

# **First Presbyterian Church of Plymouth, Michigan**

**Rev. Emily Riley Campbell, Senior Minister**

**The Longest Year Service**

**December 20, 2020**

**A worship service of hope for those feeling loss during this long year of pain**

**Rev. Emily Riley Campbell**

## **Rev. Emily Riley Campbell – Welcome and Announcements**

Friends, welcome to our Longest Year Service. Those of you who have been to our Longest Night Service know that for many years our tradition within this congregation is to gather near the longest night of the year, December 21<sup>st</sup> and, in the midst of that darkness, come before God honestly and openly, confessing our need.

Now the Longest Night Service is most often geared around those mourning the loss of loved ones, but this year it seemed very appropriate that this service would be mourning all that has taken place in the last year. We have lost an extraordinary amount of people throughout the world due to this global pandemic. There have been millions of people struck low through this illness.

Friends, tonight we gather all of those feelings, those feelings that seem, perhaps, somewhat contrary to the joy of Christmas, and we bring them before God, trusting that God meets us where we are tonight. God desires to remind us of His love and grace.

Tonight's service is a communion service, and through the sharing of these elements, even within the context of our homes, we are reminded of God's amazing love and grace. And so at this point in our service I would invite you to please gather those elements you have at home for communion. It really doesn't matter what form those elements take. They may be bread and wine; they may be a roll and water. Whatever you have available, bring those to the table, so that you are ready to celebrate together this feast that God has prepared for us.

### ***[Pause to prepare for Communion]***

Before we get going in tonight's service, which is a service that you could watch at any point in the Christmas season, whenever you need it, I would remind you that for our Christmas Eve service here at our church we have two options available for you.

The first is an online option that will be available beginning all day Christmas Eve, whenever it's convenient for your family, join together and watch the service. We are blending new elements with past years, and together as one family, even in our separate homes, we will celebrate the birth of Christ.

Alternatively, we are also offering a live parking lot service at 5:00 p.m. In the comfort of your car you can listen to the service through the radio station while you watch me

and others leading worship. If you wish to join us for this unusual way of celebrating Christmas Eve, please register your car online or by calling the church office.

Now let us prepare our hearts for worship as we move literally to the lighting of our advent candle wreath. This year this wreath represents more than just the traditional hope, joy, love and peace. Tonight, through these candles we will remember all that we have lost and yet the hope that Christ still brings to our every situation. Let us now together worship God.

### ***[Lighting of Advent Candle Wreath]***

#### **Ashley Smith Ashley, Associate Pastor**

With the first candle we light tonight, we remember those we have loved and lost. We thank God for the important roles that they have played in our lives.

#### **Rev. Emily Riley Campbell**

With the second candle we light tonight, we light to redeem the pain of loss--the loss of work and income, the loss of health, the loss of significant relationships, the loss of freedom to travel or visit with those who we love. Bring your light, dear God, into our every experience of darkness.

#### **Ashley Smith Ashley, Associate Pastor**

The third candle we light is to remember the witness of the church. We mourn, dear God, our absence from the church building and the lack of fellowship. We mourn the warm embrace and encouraging words of others. Dear God, into our isolation and loneliness, may your faithful presence sustain us.

#### **Rev. Emily Riley Campbell**

The fourth candle we light to witness to resurrection hope. We thank you, dear God, that your love holds us, even in death. We praise you, dear God, for coming into our world on that very first silent night. We thank you for the difference that your light makes to our every experience of darkness. Come, Lord Jesus, light our darkness today and always. Amen.

#### **Bekah Brudi – Plays guitar and sings “Silent Night! Holy Night!”**

### **[Scripture Readings]**

#### **Rev. Emily Riley Campbell – Matthew 1:18-25**

<sup>18</sup> Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. <sup>19</sup> Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. <sup>20</sup> But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup> She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his

people from their sins.” <sup>22</sup> All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

<sup>23</sup> “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,”

which means, “God is with us.” <sup>24</sup> When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, <sup>25</sup> but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Amen.

### **Ashley Smith Ashley, Associate Pastor — Luke 1:26-38**

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

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Amen.

