

## WORSHIP AT HOME: Week of 12/27/20 First Sunday of Christmas

*In the event you are unable to view or hear an MPLC service, here's a brief worship order you can use at home. You might light a candle before you begin to quiet your heart and prepare to worship God. You will need a bible to look up the readings. You may read aloud or in silence to yourself.*



**BEGIN:** *(You may trace a cross on your forehead or make the sign of the cross.)* Blessed be the holy Trinity, one God, Father, ☩ Son, and Holy Spirit, who was in the beginning, who makes a dwelling among us, who covers us with justice and mercy. Amen.

**CONFESS:** *(You may offer these prayers to God with a repentant heart.)*

God of goodness and lovingkindness, we confess that we have sinned against you and our neighbors. We have turned away from your invitation to new life. We have turned away from the lowly and downtrodden. In your abundant mercy, forgive us our sins, those we know and those known only to you, for the sake of the one who came to live among us, Jesus Christ, our Savior. Amen.

*(Read these words to yourself and be assured of the grace of God in Christ for you.)*

Hear the good news of peace and salvation! God forgives us all our sins, not through our own work, but through ☩ Jesus Christ, made known to all people. With all who come to the manger, rejoice in this amazing gift of grace. Amen.

**PRAY:** Almighty God, you wonderfully created the dignity of human nature and yet more wonderfully restored it. In your mercy, let us share the divine life of the one who came to share our humanity, Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

**READ:** Psalm 148 and Luke 2:1-20

**SERMON:** *by Pastor Beth Ann Stone (offered on Christmas Eve, Dec. 24, 2020)*

There are no tourists in Bethlehem this year, no Christian pilgrims making their way to that little town where Jesus was born. Last year during the Christmas season there were 1.5 million hotel reservations made in this West Bank community whose economy largely depends on visitors; this year there are none as curfews, travel restrictions and virus precautions keep them away. The streets are empty, except for the 25,000 or so Palestinians who live there and are experiencing a kind of quiet that hasn't been seen there at Christmastime for many years. O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie!

It's quiet in many of our homes this week, too, in a way that feels strange and probably a little lonely. Maybe you would normally travel for Christmas like my family always has, heading down the highway with a trunkful of wrapped gifts, or heading to the airport with your gifts already mailed ahead of you to your destination. Maybe yours is the home people usually come TO, and you'd spend days or weeks ahead of time getting the place cleaned up and decorated, shopping for food and planning a menu for the loved ones who would be gathering around your table. Or maybe you usually just take off this week for someplace exotic, spending Christmas on a beach somewhere warm instead of

watching the snow fall. But for so many of us, there's no place to go this Christmas, even though we're getting a little stir-crazy from being at home. Some of us who are living with others ran out of things to talk about with them MONTHS ago! And for those who live alone, the house seems extra quiet this week, especially for people who lost a loved one this past year. For everyone who's had to change their usual plans for Christmas, all around the world, this year feels different....quiet.

For hundreds of people who would normally be coming to the church building for Christmas Eve worship, or our choir's Christmas cantata, or the children's Christmas program, we're definitely missing things this year. The bustle of people looking for good seats in a crowded service, spreading a scarf across a pew to hold seats for the family members still parking the car...the sound of the congregation's voices together singing "Joy to the World"...the brass players and orchestra musicians and bell players performing with the choir...the sight of children who grow up all too fast wearing fancy Christmas clothes they can't wait to get out of when they get home...the darkened sanctuary slowly filling with light and heat as candlelight spreads from person to person...the pastors repeating "Merry Christmas!" over and over as our sisters and brothers in Christ file out the door to carry the love of Christ with them to their homes and neighbors. It just seems wrong not to come to church in a season like this.

But the whole point of worship at Christmastime is not that we come to God, but that God comes to US! God comes to us. Tonight, we heard again the old, old story about a young couple making their way to Bethlehem, Mary heavy with child. That's where Jesus was born, wrapped in bands of cloth, and laid in a manger. And outside town, the shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night heard a messenger of God tell them, "To you is born this day in David's city a Savior, the Lord, a child wrapped and lying in a manger." The shepherds hurry into town and find the young parents, and the child asleep on the hay. God came to US, to them, as good news to all the people.

For Christians who've been hearing this story for most of our lives, we sometimes forget how extraordinary it is that God became human, God incarnate, the incarnation. God Almighty, the Most High God joined us in our humanity in the most ordinary way possible, as a squalling, helpless newborn. With apologies to "Away in a Manger", "no crying he makes" just doesn't square with the reality of baby life, even a holy baby! Jesus was born to parents just like you and I were born, a completely vulnerable human creature who needed to be nursed and changed and held. That's how God decided to come to us some two thousand years ago.

Consider the alternatives! Before Jesus, the presence of the Lord God had appeared to God's people as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. Moses came close to seeing God on Mt. Sinai, and afterward Moses' own face shone with such light that it scared people. The Hebrew prophets discerned the voice of God, but no one had ever known God personally, because God was not a person. God was in that way unknowable, unfathomable. Until Jesus came to us.

