

ST. PAUL LUTHERAN CHURCH

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December 20, 2020 Contemporary 11:05 AM

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Senior Pastor	Alan Kethan	<u>Home:</u> (979)-942-9060	<u>Cell:</u> (830)-708-1200
Deacon of Word and Service			Sandye Fletcher
Youth & Family Specialist			Stephanie Polasek
Music Minister			Robert Eaton
Congregational Chair			Curtiss Schonenberg
Creative Child Center Director			Briana Bedford
Secretary			Elena Holub
Custodian			O. C. S.
Parish Nurse Program Coordinator			DyAnn Lauzon

MISSION STATEMENT: Love God, Love Neighbor

VISION STATEMENT: Showing our love of God and neighbor, we will work to double the number of members that are serving as well as those that are being served from 2018 to 2021.

- *As we enter into a sacred time and space, a friendly reminder to please set your cell phone to vibrate.*
- ***We want to welcome all of our guests today and thank you for worshipping with us. If you have any questions or would like more information regarding our services, programs, day care, or preschool programs at St. Paul, please visit our Welcome Center in the narthex immediately following our service, and an attendant will be more than happy to assist you. If this is your first time at St. Paul, we hope you will take a gift along with you. We also have a gift bag for children.***

* **This symbol indicates that the congregation is invited to stand physically or in spirit.**

INTRODUCTION

God keeps the promise made to David to give him an everlasting throne. The angel tells Mary that God will give David's throne to her son Jesus. She is perplexed by Gabriel's greeting and by the news of her coming pregnancy, but she is able still to say, "Count me in." We who know that Jesus is called king only as he is executed still find it a mystery hard to fathom, but with Mary today we hear the news of what God is up to and say, "Count us in."

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

LIGHTING OF ADVENT WREATH

* **CONFESSION AND FORGIVENESS**

P As we prepare for Jesus' return, let us first confess those places and times over this last week where we have sinned. We will do this privately and sincerely with God, who is always ready to listen. Then we will join in a public printed confession. *(Brief time of silence.)*

P God of giving,

C we confess that we have not always allowed the Christ we carry, to be seen by others. Forgive us, help us to be better. Forgive us and brighten our days and experiences of what it means to carry Emmanuel. Amen.

P Jesus taught his first disciples to proclaim to those who confess their sins, that He forgives them. Hear these words of Christ, You are forgiven. Now live in this promise and worship the one who has healed you.

C Amen.

GOSPEL SONG: BETHLEHEM'S TREASURE

Gifts of praise, songs of love. . . Lord our lives we share.

Celebrate heav'ns above. . . glad tidings to bear!

CHORUS:

Father's gift of love come down. Sacrifice beyond all measure.

Heav'nly hosts proclaim this sound!

Come and see the infant King, Bethlehem's Treasure.

CCLI song #924738 Words and Music by Bob Fitts ©1992 Integrity's Hosanna! Music (Admin. by Capitol CMG Publishing (Integrity Music, David C. Cook)) CCLI Lic #1729377

GOSPEL: Luke 1:26-38

In this annunciation, Luke makes clear that God comes with good news for ordinary people from little known places. This king will not be born to royalty in a palace, but to common folk in a stall. Here Luke highlights the role of the Spirit, a special emphasis in this gospel.

A The holy gospel according to St. Luke, chapter 1, verses 26-38.

²⁶In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."

²⁹But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

³⁰The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³²He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of

his ancestor David. ³³He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” ³⁴Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” ³⁵The angel said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. ³⁶And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷For nothing will be impossible with God.” ³⁸Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her.

GOSPEL SONG: BETHLEHEM'S TREASURE

Many kings from afar seek the shining star.

On our knees, in our hearts, we cry, “Lord of Lords You are!”

CHORUS:

Father's gift of love come down. Sacrifice beyond all measure.

Heav'nly hosts proclaim this sound!

Come and see the infant King, Bethlehem's Treasure.

2nd Time to BRIDGE

BRIDGE:

Riches untold, frankincense and gold, pale before the glory we behold!

LAST CHORUS:

Father's gift of love come down. Sacrifice beyond all measure.

Heav'nly hosts proclaim this sound!

Come and see the infant King, Bethlehem's Treasure.

Father's gift of love come down. Sacrifice beyond all measure.

Heav'nly hosts proclaim this s-o-u-n-d!

Come and see the infant King, Bethlehem's Treasure.

Bethlehem's treasure! Bethlehem's treasure!

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SERMON

*** SERMON SONG: HEARTS WAITING (JOY TO THE WORLD)**

Hearts waiting. Waiting for a savior. Come, O Come, Emmanuel.

Hear the prophets... speaking of the promise. Come, O Come, Emmanuel.

