



ST. JOHN'S
LUTHERAN CHURCH

When Christmas Hurts

Thursday, December 14, 2023 – 7:30 p.m.

This worship service, placed near the darkest and shortest day of the year (Dec 21 is the winter solstice), acknowledges the reality of grief and loss in life. With the pain they bring, this holy season can feel like a burden instead of a blessing. In all our need, we turn to Jesus, who is Emmanuel, God-with-us. He is the Light which shines in our darkness, “and the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1:5). We invite you to participate in this service, drawing comfort and strength from God’s promises.

Prayer before Worship

Draw near to us, O Advent Lord, in this time of worship. Open our hearts and minds to your life-giving and healing presence, that we may cast all our cares and anxieties upon you, knowing how much you care for us; in Jesus’ Name. Amen.



Prelude

“Silent Night/Still, Still, Still” (arr. Sally DeFord)

Welcome

Hymn

“O Come, O Come Emmanuel” (stanzas 1 & 2)

- 1) O come, O come, Emmanuel,
And ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appear. *Refrain*

Refrain

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel!

- 2) O come, Thou Wisdom from on high,
Who ord’rest all things mightily;
To us the path of knowledge show,
And teach us in her ways to go. *Refrain*

The Gathering

P The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

C And also with you.

P The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone. For the yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder, you have broken as on the day of Midian. (Isaiah 9:1, 4)

Let us pray:

God of mercy, hear our prayer in this Advent season for ourselves and for all who live with painful thoughts and memories. Trusting in your power to help in time of need, we pray for peace for the past, strength for today, and courage for tomorrow. We ask this in the Name of Jesus Christ, who came to share our life in joy and sorrow, death and new life, despair and promise. Amen.

Scripture Reading

Isaiah 40:1, 25-31

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God...

²⁵ To whom then will you compare me,
that I should be like him? says the Holy One.

²⁶ Lift up your eyes on high and see:
who created these?

He who brings out their host by number,
calling them all by name,
by the greatness of his might,
and because he is strong in power
not one is missing.

²⁷ Why do you say, O Jacob,
and speak, O Israel,

"My way is hidden from the LORD,
and my right is disregarded by my God"?

²⁸ Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.

He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable.

²⁹ He gives power to the faint,

and to him who has no might he increases strength.

³⁰ Even youths shall faint and be weary,
and young men shall fall exhausted;

³¹ but they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles;
they shall run and not be weary;
they shall walk and not faint.

L The Word of the Lord.

C **Thanks be to God.**

Silence for reflection and meditation.

Psalmody *(please join in reading the psalm responsively)*

Psalm 121

A I lift up my eyes to the hills.

From where does my help come?

C **My help comes from the LORD,
who made heaven and earth.**

A He will not let your foot be moved;
he who keeps you will not slumber.

C **Behold, he who keeps Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.**

A The LORD is your keeper;
the LORD is your shade on your right hand.

C **The sun shall not strike you by day,
nor the moon by night.**

A The LORD will keep you from all evil;
he will keep your life.

C **The LORD will keep
your going out and your coming in
from this time forth and forevermore.**

Silence for reflection and meditation.

Holy Gospel

Matthew 11:28-30

[Jesus said:] "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

L The Gospel of the Lord.

C **Praise to you, O Christ.**

Liturgy of Remembrance: Lighting of Four Advent Candles

First Candle

☒ The first candle we light is to remember those persons whom we have loved and lost. We pause to remember their names, their voices, their faces, the memories that bind them to us in this season and life. We hold them before God, giving thanks for their lives in ours.

Please take a moment to remember those who have died. I invite you to name them, aloud or in the silence of your hearts...

