

GATHERING OF THE COMMUNITY

On this shortest day of the year, and as we head into the longest night, we gather, mindful of the losses that have multiplied throughout the year. As we look back at it all at once, we are in danger of being overwhelmed by its tragedies— sickness, violence, fire, hurricane, earthquake, and more. Our aim tonight is to acknowledge this, to mourn this, and to know that in all of this, there is the possibility of more light.

If we are to be overwhelmed, let it be that we are overwhelmed with the assurance that we are not alone. We are able to do this because the longest night gives way for ever-more-light as the days begin to lengthen and we wait for the springtime of new life. Some of our ancient ancestors saw this night and the dawn of tomorrow as the appropriate time to honor their lost loved ones. It was this moment that symbolized most powerfully that the path to everlasting life is filled with the light of a new and growing dawn.

Psalm 36:9 says, “Within You is the spring of life; in your light, we see light.” As we light up this tree, though its light is as blue as many of us feel, the light is still there. When we feel as if our light is dimmed, we can rely on the Holy Light to continue to shine until we ourselves shine bright once more. We are not alone.

[TURN ON BLUE LIGHTS OF TREE]

Hymn #230

O Little Town of Bethlehem – vs. 1

**O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie;
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by.
Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light;
The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.**

OPENING PRAYER

Your compassion for us overflows, O God. We are facing our longest night. We come burdened with sorrow, loneliness, and sadness. We come seeking a place to set them down; a place where our words will be heard and our feelings honored. We need a place where we can drop our masks of good cheer so our tears can flow freely and our faces can wear the cares of all that we are carrying. Be among us this night, O God. Let your compassion heal us in this moment. Comfort us. Strengthen us. Care for us. Be Christ to us. Amen.

READINGS

Lamentations 3:1-3, 19-26

¹ I am someone who saw the suffering caused by God’s angry rod.

² He drove me away, forced me to walk in darkness, not light.

³ He turned his hand even against me, over and over again, all day long.

¹⁹ The memory of my suffering and homelessness is bitterness and poison.

²⁰ I can’t help but remember and am depressed.

²¹ I call all this to mind—therefore, I will wait.

²² Certainly the faithful love of the Lord hasn’t ended; certainly God’s compassion isn’t through!

²³ They are renewed every morning. Great is your faithfulness.

²⁴ I think: The Lord is my portion! Therefore, I’ll wait for him.

²⁵ The Lord is good to those who hope in him, to the person who seeks him.

²⁶ It's good to wait in silence for the Lord's deliverance.

Matthew 5:3-12a

³ "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴ "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

⁵ "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

⁶ "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

⁷ "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

⁸ "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

⁹ "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

¹⁰ "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

WORDS OF COMFORT

Rev. Melody Webb

Hymn #140

Great Is Thy Faithfulness – vs. 1

**Great is thy faithfulness, O God my Father;
there is no shadow of turning with thee;
thou changest not, thy compassions, they fail not;
as thou has been, thou forever wilt be.
Great is thy faithfulness! Great is thy faithfulness!
Morning by morning new mercies I see;
all I have needed thy hand hath provided;
great is thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me!**

NAMING OUR GRIEF

God who is with us, in this season of looking forward, of anticipating the celebration of your Son's birth and return in glory, we often find ourselves uncomfortable, uneasy, worried and sad. The lights and gaiety, the music, the bright joy around us, often make us more unquiet, more out of step, feeling even more disconnected and different.

Some of these feelings come from false expectations. Others come from real situations and issues that face us or those we love. Some are from events we may influence and some are beyond our control. Trusting in your grace and provision, we name these situations and face the pain and dislocation they cause us. We claim your promise to companion us in bearing them. We claim your steadfast love for us, knowing you will help us find peace for our troubled spirits. We claim your wise and merciful power, that you will meet each need as is best for us.

[Invite people to write on the memory tags, paper, ribbons or ornaments the names of the people, places or things they are missing and grieving this year as the hymn is sung:]

Hymn #211

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel – vs. 1

O come, O come Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel,
that mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

*We mourn this night the loss of life. For so many, the pandemic has taken loved ones. We mourn the loss of those close to us and those whose names we do not know. We mourn those who perished while working to save other lives. We mourn those who died, not of pandemic, but of other causes. And we mourn the loss, in many cases, of our ability to be with them as they passed, our loss of gathering together for comfort in the ways we needed so much. **We honor and remember these beloveds, and pray for comfort and peace.***

*We mourn this night the loss of livelihoods. For so many, the pandemic has taken the security of food, shelter, care for families, and medical care. We mourn the loss of businesses that could not withstand the circumstances. These were not just businesses, but dreams born of passion and hard work. We mourn those who find themselves needing to rely on others for help when what they really want to do is to be able to help others. **We honor and remember the dreams now deferred, and pray for sustenance and resilience.***

*We mourn this night the loss of love. Our society's dilemma, centuries in the making, has created such hatred, suffering, oppression, and ill-will. We mourn the loss of those whose lives were lost to brutality and violence. We mourn the loss of our ability to love one another despite our differences, as beings who deserve to be seen for their inherent beauty and worth. We mourn that black and brown peoples have perished and suffered at the greatest proportion in the pandemic of coronavirus. We mourn the pandemic of racism that still plagues the fabric of our communities. **We honor and remember the work of prophets who proclaim justice, and pray for compassion and change.***

*We mourn this night the loss of liveliness. For so many, this year has robbed us of our energy, our enthusiasm, and our sense of well-being. We mourn teachers and leaders and caregivers and workers who are struggling to help those in their care, themselves exhausted and needing the sustenance they give to others. We mourn the loss of all who are suffering with anxiety and depression, who are finding it difficult to live each day with fullness or to find hope for tomorrow. We mourn those we have lost to suicide. We mourn those who find themselves addicted to substances in order to ease the pain that feels unbearable. We mourn those who are experiencing their place of shelter as an abusive place from which they struggle to escape. **We honor and remember that each person is precious and whole, and pray for recovery and renewed vigor.***

Almighty God, we know that even when we cannot see or feel you, still you are there. Help us to remember you and to listen for your voice in the words of family, friends, and strangers. Kindle our hearts and awaken hope, that we may know you as you reveal yourself in the world and in our lives. Let the light of your holy Spirit shine within us, lighting the way for all who feel despairing, lost, or forgotten, and grant that it may come to dwell so deeply in our hearts that when we leave this place it may shine on, for us and for those we meet along the way. Amen.

Hymn #230

O Little Town of Bethlehem – vs. 4

O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray;
cast out our sin, and enter in, be born in us today.

**We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel!**

BLESSING AND DISMISSAL

Leader: The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace, both now and forever more. Amen.