### **Bekah Brudi — Plays and sings “Breath of Heaven”**

#### **Rev. Emily Riley Campbell — Homily**

Would you all please pray with me. Holy God, through the deep December darkness, help us to find our way into the light of your presence, into your power, and into your holy purposes at work in our lives and in your world. This, we pray in Jesus name. Amen.

Friends, as we head into the darkest night of the year, I believe that we are more aware than in other years of the darkness. We are now nine months into our fight against Covid-19 and at the present moment the darkness seems palpable. Here in the United States we have now crossed that threshold of 300,000 lives lost to this pandemic. Worldwide, there have been over 71 million cases and well over 1 ½ million deaths-- all in the past nine months. When we focus on these sobering numbers it is easy for us to feel as if the darkness is closing in. We may feel as if God is absent from these times,

and yet as we move closer to Christmas, we are also aware that our need for a Savior is greater than ever.

Through the person of Jesus Christ, that babe born in the manger in Bethlehem, God not only reminds us that he is with us in our darkness, but through the whole of Christ's life we are reminded that Christ brings light, brings hope, and resurrection joy to us. Christ offers us peace in our hearts and in our world. But each of us has a choice that we need to make this Christmas concerning how will we receive the gift of Jesus Christ into our hearts and lives.

Now you may be thinking, wait a minute, we actually have this choice every year, this choice about what we will do with the gift of Christ offered to us at Christmas. And you would be right if that's what you're thinking. But whereas God never changes, we *do* change every single year. How open we are to fully receiving Christ into our hearts, minds and lives changes every single year, based on our focus, our priorities and our need. This year I am fairly confident that we can agree on the fact that our need is great! But just because our need is great does not automatically mean that we will respond to Christ with openness like Joseph from that original Christmas story.

When life's unexpected events happen to us and especially when those events threaten our future, our immediate response may not always be turning to God. Matthew chapter 1 tells us that when Joseph learned that his fiancé Mary was unexpectedly pregnant, with the story that the pregnancy was of the Holy Spirit, Joseph did not immediately drop to his knees and pray to God in faith. Instead he simply adjusted his own life plans. Now, clearly Joseph was a kind man, because the scriptures tell us that even after he received this monumental disappointment and shock, Joseph still did not wish to expose Mary to public disgrace, so he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

Mary, on the other hand, responded to the unexpected news of her impending pregnancy, not by making changes to her own life plan, but by asking God questions. "How can this be?" In other words, how can this happen? The Angel explained to Mary, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, the power of the almighty will overshadow you, so the Holy One to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age and she who was thought to be barren is now in her sixth month; for nothing will be impossible with God." Mary responded to these words of explanation with her own praise: "I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled!"

Clearly, there are choices we have as to how we respond to the unexpected events in our lives. What gives me great hope at this time is, even when we behave more like Joseph, when we rely on ourselves more than we rely on God, God doesn't simply give up on us. God continually intervenes and we see from Joseph's story that God gives Joseph yet another chance to respond. Matthew, chapter 1, verse 20 tells us that an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph only after he had made the decision to divorce Mary quietly. This angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and with his words the angel addressed Joseph's deepest fears and concerns directly.

“Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son and you are to give him the name Jesus because he will save his people from their sins.”

God provided multiple opportunities for Joseph, and so it is with us. God provides us with multiple opportunities and time and information for us to respond to the unexpected events in our lives with faith. These opportunities are available to us now, but one thing we should recognize that comes out of Joseph and Mary's experience, is that God did not move that couple *around the darkness* that they had to go through. God instead moved that couple, with His holy presence with them, *through the darkness*. Joseph and Mary still had to face their fears, the uncertainty, the speculation of others for nine months, until the promise of hope and joy was realized in the birth of Jesus,

The Bible tells us repeatedly that in this life we will have troubles and we will experience times of darkness and uncertainty. But as it says in those famous words from the 23rd Psalm, “The Lord our Shepherd will be with us, even when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death.”

Friends, praise God that we are only walking through that valley! We are not staying there. We have no intention of living here permanently. We are still moving forward in faith and even when our lives end, we will still only be traveling through the valley of the shadow of death, because of the person of Jesus Christ. Because of His saving grace our deaths will be a passage through to eternal life.

