

Christmas Eve 2021
 Mantua Center Christian Church
 7:00pm Traditional Candle Light Service

Gathering Music

“On a Bethlehem Hill”
 (By Gerald Peterson)

Jan Green

Welcome

Merry Christmas! Welcome to Mantua Center Christian Church. We are blessed to have all of you here with us tonight to hear the Story and sing some carols.

Please make sure that you have a **candle** to light later in the service and feel free to follow along in the **bulletin** for the scriptures and songs we will sing.

I want, also, to take a moment to **give thanks** for all those on-call tonight---nurses, doctors, and caregivers, service men and women, first responders...all those who may rather be with their family tonight but serving our communities.

We are blessed tonight to hear words of scripture and also poetry written by Rev. Sarah Are Speed of Sanctified Art.

Close to Home. That was our theme this Advent as so often we feel like we are almost home. Just not quite there. Many of us are here tonight, but many of us are at home too. It has been years of adjustments and tonight is no different. Yet we pause to hear the story again. To find reason for Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love in our hearts and in the world. Tonight we seek to make a home for Christ. For Christ to be born in us anew.

CAROL

O Come, All Ye Faithful

1. 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:

Refrain

*O come, let us adore him, O come, let us adore him,
 O come, let us adore him, Christ the Lord!*

2. Sing, choirs of angels, sing in exultation,
 sing, all ye citizens of heaven above!
 Glory to God, all glory in the highest; [Refrain]

Candle Lighting Liturgy

A: In God's house, there is hope—For God loves us too much to leave us just as we are.

Light the candle of hope.

B: In God's house, there is peace—For all that separates us from God falls away.

Light the candle of peace.

A: In God's house, there is joy— Because God created music, and coffee, and dance floors, and laughter that is contagious, and endless rounds of peek-a-boos with babies; and if those things have God's fingerprints, then God's house surely exudes joy.

Light the candle of joy.

B: In God's house, there is love— Because God is love, from start to finish, and that love exists for us all.

Light the candle of love.

A: And in the center of our hope,

B: In the center of our peace,

A: In the center of our joy,

B: In the center of our love, is God—who came to this earth to dwell among us.

A: So tonight we light the Christ candle, for God's love just could not stay away.

B: Welcome home. Amen.

PRAYER

Holy God,

We've heard this story a million times—Mary and Joseph, the angels, the shepherds. We've heard it a million times, but we want to hear it like it's the first. So move among us. Circle back. Draw close.

Crack open our hearts and fill them with your goodness. Help us to hear what it is you might be saying to us with curiosity, joy, and hope.

This is an invitation. Come make a home among us.

Gratefully we pray, amen.

I. Homesick (Hope)

Scripture - Psalm 130 (*selections*)

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice!
 Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications!
 I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope;
 my soul waits for the Lord
 more than those who watch for the morning,
 more than those who watch for the morning.
 O Israel, hope in the Lord! For with the Lord there is steadfast love,
 and with him is great power to redeem.

Poetry - Homesick by. Sarah (Are) Speed

How do you describe homesickness to a child?
 You don't. They know.
 Children know the feeling of being away from home.
 It's fear, dipped in loneliness,
 that "What if I've been forgotten?" sonnet,
 or the "What if I can't go back?" refrain.
 Even a healthy, scrubbed-clean, showered-with-love child
 knows the longing of home.
 But if I had to.
 If I had to describe that aching feeling, I would say:
 "Homesickness is when longing and grief
 wrap themselves around you like a blanket.
 It's the door to comfort thrown open.
 It's an eye on the horizon for what could be
 and the only way out is to keep walking,
 to keep dreaming, to keep looking
 for signs that will point you back home."

And if you tell that to a child, you just may realize that a part of your spirit
 has shoes on and has always been walking,
 always been dreaming,
 always been looking for the home that could be.
 The door to comfort has been blown open.
 Tell God I'm homesick. I'm on my way.

II. Laying the Foundation (Peace)

Scripture: Luke 1:26-38

26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' ²⁹But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. ³¹And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³²He 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. ³³He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' ³⁴Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' ³⁵The 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. ³⁶And 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. ³⁷For nothing will be impossible with God.' ³⁸Then 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.

Poetry - Come On Home by Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed

We all know the feeling—the shaky ground,
sinking sand, water-is-rising, sun-is-fading feeling
that makes steady breathing an entire miracle,
and holding back tears a marvel in and of itself.
And when those days come, I call my parents.
And I call my church, and I call my friends,
and they say in unison what God has said from the very beginning,
which is, "Come on home."
Is there anything more healing than an open door?
If you're seeking sanctuary, if the waters are rising—listen.
It may be hard to hear, but God is always saying,
"Come on home."

Carol:**Away in a Manger #147**

1. Away in a manger, no crib for a bed,
the little Lord Jesus laid down his sweet head.
The stars in the sky looked down where he lay,
the little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay.
3. Be near me, Lord Jesus, I ask thee to stay
close by me forever, and love me, I pray.
Bless all the dear children in thy tender care,
and fit us for heaven, to live with thee there.

III. A Home For All (Joy)**Scripture - Luke 1:67-79**

⁶⁷ Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy about John:

⁶⁸ ‘Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favourably on his people and redeemed them.