Silence for reflection and prayer

☒ **Lord, in faith we take our loved ones by the hand and lead them to you, the God of love. Here we present them to you. Accept our love and thanksgiving as we entrust them to your loving care. We trust that in you our loved ones are truly at home. We look forward to joining them around your throne of grace in heaven. We ask that you fill us with motivation and energy in the days ahead when we feel like giving up. Remind us of our true home with you when we are caught up in the isolation and weariness of the journey. Help us to find joy in the people, events and the beauty of your creation which surround us.**

Thank you for the gift each of these people has been in our lives. We believe that we will celebrate the treasure of your saving love with them when by your grace we are all in your presence forever. May this truth sustain us in the days to come. Take our sad and aching hearts and comfort us. Comfort us, for we feel only hollowness and emptiness. God of sorrowing, draw near and help, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Hymn

"O Come, O Come Emmanuel" (stanza 6)

O come, Thou Dayspring from on high,
And cheer us by Thy drawing nigh;
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night,
And death's dark shadows put to flight. *Refrain*

Second Candle

☒ The second candle we light is to redeem the pain of loss: the loss of relationships, the loss of jobs with the security they bring, the loss of health in ourselves or in family

members, the loss of joy and peace in our lives from the stresses which surround us, the loss and loneliness we experience when our loved ones do not share our faith. As we gather up the pain of the past we offer it to you, O God, asking that you now place into our open and waiting hands the gift of your blessed peace.

Please take a moment to remember your losses. I invite you to name them, aloud or in the silence of your hearts...

Silence for reflection and prayer

- ☐ God of mystery, we turn our hearts to you. We come before you in need of peace, grateful for the mystery and gift of life, and ever thankful for your promise to guide and protect us. We place our trust in you, but confess that our hearts often grow fearful and anxious. We forget so easily that you will be with us in all of life. Teach us to be patient with the transformation you are working in our lives. Teach us to be open to the changes which we are now experiencing. Hear us and help us, for Jesus' sake. Amen.**

Hymn

"O Come, O Come Emmanuel" (stanza 5)

O come, Thou Key of David, come,
And open wide our heav'nly home;
Make safe the way that leads on high,
And close the path to misery. *Refrain*

Third Candle

- ☐** The third candle we light is for those who experience a loss of direction in their lives. God of the Exodus, you led Moses and your people through the wilderness to the Promised Land. Hear our prayer in the midst of our own wanderings. We want so much to have a sense of direction, to know where we are and where we ought to be headed. But the darkness and the questions stay. You ask us to be full of faith, to believe that you are our wisdom and guide, and to trust in your presence. Your words to us are clear: "Do not fear, I go before you."

Please take a moment to remember the confusion and uncertainty that we face in life, whether for yourself or others. I invite you to name them, aloud or in the silence of your hearts...

Silence for reflection and prayer

- ☐ God of mercy, we cry out to you for guidance. Help us to have a strong sense of your presence in our lives and how you are leading us. When we are full of doubt and uncertainty reassure us that even as you led Moses and your people**

of old, so you will lead us today on the right path. Take our lives and use them according to your gracious will. Take all that is lost and bring it home to you. Hear us and help us for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Hymn

(Lutheran Service Builder, stanza 3)

O come, O come, Thou Lord of might,
Who to Thy tribes on Sinai's height
In ancient times didst give the Law
In cloud and majesty and awe. *Refrain*

Fourth Candle

L The fourth candle we light as a sign of hope, the hope that the Christmas story offers to us. We remember that God, who sent his only Son into our broken world of sin and suffering, shares our life. Through Jesus, God promises us a new life and a new world where God will wipe away every tear from our eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there will be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for these former things have passed away. (Revelation 21:4)

Please take a moment to remember and rejoice in this saving truth, giving thanks to God aloud or in the silence of your hearts...

Silence for reflection and prayer

C **O God, whose spirit is known by those whose hearts are thankful, and who makes cheerfulness a companion of strength, lift up our hearts, we pray, to a joyous confidence in your care. Guide us when we cannot see the way. Teach us to know that a shadow is only a shadow, because the light of eternal goodness shines behind our fears. Where there is love in life, teach us to find it. Help us to trust in your love and enable us to grow and abide in it. So may our lives bring comfort and encouragement to others. We ask this in the Name of Jesus Christ whose life is our light and salvation. Amen.**

Hymn

(Lutheran Service Builder, stanza 4)

O come, Thou Branch of Jesse's tree,
Free them from Satan's tyranny
That trust Thy mighty pow'r to save,
And give them vict'ry o'er the grave. *Refrain*

Meditation

Following the meditation, we observe a time of silence for reflection and prayer.

