

Lakewood Congregational Church

A Congregation of the United Church of Christ

Sunday, December 24, 2020



An Order of Worship to be followed in your home,
along with our worship video.

Welcome and Announcements

Beloved in Christ, it is Christmas Eve.

2,050 years ago, Jesus was born in an unexpected and less-than-ideal place, because something was happening in their time and culture that disrupted everyone's lives as they knew it. Mary and Joseph found themselves at a distance from the community they always imagined would surround them and care for them to celebrate the birth of their first baby.

Tonight, Jesus will be born in an unexpected and less-than-ideal place, because something is happening in our time and culture that is disrupting everyone's lives as we once knew it and we find ourselves at a distance from the community we always imagine will surround us as we celebrate the birth of Immanuel, God-with-Us.

Welcome. Welcome to the extension of God's everlasting promise. Welcome to this service of celebration, of song, of the sharing of scripture, of light. I pray that your home, and this video, will be for you a "thin place," a place where Heaven and Earth touch and you feel the Spirit of connection to all of our siblings across time and space and generation: the Hopes and Fears of all the years, met here, in God's abiding grace, in the redeeming of the world through the birth of a baby.

Before we begin our worship service, I want to share two quick announcements. The first is that I hope you will find a candle in your home tonight to light during the singing of *Silent Night*, as we do when we are together, so if you don't have one, you might take a moment to pause and go find one.

The second one is to let you know that all of our carols tonight were recorded separately by our musicians and put together by our Director of Music Ministries, Ben Malkevitch. I wanted to lift up that fact because I think when you hear them you will be so blessed by the absolutely miraculous way that the Holy Spirit pulls us together through creative technology.

Open your hearts in this Holy Night, and let us worship God.

Carol *O Come, All Ye Faithful* (#148)

Prayer of Invocation (in unison) Ruby

Fraunfelder

O Word made Flesh, You have come into our midst as light and wisdom, desiring to be known to us in our lives and to be found in the world around us. Open our eyes and our ears and our hearts to recognize you where you dwell- in our midst- challenging, heartening, lighting the way to truth, peace, and justice. Amen.

First Reading Erin Wereb

Isaiah 9:2-7

Special Music Adolphe Adam

O Holy Night

Victoria Peacock, soprano
Michael Komperda, tenor
Ben Malkevitch, piano
(a remote collaboration)

The Lighting of the Advent Candles

A Poem by Howard Thurman: theologian, educator, civil rights activist.

I will light Candles this Christmas

I will light candles this Christmas,
Candles of joy despite all the sadness,
Candles of hope where despair keeps watch,
Candles of courage for fears ever present,
Candles of peace for tempest-tossed days,
Candles of grace to ease heavy burdens,
Candles of love to inspire all my living,
Candles that will burn all year long.

Because injustice and despair threaten to overwhelm us, we pray for hope...

Because so many swords have not yet been beaten into plowshares, we pray for peace...

Because grief and loss weigh so heavily, we pray for joy...

Because hatred is still so strong, and because people all over the world are suffering, we pray for love.

Carol *O Little Town of Bethlehem* (#144)

Second Reading Penny Spahr

Micah 5:2-5a

Carol *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing* (#150)

Third Reading

Luke 1:26-38

Joann Riordan

Special Music*It Came Upon the Midnight Clear*

David Kasper, alto saxophone

Fourth Reading

Luke 2:1-7

Kim Mitchell

Carol*What Child Is This?* (#162)**Fifth Reading**

Luke 2:8-20

Vance Awa

Christmas Eve Message

Rev. Joanna D'Agostino

*[See full text below]***Sixth Reading**

John 1:1-14

Melanie Wright

Lighting of the Christ Candle

Rachel Burns

Together, our small candles symbolize the bright flame of Christ's light in the world. Consider the beauty of our lights shining together. May we be both witnesses and bearers of this light tonight and every night after. Amen.

The Service of Candlelight

During the singing of "Silent Night," please light a candle in your home, and remember that we remain connected to one another and to God on this Holy Night.

Carol*Silent Night, Holy Night* (#145)**Benediction**

Rev. Joanna D'Agostino

Carol*Joy to the World* (#143)**Postlude**

Michael Helman

Voluntary on French Carols

Ben Malkevitch, organ

Thanks to Lakewood Congregational's virtual choir this year:

Sopranos: +Katherine Bruton, Beth Foote, +Valerie A. Mathis, Kate Mozynski, *Victoria Peacock, Heather Tuck-Macalla

Altos: *Gwendolyn DeLaney, +Lisa Hirzel, Liz Spahr

Tenors: Eric Tuck-Macalla, Peter Hampton, Michael Komperda, *Ben Liu, +Shaun McGrath

Basses: Tim Hampton, *Noah Hamrick, Ben Malkevitch, Robert Wenz

Luis Clebsch, trumpet; Miranda Deppisch, French horn;

