

First Presbyterian Church of Plymouth, Michigan

Hello, My Name Is... Jesus

Christmas Eve Online Worship Service, December 24, 2020

Rev. Emily Riley Campbell, Senior Minister

Solid Brass Quintet – Plays Prelude, “Ding Dong, Merrily on High”

Rev. Emily Riley Campbell – Welcome & Announcements

Welcome to worship on this Christmas Eve! Whether you worship with us each year or whether this is your very first time tuning in, I want to welcome you to worship at First Presbyterian Church Plymouth. My name is Emily Campbell, and I, along with our other church staff and family, am so glad you are here.

I have no doubt that when we look back on 2020, this Christmas celebration will be historic in the fact that none of us can gather in the church building, but we worship God as one family, yet apart in our homes--in our homes that are scattered throughout this community, throughout the state of Michigan, throughout the United States, and the world.

Together we will join our hearts as we celebrate the giving of the Christ Child. We will celebrate tonight the fact that God is faithful to us through every season of life and through every experience of life. Although it is bittersweet this year, being outside of our church building, one thing that we can be certain of is that we are *not* outside of God's loving presence. God is with each of us tonight. As we celebrate the birth of God's son, Jesus Christ, God invites us to open our hearts and our lives more fully to the light that Christ brings into our darkness, to the hope and joy that Christ offers us, to the love and peace that Christ brings. I think it's safe to say we would all benefit from some of these gifts of God *this Christmas*, in particular!

So as we begin our worship service tonight on this special Christmas Eve, I, first of all, want to say I'm so grateful to our church staff who are here to help lead this service of worship. I'm especially grateful to Susan Underhill for blending within this worship service older elements, which you will see when you see choirs singing without masks, with our new elements of liturgy and preaching. Friends, as a church we will carry on our celebration of Christmas Eve and beyond tonight to our Sunday service on December 27th.

Friends, our service tonight begins and ends with *light* and in just a minute the Evans family will come forward to light our final Advent candle, which is the Christ candle. At the end of our service tonight we will have a candle lighting ceremony that's made possible through a previous video from Christmas Eve. At this point in our service, if you would like to pause the video and collect, within your own home, your own candle and matches, in this way you can participate in that candle lighting ceremony at the end of our service, where we celebrate the fact that Jesus Christ coming into the world is the gift of light into our experience of darkness, as he is the light of the world.

Now, friends, it is with joy that we welcome the Evans family to be our Advent candle lighters.

Lighting of the Advent Wreath Candles — Charles & Kendra Evans and Daughters

Throughout the season of Advent we have affirmed the difference that Christ makes to our life and world by lighting each of our four advent candles. With the first candle we affirm that Jesus Christ is our hope. With the second candle we celebrate that Jesus Christ is our joy. The third candle reminds us that Jesus Christ is our source of love. The fourth candle reminds us that Jesus is also our peace.

Tonight, as we light our final candle, the Christ candle, we celebrate the fact that Jesus Christ brings light into our every experience of darkness. The Apostle John writes, “The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.”

Let us pray together. Holy God, we thank you for your Son who is the light of the world. We thank you for the hope, joy, love and peace which He brings with His coming. May we draw near to Him now, we pray. Amen.

Ashley Smith Ashley, Associate Pastor — Opening Prayer of Praise

Let us pray. Good and gracious God, on this holy night you gave us your Son, the Lord of the universe, wrapped in swaddling clothes, the Savior of all, lying in a manger. And on this holy night we ask that you would draw us into the mystery of your love. Join our voices with the heavenly hosts that we might sing your glory on high. Give us a place among the shepherds that we might find the one for whom we have waited. And make us like the Magi, that we might come to adore the Holy Child, the promised King, Jesus Christ, the Messiah and Lord who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit within God, forever and ever. Amen.

Ashley Smith Ashley, Associate Pastor — First Reading, Isaiah 9:2-7

- ¹ The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.
- ³ You have multiplied the nation,
you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as people exult when dividing plunder.
- ⁴ For the yoke of their burden,
and the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian.
- ⁵ For all the boots of the tramping warriors
and all the garments rolled in blood
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.
- ⁶ For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;

authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
⁷ His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.
He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time onward and forevermore.
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

Song of Response, Chancel Choir — “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel”

Jerry Smith — Second Reading, Luke 2:1-7

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

Song of Response, Congregation — “Once in Royal David’s City” (Verses 1 and 2)

Rev. Mark Hovermale — Third Reading, Luke 2:8-15

⁸ In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ 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: ¹¹ to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” ¹³ And 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 favors!”

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.”

Song of Response, Congregation — “What Child is This?” (Verses 1 and 2)

Rev. Emily Riley Campbell — Fourth Reading, Luke 2:16-20

So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Rev. Emily Riley Campbell — Meditation

Would you all please pray with me. Holy God, help us in this time and place to be like Mary and ponder your words and actions in our hearts, and as we ponder, may we find room in our hearts for you today. This we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

Friends, 250 years before the birth of Christ, Aesop, known for his great fables, first wrote the phrase, "Be careful what you wish for, lest it come true!" Now these are wise words, to which, I most certainly should have paid attention. I am guilty of wishing, for as long as I can remember, that Christmas would somehow become less commercialized. And I am sure many others are guilty of also wishing for a quieter, slower-paced Christmas, that would provide us with a break from the frantic pace of life. I always believed that if we were not quite so focused on all the shopping sprees and holiday parties and the merry chaos, then we might discover the real peace of this season.