Prayers of the People

P In the Name of Jesus, who is Emmanuel, God-with-us, let us now confidently ask our loving Father for all the good things that we need: for ourselves, our loved ones, and friends as we cope with our many different losses. God, hear our prayer.

C And in your mercy, answer.

A For our families and friends, that you would bless them with love, peace and joy as they continue to help and support us in the midst of life's challenges. May we in turn help and support others who are in need. God, hear our prayer.

C And in your mercy, answer.

A For any person struggling with the loss of a loved one, for all the losses we know in our lives, that all may be redeemed by your Easter promise of resurrection and new life in our risen Savior, Jesus Christ. God, hear our prayer.

C And in your mercy, answer.

A For peace throughout the world, first proclaimed by the Christmas angels on that faraway hillside. God, hear our prayer.

C And in your mercy, answer.

A For greater understanding and courage to live out the love and compassion taught by Jesus our Lord. God, hear our prayer.

C And in your mercy, answer.

P God of great compassion and love, listen to the prayers of your people. Grant to all, especially the bereaved and troubled ones this Christmas, the blessing we ask in the Name of Jesus, who has taught us to pray:

C 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.

Lighting of Individual Candles

- P** Each of us comes bearing our own hurt, sorrow, and pain – the broken places of our lives.

I now invite you to offer these up to the Lord God who loves us deeply, who sent his only begotten Son as our Savior, and who wants to carry our pain. The Lord calls to us in love, “Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”

I invite you to come forward and light a candle. As you light the candle, remember that it is Jesus who has born our griefs and carried our sorrows. Remember that it is Jesus who is the Light shining in our darkness. Remember that it is Jesus who holds us close until we are able to shine.

After the candles have been lighted and people have returned to their seats, the following words are spoken:

- P** As these lights brighten this sanctuary, so the good news of God’s love for us in Jesus Christ brightens our lives. Though these lights are only symbols and will soon go out, we remember and rejoice that the light of God’s love shines on forever.

Closing

- P** As we gather this evening, we acknowledge the reality of the darkness that is present both in the world and in our lives. As people of faith, we also gather to be illumined by the light of the Christ Child in this Christmas season. May this same Christ Child, born in a lowly stable, bring his saving light, comfort, peace and joy in this holy season and throughout the year.

Blessing

- P** May the hope of the Christ Child sustain you through this darkness and into eternal light.

C **That together we may shine again. Amen.**

Hymn

“O Come, O Come Emmanuel” (stanzas 7 & 1)

O come, Desire of nations, bind
In one the hearts of all mankind;
Bid Thou our sad divisions cease,
And be Thyself our King of Peace. *Refrain*

O come, O come, Emmanuel,
And ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appear. *Refrain*

Postlude

“The Coventry Carol” (arr. Anthony Giamanco)



Members of St. John's Prayer Team are available after the service for individual prayer.



Our Ministry of Worship

Officiant	Pastor Meehan
Pianist	David Leahey
Soloist	Brian Hoins
Readers	Members of St. John's Prayer Team
Ushers	Members of St. John's Prayer Team
Greeter	Members of St. John's Prayer Team
AV Team	Jean Gilbertson Mark Gilbertson

Please join us for these upcoming special Advent-Christmas services and events:

Third Sunday in Advent – Sunday, December 17

- Holy Communion with livestreaming at 10:30 a.m.

Midday Advent Service - Wednesday, December 20

- Holy Communion at 12 Noon

Fourth Sunday in Advent/Christmas Eve – Sunday, December 24

- Holy Communion with livestreaming at 9:30 a.m.
 - No Children’s Ministry and Adult Education
- Children’s Service with livestreaming at 5:00 p.m.
- Candlelight Holy Communion with livestreaming at 7:30 p.m.

Christmas Day – Sunday, December 25

- Holy Communion with livestreaming at 9:30 a.m.

New Year’s Eve – Sunday, December 31

- First Sunday after Christmas with Holy Communion at 9:30 a.m.
 - No Children’s Ministry and Adult Education
- Worship with Holy Communion with livestreaming at 5:00 p.m.



Acknowledgments

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