

December 24, 2020 – 7:00 PM

Christmas Eve - Traditional Lessons and Carols

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Welcome to Memorial Lutheran Church! On this Holy Night, we hope that your worship experience brings you great joy as the Holy Spirit fills this time, and our hearts, with the light of Christ. God bless you this Christmas season!

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PRESERVICE MUSIC

PRELUDE

OPENING CAROL: *"O Come, All Ye Faithful"* – **Hymn 379 (vs. 1 & 4)**

CHRISTMAS MESSAGE: *"Christmas Connections"* – **Luke 2:1-20**

Christmas is usually a time of connection. In a normal year, company Christmas parties bring together people from all over who work together. Family and friends gather together, college students return home and meet their friends again.

Christmas also is a time of disconnection. If you can't be with family, there's no more obvious time for you to notice this lack than when everyone else is coming together except you, when everyone else's mailbox overflows with cards and packages except yours, when there's only one stocking hanging up in your house. If you've just experienced a breakup, a major move, or the death of a loved one, Christmas can amplify the disconnectedness you already feel.

Even if you're with others, there can be disconnection. Sin separates us from each other and from God. The first lesson, from Genesis 3, tells us of how humanity was separated from God. After Adam and Eve committed the first sin by eating the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden, they hid from God, cutting the connected that had existed between them since they were created. The rest of the lessons show how that separation was seen in darkness and death. Abraham almost sacrifices his only son, Isaac, but God provides a substitute to save Isaac. The prophecies of Isaiah and Micah, to a people looking toward a future of exile and captivity, tell of how God would come and rescue them, restore them, and bring them out of darkness into light. Throughout the rest of the Old Testament, sin cut the connections between people, between families, between nations, and between the whole world and God. And nothing anyone tried could protect or repair those connections.

The first Christmas was a time of disconnection. Joseph and Mary were far from home, having traveled 90 miles or so from Nazareth to Bethlehem for the census. Joseph must have had relatives in Bethlehem, but none of them would take them in. They'd gone through a whirlwind nine months, with angelic messengers needed to keep them together after Joseph discovered that Mary was pregnant and he knew he wasn't the father. Their travels must have been, at least

in part, a relief in being able to escape from the gossip and shunning they received from others in Nazareth.

But Christmas is also about connecting. So how do we stay connected in an isolating age, where the way to keep others safe from the virus is to stay away from them?

We find ways to connect in ways that don't endanger others. Earlier this week, maybe you were among those who traveled out of town to look for the great conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn. Cars lined the gravel roads outside of town, and social media was full of people sharing their pictures of this once in a lifetime astronomical event. While some speculation about the conjunction makes people think of the Christmas star, we do know it brought people together in a shared experience where they didn't have to be physically by each other.

We connect using technology. Everyone is much more familiar with Zoom and other video conferencing services now than they were at the beginning of this year. You can connect by finding concerts and church services you'd never be able to attend in person, but now can watch from the comfort of your couch.

And we connect by using old ways of communicating, too, like Christmas cards and Christmas letters. Every year, family and friends write to each other. Some just send a simple card, with a brief message. Others write elaborate letters, complete with fancy fonts, headings and footnotes. Still others fill their letters with pictures of the places they've traveled and the people they've seen.

Why do we send Christmas letters? We send them so that we can share what has happened to us over the past year. We send them in the hopes that others care about what has happened to us. We send them in the hopes that we will be able to maintain friendships and connections across great distances. We send them in the hopes that they connect us to each other.

This year has also taught us that while these ways of connecting can help, they don't work as well as they could. Letters don't connect us as much as we can connect in person, though. It takes being able to hold a hand, give a hug, see a smile to truly communicate. Body language is important. When you really need to make sure that your message is communicated, when you really want to connect with someone, it takes more than a letter, a phone call, a tweet or a Skype conference. It takes a person.

Herman Gockel tells about a nuclear scientist making an urgent plea for scholarships to be given to American students who would study in foreign lands. Stressing that such scholarships would win for America a much greater measure of understanding abroad, he said significantly: "The best way to send an idea out into the world is to wrap it up in a person."

That's what we celebrate every year at Christmas. We celebrate family and friends, gifts and gadgets, songs and Santa, to be sure. But most importantly, we celebrate Jesus. Jesus, God made man. Jesus, the Word made flesh. We celebrate how God didn't just tell us that he loved us, but he wrapped that love up in a person, in Jesus.

You are Christmas letters. You are letters that share all that happened in your lives over the past year. More importantly, you are letters that share how God has worked in your lives over the past year. Whether it's the joy of a new birth or the sorrow of a funeral, or the many ways this strange pandemic year has affected and changed you, God has been with you through all the events of the past year, celebrating your joys and bearing your sorrows.

You are Christmas letters. You are the ones that share the true meaning of Christmas with your children. You are the ones who share the message that God came to earth with those who don't know. You are the ones who carry God's name, from your baptisms, as the signature of your letters.