Well, friends, I was wrong! I certainly failed to consider the implications of this wish coming true. I failed to consider what life would be like if we were to live without the merry chaos of this season. Never in my wildest dreams did I picture a Christmas where we worshipped apart from one another and apart from this church building, from our homes or within our parking lot. Never did I imagine that family meals and celebrations would be done through Zoom. I never would have guessed that we would be wishing each other a Merry Christmas through face masks while socially distanced. I never thought that our country and world would be facing such great loss at what is supposed to be the happiest time of the year.

Friends, the reality of our situation this night is that the peace that we have craved we need now more than ever before. Over the past nine months, in the time since this pandemic began, I have learned that peace does not come as a direct result of cutting back our schedules. It does not come from abstaining from our normal activities. Free time in our schedules does not equate the discovery of needed peace, because too often we fill our empty schedules with quick comfort opportunities.

We *do* search but recently most of our searches have been more in terms of searching on Netflix or Hulu or Disney+ for the next best thing to watch. We seek distraction and we seek entertainment *more* than we seek deep peace. It does not matter whether our search takes the form of searching social media or online gaming or online shopping experiences, real peace is nearly impossible for us to find. But let me say clearly here tonight that there is nothing wrong with any of these distractions or sources of entertainment. I engage in these pursuits, as well, but none of these searches lead us any closer to finding that deep abiding peace that we crave and need desperately.

Roughly 700 years before the birth of Christ, the Prophet Isaiah wrote these now famous words,

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined.

. . .

For a child has been born for us, a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.”

This promise of endless peace from the Prince of Peace is more along the lines of that elusive peace that we crave. But how are we supposed to understand or receive this gift of peace, this Christmas, in the midst of more than 300,000 people who have lost their lives in this country? How do we find peace amid more than 80 million global cases of Covid in the past nine months? Where is the peace found in over 1½ million deaths worldwide?

The answer, friends, this Christmas, is that our peace is found in the recognition that we have never been alone in any of this, not one day, not one hour, not one minute. The God whom we worship, the God who gives himself to us at Christmas, is, as it says in Matthew chapter 1, at verse 23, “He is Emmanuel, which means, ‘God is with us.’”

At Christmas we celebrate not the birth of a baby but the birth of our Savior. This Savior rescues us from every experience of darkness and from death. This Savior lifts the burden from our shoulders and wipes the tears from our eyes. This Savior was born for us so that we may know eternal life, so that we may experience light and hope, joy and peace, that deep, long-lasting, life-altering peace with God.

What is needed from us this Christmas is that we would have the humility of the shepherds. We need to humble ourselves enough to accept the fact that we need a Savior and then we need to be humble enough, as the shepherds were, to *search* for that Savior. We also need the wisdom of the Wise Men, who were wise enough to follow the teaching and guidance of God. We need the faith of Mary and Joseph, who, even amid their own personal disappointment, trusted in God for nine months, until that hope was realized.

Friends, nine months have just passed for us! Nine months since the onset of this global pandemic, and our hope of healing and peace from this pandemic is only now starting to be realized. Until that peace and healing comes in all of its fullness, we hand our lives and our heartache over to the Prince of Peace, for He alone can make a difference to our darkness today.

One thing I know for sure, this pandemic will not last forever, but God's work of restoring peace within us and within our world carries on, even after this pandemic has ended. This Christmas my prayer for us all is that we would welcome a Savior home,

into our hearts, into our pain, into our fear, into our sadness and worry. We would welcome Christ into every part of our lives, and I pray, that as each of us finds room in our hearts for Christ, I pray that we would know the blessing of God at work in our lives. I pray that the Lord would bless you and keep you this Christmas, the Lord make His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. May the Lord lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace, today and always. Amen.

Musical Response, Carole Moon — “O Holy Night”

Rev. Emily Riley Campbell — Fifth Scripture Reading, John 1:5

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

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

[Candle Lighting Ceremony]

Music, Congregation — “Silent Night”

Ashley Smith Ashley, Associate Pastor — Prayer for Christmas

Let us pray. God of mystery and might, we praise and worship you, for you came in silence, while all were sleeping, to enter our world as a child of humble birth. We thank you for the hope of the Prophets, the song of the angels and the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. We thank you that, in Jesus, you became flesh and dwelt among us, sharing human hurts and pleasures. In His face we behold your glory. For His birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension, we experience the gift of salvation. Glory to you for your grace-filled love. Glory to you, eternal God. By your Spirit make our hearts burn with thanksgiving, that we might give as we have received, that our whole lives might be gifts of praise to you, God of love and peace.

In the gracious name of Jesus Christ, your son, who taught us to pray together, saying,

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.

Solid Brass Quintet — Closing Carol, “Joy to the World”

Rev. Emily Riley Campbell — Christmas Blessing

Friends, as we go from here tonight, go knowing that God is with us, God is for us, God is in us. And because of God's presence revealed in the person of Jesus Christ, we shall overcome the darkness of our day. Go forth in hope, joy, love, and peace.

And may the blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, rest upon you and upon all those whom you love, this day and forever more. Amen.