Jesus is like God with skin on. God the most High is more than just Jesus, has always existed, well before the birth of Jesus, so Jesus is called God's Son. Emmanuel. God with us. God born for us. God who comes to us. Jesus who shows us what it can be like to live in right relationship with our heavenly Creator. Jesus, God with skin on who shows us how to be human, how to live well, and live abundantly not by following the ways of the world and accumulating worldly power and wealth...but just the opposite...by renouncing worldly power and wealth, by loving our neighbors and our enemies, and by pouring out our lives in service to God and those in need. Jesus came to us to love us with holy love by

giving his whole life for the debt of our sin. He came down that we may have life and light and love and purpose and joy and hope in him. God comes to us.

There's no better news than that in a year when we're staying home, for the sake of our own health and the health of our loved ones. This Christmas season, when we're literally not going to church to worship the newborn Savior, God comes to us. God comes to YOU, in your home, in the hospital, in the nursing care center, or wherever you're worshipping alone or with loved ones today...God comes to you. God shows up in Jesus, the one who knows our life and our struggles, our loss and our pain, our joys and our challenges. God comes to you.

And Christ lives through you. Through your sacrifices for others. Through your patience in suffering. Through your generosity toward the needy. Through your kindness to strangers, neighbors, and even enemies. Through your prayers to the Most High God. Christ lives and loves through you, his ambassadors. As you go through all of the emotions of this week, whatever they may be, remember that you are loved, deeply and personally by a God who comes to you, and that this is a gift meant to be shared, for the sake of the world God so loves. May Christ's light shine through you today and always. Amen.

PRAY: For those who travel and those who stay put; for essential workers and health care workers; for fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains, that all creation may sing for joy in Christ; for people struggling with addiction, depression, or chronic illness; for new parents and all parents; for the lonely, the grieving, and the sick; for people who are hungry or homeless; for the church around the world, and for ourselves...

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 and ever. Amen.

BLESS: Almighty God, who sent the Holy Spirit to Mary, proclaimed joy through the angels, sent the shepherds with good news, and led the magi by a star, bless you this day ☩ through the Word made flesh. Amen.

Go in peace. Share the gift of Jesus. Thanks be to God.





## WORSHIP AT HOME: Week of 1/3/21 Second Sunday of Christmas

*In the event you are unable to view or hear an MPLC service, here's a brief worship order you can use at home. You might light a candle before you begin to quiet your heart and prepare to worship God. You will need a bible to look up the readings. You may read aloud or in silence to yourself.*

**BEGIN:** *(You may trace a cross on your forehead or make the sign of the cross.)* Blessed be the holy Trinity, one God, Father, ☩ Son, and Holy Spirit, who was in the beginning, who makes a dwelling among us, who covers us with justice and mercy. Amen.

**PRAY:** Almighty God, you have filled all the earth with the light of your incarnate Word. By your grace empower us to reflect your light in all that we do, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

**READ:** John 1: 1-18

<sup>1</sup>In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup>He was in the beginning with God. <sup>3</sup>All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being <sup>4</sup>in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. <sup>5</sup>The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

<sup>6</sup>There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. <sup>7</sup>He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. <sup>8</sup>He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. <sup>9</sup>The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

<sup>10</sup>He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. <sup>11</sup>He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. <sup>12</sup>But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, <sup>13</sup>who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

<sup>14</sup>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. <sup>15</sup>(John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") <sup>16</sup>From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. <sup>17</sup>The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. <sup>18</sup>No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

**REFLECT:** See the provided "Daily Discipleship" Bible Study handout for John 1: 10-18.

PRAY: Redeeming God, you gather your people from the farthest parts of the earth. Protect your church from stumbling. Let it not be overcome by sorrow, division, or despair. Make us radiant with goodness, that we might live always to the praise of your glory.

You bring together heaven and earth. All creation testifies to your splendor. Hold the ecosystems of this earth in delicate balance, from coastlands to farmlands, forests to wetlands, deserts to rainforests. Show us new ways to live in harmony with the world around us.

You overflow with grace upon grace. Expand the imaginations of those who serve in positions of authority. Open their hearts to the needs of their nations and communities. Protect all those in harm's way and those risking danger for the sake of others.

You bring consolation to those who weep. Embrace those who feel far-off, excluded, or defeated. Accompany those living with chronic and invisible illness. Sustain the weak and weary. Refresh those who labor under the weight of pain or sickness, especially Ross Larson, Ray Nellis, Ben Poulsen, Dick Jonas, Sharon Polak, Trina Larsen, Linda Petersen, Diane Poulsen, Helen & Ken Fones, Sheila Johnson, Barbara and Scott Christiansen, Karen Tyykila, Cathy Spatz, Warren and Joannie Williams, Jennifer Vyeda, Barb & Bill Mains, all who suffer from Covid-19, and these we name before you....

You come to us in the beauty of darkness and of light. Bring justice and reconciliation to communities divided by oppressions and misuse of power. Guide us to speak holy words of advocacy and truth. Help us to honor your image in one another.

You turn our mourning into joy. We give thanks for those who have died in faith. With all the saints, give us our inheritance in Christ. In the fullness of time, gather us all together in your mercy. God of mercy, come quickly to us with grace upon grace as we lift these and all our prayers to you, in the name of Jesus. Amen.

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 and ever. Amen.

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