What was God doing in the lives of Mary and Joseph in those nine months waiting for Mary to give birth? What has God been doing in our world in the last nine months as we have also waited for our hope to be realized? I believe that God is building our souls. God is working on our faith and character development, so like the Apostle Paul, our faith may one day be characterized by its depth and resiliency.

In his letter to the church in Philippi, Paul writes, “I have learned the secret of being content in every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through Him who gives me strength.” And dear friends, so can we!

One day soon this pandemic will be over but God's work in us will remain. This Christmas I pray that we will come into God's presence with our questions, with our fear, our disappointment, our anger, our pain. We come to God honestly and openly, allowing God to meet us where we are so that we can receive more fully the gift of Jesus Christ and his love and hope and peace.

Come, Lord Jesus, this Christmas and fill our darkness with your light today. Amen.

### **Rev. Emily Riley Campbell — Sacrament of Communion**

Friends, Jesus has said, “Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls.” Come to this table today if you love God a little and wish to love God more.

Friends, would you all please pray with me. Loving Lord, we thank you for your sustaining love and grace. We thank you for the strength you give us each day to continue walking forward. We confess that we do not always understand how you are at work, but we trust that you are at work. We pray today for all who will celebrate Christmas alone this year, for all who are facing overwhelming loss. We pray for all who mourn during this season for those losses expected and unexpected. Lord, we thank you for the promise of heaven and your gift of eternal life. We thank you that our goodbyes to our loved ones are not permanent but one day will end, and while we wait for that glad reunion that is to come give us strength of faith, we pray, gracious God. This year we have been reminded how quickly life can change. We thank you that in every change, you remain the same. When darkness seems to reign in our world or nation or life, we thank you that your light can cut through our every experience of darkness. Eternal God, we pray tonight for all who will celebrate Christmas alone and especially for anyone in hospital, nursing homes, or rehab facilities, for those who are sick or alone. Lord, we pray for them and for all who care for them. Strengthen our first responders, dear God; remind them of your love and peace. We pray for anyone whose life is in transition due to a lack of health or lack of work or a lack of certainty about the future. Please help us to be patient in waiting for this pandemic to end. We continue to pray for the cure, and pray, Lord, for the ability to be part of that cure. In your time and in your way, reveal your plans for the future. Help us to live our lives in such a way that our lives can be a witness to your love and grace and a blessing to others. We thank you, oh God, that you are a blessing to us. Please hear these prayers.

In all of our prayers this day, we ask in the strong name of Jesus Christ, your Son, who has taught us when we pray to say 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 debts  
as we forgive our debtors.  
And lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from evil.  
For thine is the kingdom,  
and the power and the glory forever.  
Amen.

Friends, on the night of his arrest our Lord Jesus took bread and after he had given thanks to God his father, he broke it saying, this is my body that has been broken for you. Do this in memory of me. In the same way after supper Jesus took the cup saying this cup is the new covenant sealed by my blood. Whenever you drink from it, do so remembering me, for as often as you eat this bread and drink from this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes again. These are the gifts of God given to the people of God. Let us share this meal together.

### **Bekah Brudi – Plays and sings, “Oh Come, All Ye Faithful”**

Once you have finished your own experience of taking communion, if you feel so moved, please sing this with me, “Oh Come All Ye Faithful”.

### **Rev. Emily Riley Campbell – Closing Prayer and Benediction**

Gracious and loving God, we come as your faithful people tonight to thank you for the gift of this bread and this cup. We thank you, dear God, for these tangible signs of your invisible love and grace. Thank you for strengthening us, guiding us, helping us live through this difficult year. We thank you, dear God, that the days and months and years ahead are all under your watchful eye. We ask, dear God, that you would help us to navigate all that is before us, even as you have faithfully walked with us through all that is past. May our lives always reflect your love and kindness at work in the world. This we pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Friends, at this table we are reminded that we are one family, even when we are gathered in separate homes. As one family we go out into the world, tonight, under the blessing of God Almighty. God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit goes before us and behind us, above us and below us. And with that knowledge, let us go out into the world in peace.

And may the blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit rest upon you today and all your days. Amen.