Tess Cayton, trombone; Ben Malkevitch, organ

* denotes LCC soloist and section leader, + denotes guest singer

Sermon Transcript

- I. Something about the Grinch Who Stole Christmas hits different this year. As the Summer months turned to Fall and move towards winter, and our COVID numbers continued to climb, I heard so many voices of fear and worry about whether or not we'd be able to "have Christmas this year." There were fears about not seeing family, about not participating in traditions, about not coming to church, of course fears about physical and mental health.
 - A. In my conversations I kept hearing, "I just want so badly to have Christmas."
 - B. I have thought so very often about the foundational lesson of the Grinch Who Stole Christmas, and this promise that not even the most wonderful, awful idea can stop Christmas from coming.
 - C. It hits differently this year though, because in the Grinch, it was the decorations and the food and the presents that were stolen, but it was their physical presence, it was their gathered community that couldn't be taken away. This year we have all of the decorations, most of the food, plenty of Amazon shipments, and curbside pickups, but what has been stolen from us is the ability to gather and hold hands in song.
 - D. I'm still convinced that nothing-- not a Grinch, not a virus- - can stop this Christmas from coming.
- II. This Advent, as I listened to, read, and meditated on the lessons of the Nativity story and the arc of the Advent liturgy, I'm struck by the uncertainty and fear that so many of God's people have lived through: about the communities the Prophets spoke to, about the world that Jesus was being born into, about exile and wilderness and refuge, and learning to navigate the systems and obstacles of the world.
 - III. I believe that even when our lives feel very different from the Biblical context, there are certain constant, ever-relevant truths through which God's light shines. This year I'm thinking about how our stories are still, so very often, stories of what it means to have hope in the face of fear.
 - IV. The author Elizabeth Gilbert offered an image that I love, about the role of fear on the road trip of life. She acknowledges that for most of us, fear will always be a passenger on our journeys... on the road trip of life.. because to be afraid of the unknown is to be human. We're afraid to take risks, to step out of our comfort zones, to commit, to help others, to accept help, and all of that is quite normal and common. Still, one of the most common commands throughout scripture is this one: Do Not Be Afraid. Elizabeth Gilbert says that when fear is on our road trip, it may very well be a backseat driver, but that doesn't mean we have to let it touch the steering wheel. She says, we don't have to let it touch the roadmap, or the radio, or the heat. We don't have to follow it's detours and, for God's Sake, we don't have to let it drive.
 - V. Just as Mary and Joseph did not allow fear to drive on their journey, our scripture shows us consistent examples of the way that fear cannot be our driving motive. Sometimes the trickier question is, "who *does* get to drive?" When we're on the road trip of life, with all its obstacles and the decisions and hills and valleys, who does get to take the steering wheel? Who or what gets to be our driving inspiration?
 - VI. At the beginning of our service, I read one poem by Howard Thurman. Now I want to read a second one; a pretty well-known one. It's called *The Work of Christmas*.
 - A. When the song of the angels is stilled,
when the star in the sky is gone,
when the kings and princes are home,

when the shepherds are back with their flocks,
the work of Christmas begins:
to find the lost,
to heal the broken,
to feed the hungry,
to release the prisoner,
to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among the people,
to make music in the heart.

VII. This is the work of Christmas because it is the work of Jesus Christ. And it is **this work,** I'm convinced, that we must put in the driver's seat. What amazing things might happen to us, to our community, to our world, when the driving focus, renewed each year at Christmastime, is finding the lost, healing the broken, feeding the hungry, rebuilding, bringing peace, making music in the heart?

VIII. This is the work that Mary grew within her womb. God gave her this burden— a burden that is at the same time heavy **and** light— even as she was surrounded by human fear. Mary tended to this work through labor pains, rocked and soothed it when it cried, and held it to her breast and nursed it as it grew fat and healthy. All the while, I have to imagine that fear sat in her back seat, visible in the rear-view mirror— it looked so much like it does today— like systems of power and oppression, like financial instability, like broken relationships and mental health struggles and restlessness and isolation, like war, like addiction, like physical pain— but time and time again Mary looked at fear in the rearview mirror, held her tiny baby (God-with-us) tight, and said “sit back down and buckle yourself in.” You are not the driver.

IX. This Christmas, so much of our physical, embodied gathering has been stolen from us. As we sit on our couches, perhaps

together with a small part of our family, perhaps alone, I hope you see: “This virus HASN'T stopped Christmas from coming! IT CAME! Somehow or other, it came just the same!”

A. But most of us, all of us probably, have a lot of emotions along for the ride: joy and sorrow, hope and fear, celebration and exhaustion. And yet if you're watching this it's because you chose to sing and listen and look to the Christ-Light. It's because you said, “I will light candles this Christmas.” And when you light those candles, you are proclaiming that the Work of Christmas has begun because we chose a different driver.

B. I have said throughout this Advent that in the words of Meister Eckhart, we are all meant to be Mothers of God. I wonder what might happen if each of us embraces our calling to follow Mary's example this Christmas, to bring light into the world in the face of uncertainty and fear. It is in the lighting of candles, it is in the birthing of Christ, it is in the call to find the lost, heal the broken, feed the hungry, release the prisoner, rebuild the nations, and bring peace among the people, that we rest assured that there is nothing that can stop Christmas from coming this year, not any year.

God's Beloved, Let the work of Christmas begin.
Merry Christmas. Amen.

Offering and Contribution Collection

Please consider fulfilling your pledges during this time. Financial gifts are always welcome, and our church feels the call to respond to the needs around us as they arise. Financial stability allows us to do so more effectively. So, let us give generously of our time, talent, treasure to further the work of God in our community. You can do so in the following ways:

- Writing and mailing a check to Lakewood Congregational Church, 1375 W. Clifton Blvd., Lakewood, OH 44107
- Texting STEWARD to 44-321
- Sending a gift through your bank's online bill pay
- By using the donate button on the church's website www.lcc-church.org
- Call the church office at (216) 221-9555 to discuss other options

Our Mission Statement proclaims our common goal.

*We strive to be a welcoming,
worshipping community of faith,
helping people discover and deepen
their relationship with God, growing as
disciples of Christ, and reaching out in
faith and loving service.*

*In keeping with the spirit of our Mission Statement,
Lakewood Congregational Church,
United Church of Christ,
is an Open and Affirming congregation.*

*We welcome people of all sexual orientation,
ages, differing abilities, and ethnic, economic,
and racial backgrounds into
the full life and ministry of our church.*

*We declare this in the name of the Still Speaking God,
whose Son, Jesus Christ, welcomed
all people into God's circle of grace.*