⁶⁹ He has raised up a mighty saviour for us in the house of his servant David,

⁷⁰ as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,

⁷¹ that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.

⁷² Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,
and has remembered his holy covenant,

⁷³ the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,

to grant us ⁷⁴that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,
might serve him without fear, ⁷⁵in holiness and righteousness
before him all our days.

⁷⁶ And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;

for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,

⁷⁷ to give knowledge of salvation to his people

by the forgiveness of their sins.

⁷⁸ By the tender mercy of our God,

the dawn from on high will break upon us,

⁷⁹ to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.’

Poetry - Words for the Beginning by Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed

If I could give you words for the very beginning—
 for the stretches and the yawns, and the opening of eyes,
 for the first hiccups, and the first smiles, and the first purse of your lips,
 I would say, “Oh, dear child, how you are loved.”
 But the thing about love is you can’t stop there,
 so I would go on to say,
 “You are strong, stronger than you think.
 And you are not alone—look at these parents who adore you
 and these doctors and nurses fighting for you.
 And you are enough, already enough. You haven’t done anything yet.
 You’ve just been here,
 breathing,
 sleeping,
 and already, you are enough.
 And then I might say, “This world is a mess, but it is your home,
 and you can make it better, so always try to make it better.
 And maybe most important of all:
 there is a love that is bigger than my understanding,
 that moves through this world, and I call that love God.
 And that love is here, here in this room,
 and that love knows your name by heart.”
 Those are the words I would say to you
 as you stretch and yawn and open your eyes
 on the very first morning of your very first day.
 Let that be your foundation, like Zechariah did for John.
 Let love be your beginning.

CAROL - Joy to the World #143

1. Joy to the world, the Lord is come! Let earth receive her King;
 let every heart prepare him room, and heaven and nature sing,
 and heaven and nature sing, and heaven, and heaven and nature sing.
 2. Joy to the world, the Savior reigns! Let all their songs employ;
 while fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains.
- Repeat the sounding joy, repeat the sounding joy, repeat, repeat the sounding joy.
3. 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.

IV. Seeking Sanctuary (Love)

SCRIPTURE - Luke 2:1-20

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph 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. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And 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.

⁸ In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.’ ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

¹⁴ ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!’

¹⁵ 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.’ ¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Poetry - Invitation by Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed

I've been thinking about a universal truth—the way we all want to be invited in. We want the door to be opened with cheers of, “You're here!” We want the clerk at the store to ask how we're doing, and the waiter to wink at us and whisper, “Good choice.” We want the barista to learn our names, which people call being “a regular,” but it feels more like being known. We want the stranger to help us pick up our sodas when the case breaks, and the woman to put her bag in her lap on the subway, which is to mean, “Come, you can sit by me.” We cherish every open palm wave from the child in the grocery store and every city church with open doors when the organist plays. At the end of the day we are all just a collection of heart and bones

walking through this world, exchanging invitations, saying to one another in a million little ways—come matter here. Come make a difference here. Come be you, here. Jesus didn't receive much of an invitation.

No one moved their bag to their lap, or opened the door to the inn and said,
 “You're here!”
 Still, he came.

What a gift it is to have a God who does not wait on my invitation.
 What a gift it is to have a God who can't imagine being anywhere but here.

Special Music

“O Holy Night”

Ally & Jon Bozeka

V. Home in Christ

SCRIPTURE: John 1:1-5, 14 (Christmas Eve) - Chad

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

¹⁴ 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.

Christmas Eve Prayer - Chad

God of shepherds and angels,

God of starlight and seekers,

God of mangers and unwed teenage mothers:

It is almost Christmas. It's almost here. We are close to home.

It feels like we have been waiting so long for this night.

Amidst the hustle and bustle of this busy season, we have been waiting for a quiet, a calm, a stillness. We have been waiting for good news that changes us and for the undeniable sense that you are near.

So in this moment, surrounded by community, in the presence of candle light and hallelujahs, we bow our heads and give thanks:

Thank you, God, for the places and people that feel like home.

Thank you for the hope on the horizon which carries us through.

Thank you for moments of worship that break open our hearts.

Thank you for the joy of children on this night, which reminds us of love.

And thank you for the stars in the sky which remind us of you.

We have so much to be grateful for.

However, even amidst our prayers of gratitude and joy, we also bring you prayers of concern. For when the music is quiet and the clouds clear, we can finally hear our own thoughts and see sky above us, and that is when there is enough space for hurt to float to the surface.

We know we are close to home, God, but we also know we are not home yet and that

truth aches in us. So many of us are still seeking, still looking for a place to belong, still

searching for a faith that feels like home.

We are closer to home, but we're not there yet.

We are only truly home when we are with you.

So God of starlight and angel choruses, on this Christmas Eve, as you come dwell among

us, we pray that you would bring us closer to home. Scoop us up. Draw us in. Build the

world you have in mind for us. Hover here. Hear our prayers. Take this grief and pain off

of our shoulders and hold our hands as we walk through the dark.

It is almost Christmas. It's almost here.

We can feel it—we are close to home. Amen.

CAROL - Silent Night

*1. 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.*

*2. 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!*

*3. 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

God's Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love be with all of you.
Merry Christmas and Go in Peace! Amen

POSTLUDE

“Good Christian Friends, Rejoice!
(By Robert Thygerson)

Jan Green