

Christmas Eve Candlelight Service

Prelude

Welcome

Tonight, we celebrate the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Tonight's service is one of scripture and hymns, or Christmas Carols. The scriptures and accompanying narrative *are* the Christmas message, and there is therefore no sermon. The narrative in *italics* is normally read by one person and the scripture lessons are read by another. The congregation joins in singing the carols

This service has a variety of carols and a lot of carols. While you are encouraged to sing, it can be rather meaningful to some people to just listen to one or to even a few of the carols, especially those that you find unfamiliar.

We are glad that you came and hope you enjoy your worship experience.

The opening hymn is often sung as a solo. It's a familiar piece that everyone knows and tonight is a chance for you to sing it, even if you're not a soloist.

Stand

P: We worship in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Lighting of the Advent Wreath Christ Candle

Opening Hymn

O Holy Night! Vs 1

The Old Testament Prophecies

Sit

The Christmas story begins with Old Testament prophets. More than 700 years before Jesus' birth, Micah was talking to the common people of Judah about their travails when he drops in this little nugget of hope. Ephrathah was the ancient name for Bethlehem.

Micah 5:2

“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
though you are small among the clans of Judah,
out of you will come for me
one who will be ruler over Israel,
whose origins are from of old,
from ancient times.”

Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming vs 1-2

The Isaiah Prophecy

Isaiah followed Micah by 50 or so years. He came from an upper-class family, rubbed shoulders with royalty, and was a prophet to the court at Jerusalem. In chapter 9, he is providing hope for the future of Judah when he includes these familiar prophetic verses memorialized by Handel.

Isaiah 9:6-7

For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Of the increase of his government and peace
there will be no end.
He will reign on David's throne
and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it
with justice and righteousness
from that time on and forever.
The zeal of the LORD Almighty
will accomplish this.

Angels We Have Heard on High vs 1-2

The New Testament beginning with Matthew

The story of Jesus' birth continues into the New Testament. The Christmas story is told in both Matthew and Luke. The Gospel of Matthew was written to Jews to answer their questions about Jesus. Matthew begins his Gospel message with Jesus' genealogy beginning with Abraham. He then provides a synoptic picture of Jesus' birth.

Matthew 1:18:24

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

But after he had considered 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 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.”

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel”—which means, “God with us.”

When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

In the Bleak Midwinter, vs 1

The Christmas Story told by St. Luke

Luke was a physician and the author of both the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts. Luke was a close friend and frequent traveling companion of Paul. Just as Dr. Watson accompanied and chronicled the adventures of Sherlock Holmes, a loose analogy might be made of Luke and Paul. Luke converted to Christianity after Jesus' death and resurrection, so he relied heavily on eyewitness accounts for those events that he himself did not witness. Beginning with verse 5 of the first chapter, Luke tells the story of Zechariah's encounter with an angel where the birth of John the Baptist is foretold. Luke continues with Mary's encounter with an angel where she is told of the unbelievable events that are to come.

Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."

"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High 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 said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God."

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her.

Infant Holy, Infant Lowly, vs 1, 2

Mary visits Elizabeth

We can assume that Mary was pretty much beside herself with her emotional responses to the angel's visit. Given the similarity of their encounters with angels, Mary decides to visit and to share her anticipations with Elizabeth, wife of Zechariah and the expectant mother of John the Baptist.

Luke 1:39-45

At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!"

What Child Is This? vs 1-2

The Magnificat

Mary's song is known as the Magnificat, which apparently comes from the first word of the Latin translation. This much loved piece of our Christian tradition contains 15 discernible quotations from the Old Testament, indicating how well the Old Testament was known by Jesus' mother-to-be. The Magnificat was Mary's response to her growing realization of just what her role in God's plan was to be. Because of its beauty and elegance, the Magnificat was no doubt inspired by the Holy Spirit.

(The Magnificat below may be sung as a solo by a youthful female voice, as if it were being sung by Mary.)

Luke 1:46-56

And Mary said:

“My soul glorifies the Lord
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has been mindful
of the humble state of his servant.

From now on all generations will call me blessed,
for the Mighty One has done great things for me—
holy is his name.

His mercy extends to those who fear him,
from generation to generation.

He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.

He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering to be merciful
to Abraham and his descendants forever,
even as he said to our fathers.”

Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home.

Gentle Mary Laid Her Child vs 1-2

The Birth of Jesus

Luke completes chapter 1 of his Gospel with the story of the birth and circumcision of Elizabeth's son, John the Baptist. He then moves on to chapter 2, which contains one of the most well-known stories of the Bible. Luke sets the stage before writing of Jesus' birth.

Stand

Luke 2:1-7

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to his own town to register.

So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

Away in a Manger

Sit

The Angels and the Shepherds

Following Jesus' birth, Luke tells the story of the shepherds. We all know and love this story. There seem to be more Christmas carols singing about the shepherds than any other part of the Christmas story. There was no media, Facebook, or Twitter, and the Holy Spirit chose plain old common shepherds to tell the story of the birth. The Holy Spirit continues to rely on us common folks and only occasionally uses the powerful, beginning perhaps with the Roman Emperor Constantine in the early 300's AD. As was the case with Zechariah and then Mary, the angels played a starring role in their appearance to the shepherds.

Luke 2:8-14

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests."

Hark! The Herald Angels Sing

The Shepherds Respond

So who can just sit still after an appearance of angels? Mary couldn't; she visited with Elizabeth. The shepherds could not sit still either. They got up, went to Bethlehem to verify the story that they had been told, then praised God and spread the story!

Luke 2:15-20

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

The offering is received.

Stand

Apostles' Creed

C: I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord. He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into hell. On the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen

The Lord's Prayer

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

Go Tell It on the Mountain vs 1-3

Sit

Mary and Joseph take Jesus to the Temple

There was to be no rest for the weary. The trip from Bethlehem to Jerusalem was a few miles and there was no public transportation. But the temple visit was an event that was to be remembered.

Luke 2:21-24

On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise him, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he had been conceived.

When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord”), and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: “a pair of doves or two young pigeons.”

O Little Town of Bethlehem vs 1-2

The Story of Simeon

When does the Christmas story end? It doesn't end yet. In modern literature, the story of Simeon might be called a sidebar. It is the story of a promise being fulfilled and of Simeon's praises to God.

Luke 2:25-32

Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

“Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,
you now dismiss your servant in peace.
For my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the sight of all people,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.”

The First Noel, vs 1, 2

Simeon's Prophecies

Simeon was beside himself with the joy of the fulfilled promise. But it wasn't his joy that led to his blessing and to his own prophecy; after all, he was filled with the Holy Spirit. The sword which he mentions refers to the agony that Mary would bear.

Luke 2:33-36

The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: “This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

O Come, All Ye Faithful vs 1, 5, 6

The Story of Anna

Anna was a woman of God, a woman of faith. She knew who Jesus was when she first saw him in the temple, carried by Mary and Joseph.

Luke 2:37-38

There was also a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

Stand

The candles are lit and the house lights are extinguished during this next carol.

When lighting the candles, keep the lit candle upright and pass the flame to the unlit candle by tilting the unlit candle. This minimizes wax dripping. Make sure your coat is not lying on the back of your chair where it might be vulnerable to dripped wax. Parents holding infants may choose to not light their candles for safety reasons.

It Came upon the Midnight Clear vs 1, 2

(candles are lit, house lights are extinguished during this carol)

Silent Night vs 1-3 (sung by candlelight)

The Christmas Story Ends

The story of the Wise Men is often told as a part of the Christmas story, but the Wise Men from the East visited Jesus and his family many months later. Some think their visit may have up to 2 years later. We leave the story of their visit for the Epiphany season.

Jesus and his family lived happily ever after. Well, not really, but we do like stories to have happy endings. This story ultimately goes on to have the most profound ending in history, but the story about Jesus' birth ends here.

The lights are turned on and the candles are extinguished.

Luke 2:39-40

When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth. And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him.

Closing Prayer

Joy to the World! The Lord is Come

P: The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you. The Lord look upon you with favor + and give you peace.

C: Amen

P: Go in peace, Serve the Lord.

C: Thanks be to God.

Merry Christmas!

Scripture lessons are from the NIV 1984. Some of the notes are from the Ryrie Study Bible, 1986. The narrative was written by Earl Franklin, 2011. All of the carols are printed in the Christian Life Hymnal and are in the public domain.