After we gather here, after we hear the familiar stories and sing the familiar carols, like letters you are all sent out. Some local, some out of town. Sent out to share the message of Christmas, the message that God came down to earth, to love us, and die for us. He didn't just send a letter, but came himself. As we go out, we invite others to join in that message, to join what we just sang. O come, let us adore him, Christ the Lord.

CAROL: *"Of the Father's Love Begotten"* – **Hymn 384 (vs. 1 & 3)**

FIRST LESSON: *Genesis 3:8-15*

They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, "Where are you?" He said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself." He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" The man said, "The woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate." Then the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent tricked me, and I ate." The LORD God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, cursed are you among all animals and among all wild creatures; upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel."

CAROL: *"Once in Royal David's City"* – **Hymn 376 (vs. 1, 2 & 5)**

SECOND LESSON: *Genesis 22:15-18*

The angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven and said, "By myself I have sworn, says the LORD: Because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you; and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies, and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed My voice."

CAROL: *"What Child Is This"* – **Hymn 370 (vs. 1 & 2)**

THIRD LESSON: *Isaiah 7:14; 11:1-9*

Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel... A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the LORD shall rest on Him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what His eyes see, or decide by what His ears hear; but with righteousness He shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; He shall strike the earth with the rod of His mouth and with the breath of His lips, He shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt around His waist, and faithfulness the belt around His loins. The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. They will not hurt or destroy on all My holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.

CAROL: *"Lo How A Rose E'er Blooming"* – **Hymn 359**

FOURTH LESSON: *Isaiah 9:2-7*

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. 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. 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. For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. 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. 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.

CAROL: *"Now Sing We, Now Rejoice"* – **Hymn 386 (vs. 1 & 4)**

FIFTH LESSON: *Micah 5:2-4*

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you, shall come forth for Me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. Therefore, he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel. And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall live secure, for now He shall be great to the ends of the earth; and He shall be the one of peace.

CAROL: *“O Little Town of Bethlehem”* – **Hymn 361 (vs. 1 & 4)**

SIXTH LESSON: *Luke 1:26-38*

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

CAROL: *“It Came Upon the Midnight Clear”* – **Hymn 366 (vs. 1 and 4)**

SEVENTH LESSON: *Matthew 1:18-25*

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. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. 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. She will bear a Son, and you are to name Him Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name Him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named Him Jesus.

CAROL: *"Gentle Mary Laid Her Child"* – **Hymn 374 (vs. 1 & 2)**

EIGHTH LESSON: *Luke 2:1-7*

And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed. (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.) And all went to be taxed every one into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, (because he was of the house and lineage of David.) to be taxed with Mary, his

espoused wife, being great with child. And so it was that while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn Son and wrapped Him in swaddling clothes and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

CAROL: *"Away in a Manger"* – **Hymn 364**

NINTH LESSON: *Luke 2:8-14*

And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. And lo, an angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them; and they were sore afraid. And the angel said to them, "Fear not: for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you: Ye shall find the Babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!"

CAROL: *"Angels We Have Heard on High"* – **Hymn 368**

TENTH LESSON: *Luke 2:15-20*

And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, "Let us now go even unto Bethlehem and see this thing which has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us." And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the Babe lying in a manger. And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying, which was told them concerning this Child. And all those who heard it wondered at those things, which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart. Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.

CAROL: *"Hark! The Herald Angels Sing"* – **Hymn 380 (vs. 1 & 3)**

ELEVENTH LESSON: *John 1:1-5, 9-14*

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through Him, and without Him, not one thing came into being. What has come into being in Him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.... The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through Him; yet the world did not know Him. He came to what was His own, and His own people did not accept Him. But to all who received Him, who believed in His name, He gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. 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.

CAROL: *"Joy to the World"* – Hymn 387

LITANY OF THE INCARNATION

P: God of Love, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, You were merciful to those who walked in darkness or despair. Receive, then, the prayer we offer this night for the peace of the world and the salvation of all people.

C: O Lord, hear our prayer.

P: Look down, we pray, upon our fellow Christians throughout the world who this night gather to celebrate the Savior's birth, and accept the prayers and praises we offer as one holy Christian Church.

C: O Lord, hear our prayer.

P: God of peace, let peace reign all over the earth, heal the wounds of pride and arrogance, clear the vision of those blinded by greed, and let people everywhere know Your will revealed in the Prince of Peace.

C: O Lord, hear our prayer.

P: Your Son came like a bright light into a dark night. Give us courage and the radiance of love to bring His light into our darkness, and keep us restless until it has penetrated the whole world.

C: O Lord, hear our prayer.

P: Watch over our loved ones that they may remember Your love and share with us in our thanksgiving to You. Increase the faith and confidence of the sick, the aged and the poor. Encourage the afflicted. Give hope to those in despair, and comfort to those who mourn.

C: O Lord, hear our prayer.

P: We remember the faithful departed who rest in Your love and care. Bring us and all Your children to stand in the full light of Your presence and the radiance of Your love.

C: Lord, be gracious to us and give us Your peace. Amen.

LORD'S PRAYER

LIGHTING OF THE CANDLES

CAROL: *"Silent Night"* – Hymn 363

BLESSING

POSTLUDE