

December 21, 2020

*Dear Members and Friends of First Presbyterian Church: Today is the shortest day of the year, and thus the longest night of the year. Thanks to Rev. Dr. Mary Jane Hitt, we have held a “Longest Night Service” on this evening for the past several years as a way of comforting those who are filled with sadness and grief during the holiday season. Since we cannot hold a service this year, Mary Jane has graciously provided us with a “Longest Night” meditation for this year. I hope that you find this helpful. Yours in Christ, Pastor Mark*

## First Presbyterian Church of Westerville

### Longest Night 2020

Rev. Dr. Mary Jane Hitt

In what we have come to think of as the “normal” Christmases of the past, these days in December were full of anticipatory excitement for the upcoming holiday: malls were bustling with Christmas shoppers; Christmas carols rang out and filled us with joy; neighbors knocked on doors with homemade goodies and gathered for holiday parties; families made plans to be together for Christmas. A familiar song called it “the most wonderful time of the year” and for many people, it was.

Of course, that constant refrain also caused pain for those who were reminded in the midst of all the holiday festivities around them of what they had lost, or never had in the first place. The anguish of broken relationships, the loss of people dearly loved, the insecurity of unemployment, the weariness of ill health, the pain of isolation, the divisions we see in our nation and our world – all of these things can make us feel very alone in the midst of the celebrations taking place all around us.

That has never been more true than it is this year, when the earth beneath our feet has been shaken by the Covid-19 pandemic. The malls are not bustling, even though some intrepid shoppers make their obligatory shopping trip, wearing masks and hurrying back to safety of home; carols ring hollow; neighborhood gatherings have been cancelled; families struggle as they realize it is too risky to gather for the holiday; many church buildings are closed and Christmas Eve services moved on line or cancelled altogether.

It is not just the winter darkness that surrounds us this December. A darkness of the heart is also all too real in these difficult days. And so it is more important than ever for us to reflect on what the Christmas story is all about – to remember the coming of Christ as light in our darkness.

It is common for us to think of the story of Jesus' nativity as a sweet and joyful story, but sweetness and joy are only part of the story. In the Gospel according to Matthew, we read of the challenge and pain that were there, as well. So I invite you to listen for God's word to you, whatever you are feeling today, as you reflect on these passages of scripture.

#### Matthew 1:18-24

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 maiden 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.

#### 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 humanity, 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.

Scripture helps us remember what it is that truly makes Christmas “wonderful” – not the decorations or the food or the gifts under the tree, but the coming of the light of life into our painful, messy, grief-stricken lives. When we get right down to it, what we desire most during these dark days is not another electronic gadget or one more roast beef dinner or compliments on our decorating. What we *really* want is for the light of life to come to us, in the difficult circumstances of our lives, right now. What we *really* want is to remember that the story of Christmas is good news for all people, and especially for a world that is struggling in pain and sorrow. This is a time to remember the stark reality of the Christmas story, and to claim the hope and promise of that story in the stark reality of our own lives.

Because the story of the first Christmas is a story of hardship and uncertainty. The coming of the baby Jesus is more than the picture on a Christmas card. The real Christmas story is the story of an unwed, pregnant teenager, at risk of death for the circumstance in which she found herself – a courageous and even rebellious young woman who, when she realized she was pregnant, sang a protest song we have come to know as The Magnificat. These are her words:

*My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.*

*Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed, for the  
Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.*

*His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.*

*He has shown strength with his arm, he has scattered the proud from  
their thrones, and lifted up the lowly.*

*He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.*

*He has helped his servant Israel in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.*

This year we, like Mary, are experiencing challenges that have turned our world upside down – that have us, perhaps for the first time in our relatively comfortable lives, identifying with the lowly, the hungry, the needy. Covid has made us all vulnerable in ways for which we feel unprepared, and alongside the pandemic are many other struggles: perhaps the death of the person you most loved has you feeling empty and alone and hungry in the depth of your being; perhaps the failing of your body has you feeling uncertain and fearful for the future; perhaps the loss of your job has you feeling helpless in a way you have never known; perhaps the rancorous political climate of our time has you feeling as though you have lost the country you once knew. Challenges abound.

But Mary's song reminds us that God's grace abounds, too. In the upside down economy of God, it is the poor, the lowly, and the hungry who are blessed. The poor and lowly are lifted up; the hungry are fed. Mary's courage and confidence as she faced the dire circumstances of her own life is a reminder to us tonight of God's eternal love and grace that shines its light in the darkest of days.

This year, whatever our struggle – Covid, the loss of a love, a job, a dream, a hope – let us ask the Holy One to teach us the lessons of endings and the lessons of beginnings, that this might be a starting place, the spark that will bring forth light and new life.

In this season of our longest nights, let us remember the good news that whatever the circumstances of our lives – God has come to be with us:

to comfort us; to redeem us; to save us;

to restore us; to empower us; to strengthen us;

to grant us peace;

to hold us in the communion of saints with those we have loved and lost;

to fill us with hope for tomorrow.

So let us say yes to the Christmas story, moving from the pains of the past into the hope of the future; from the grief of the past into the love of the future; from the darkness of life into the light of Christ's coming. Let us choose to follow the light.

Perhaps this prayer from the Iona Community will help you do just that:

When the world was dark  
and the city was quiet,  
you came.

You crept in beside us.

And no one knew.  
Only the few  
who dared to believe  
that God might do something different.

Will you do the same this Christmas, Lord?

Will you come into the darkness of tonight's world;  
not the friendly darkness  
as when sleep rescues us from tiredness,  
but the fearful darkness,  
in which people have stopped believing  
that war will end  
or that food will arrive  
or that healing will come  
or that mourning will end  
or that the governments of the world will change  
or that the Church cares?

Will you come into that darkness  
and do something different  
to save your people from death and despair?

Will you come into the quietness of this city,  
not the friendly quietness  
as when lovers hold hands,  
but the fearful silence when  
    the phone has not rung,  
    the letter has not come,  
    the friendly voice no longer speaks,  
    the doctor's face says it all?

Will you come into that darkness,  
and do something different,  
not to distract, but to embrace your people?

Will you come into the dark corners  
and the quiet places of our lives?

We ask this because the fullness our lives long for  
depends on us being as open and vulnerable to you  
as you were to us,  
when you came,  
wearing nothing,  
and trusting human hands  
to hold their maker.

Will you come into our lives  
if we open them to you?  
Will you lead us to a new tomorrow –  
a tomorrow of light and hope and peace?

When the world was dark  
and the city was quiet,  
you came.

You crept in beside us.

Do the same this Christmas, Lord.  
Do the same this Christmas.

Amen.