took shelter in a stable among the animals and gave birth to a light that would change the world.
Let us pray.

All: Gentle God of love, help us reach out together for the light of faith, for renewal and recovery and a new day coming. Grant that hope may come to rest in our hearts, and let it go forth with us into the darkness, this night and in the nights to come, until we see the dawn.

Officiant: Lighten our darkness, we beseech you, O God; give us light in the night season; and by your great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of this night. Amen.

CANDLE LIGHTING

PSALM 121 *(unison)*

**I lift up my eyes to the hills—from where will my help come?
My help comes from the Lord,
who made heaven and earth.
He will not let your foot be moved;
he who keeps you will not slumber.
He who keeps Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.
The Lord will keep you from all evil;
he will keep your life.
The Lord will keep
your going out and your coming in
from this time on and forevermore.**

CONCLUDING PRAYER AND BLESSING

CLOSING VOLUNTARY

O Little Town of Bethlehem

Karen Sawyer

St. Louis

Dismissal

Officiant: The Peace of the Lord be always with you.

People: And also with you.

**Congregation stands, who are able.*

All scripture readings are from *The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version* unless noted.

The Ministry of Worship for Today:

Rev. J. Kenneth Byrd, Jr., Pastor
Blaine Pittman, Director of Music & Education
Clyde Patterson, Organist
Karen Sawyer, Pianist