A light of glory filled the sky, and we heard the angel choir...

CHORUS:

Joy to the world! Joy to the world! The Lord has come! The Lord has come to us!

Joy to the world! Savior for all! The Lord has come! The Lord has come to us!

Messiah. Ruler of the Nations. Come, O Come, Emmanuel.

Our Redeemer... God is with us... God is for us. Come, O Come, Emmanuel.

The doors of heaven open wide. Can you hear the song inside?

CHORUS:

Joy to the world! Joy to the world! The Lord has come! The Lord has come to us!

Joy to the world! Savior for all! The Lord has come! The Lord has come to us!

BRIDGE:

And He shall reign forever and ever. He shall reign forever.

And He shall reign forever and ever. He shall reign forevermore. CHORUS

CCLI Song #7069395 Words and Music by Matt Redman, Jonas Myrin, Chris Tomlin, and Beth Redman
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*** APOSTLES' CREED**

A With the whole church, let us confess our faith.

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

I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,

who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary,

suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried;

he descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again;

he ascended into heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the Father,

and he will come 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 congregation may be seated during the prayers.)

PRAYERS

A God of power and might, fulfill your promise and come quickly to this weary world. Hear our prayers for everyone in need.

A brief silence.

A Comforting God, be with the family and friends of Robert Little, who passed away this past week. Be with them and comfort them during this difficult time.

A brief silence.

A God of health, we pray for those in need of healing and whose needs are diverse and known to you including:

Janis Stancik; Verna Nell Dittmar; Mae Dene Zajicek; Brinlee Kazmir; Rev. Kenneth Wicks;

Margaret Denker; Barbara York; Matthew Scanlin; Tiger Bergfeld; those on our Prayer

Team's list; and those we name in our hearts before you.

A brief silence.

- A Strengthening God, we pray those battling cancer including:
Jo Ann Moeller; Lily Presswood; Denise Lange; Cliff Grohmann; Doug Mason; Wanda Sutton; Fran Gillett; Dr. Tom Hancher; Stanley Yearwood; Joe Berry; Joyce Templeton; Tim Dahlstrom; Gracie Brune; Margaret Rogers; Leonard Kahlden; Curtis Wallin; Harvey Skow; Megan Burch; Jennifer Aleman; Lisa Grazier; Phyllis Behrend; Bill Stolle; Jamie Stokes; Jessica Mauchlen; Larry Guthrie; Donna Tiner; Libby Divin; Tina Barten; Anthony Baumbach; Cindy Masek; Denver Meyer; Diane Brooks; Bob Loy; Joe Hluchanek; Devon Tiffin; Stanley King; Monty Gillett; Dawn Foster; Amber Smith; Edward Halcolm; Alison Randazzo; Amber Kutach; Louis Camacho; Melvin Schobel; Janet Greene; Karen Teal; Sabrina Galindo; Debbie Grimes; Horst Traub; Margie Fisk; Preston Carter; Penny Miller; Carl Hahn; Megan Cain; Bob Rutta; Amanda Fuchs; Cyndi Wallace; Karen Broussard; Donna Young; Sharon Heimann; and Brenda Baker that they may know healing and comfort.

A brief silence.

- A Loving God, we pray for all expectant mothers and especially for:
Hannah Pavlicek; Kelsey Maertz Zapalac; Courtney Busselman; Chandler Divin; and Kelsey McNeely that they have healthy terms and deliveries, and if not, may they find comfort and peace.

A brief silence.

- A Compassionate God, we pray for those who reside in care facilities and the homebound including:
Coy Dell Schindler; R. O. (Reuben) Barten; Clemons Venghaus; Deanna Lee; Dolores Wessels; Alma Larmer; Doris Poppe; Bill Rodgers; Barbara McMath; Linda Munos Rodgers; Mabel Krenek; Judy Brisco; Barbara Prause; Lou Cordes; Madeline Menke; Adeline Spross; Doris Horndt; Helen Perrard; Delores Purcell; Curtis Berger; Marjorie Brune; Dolores Hoelscher; Jesse Grabow; Beatrice Zikuhr; Robert Eaton; James Booker; Adrian Fritsch; Don Morrison; and Sylvia Marburger that they receive your caring and compassion.

A brief silence.

- A Courageous God, we pray for all law enforcement officers, including Troy Neisner; Jacob Gorman; Marley Mayo; Johnny Kovar; Abigail Weido; Dustin Lattimore; Andrew Lattimore; Luke Kanz; Bruno Flores; Jessica Dimas; Zane Weido; as well as Donnie Templeton and Jason Templeton who are also fire fighters. For all fire fighters, first responders, healthcare workers and 9-1-1 dispatchers, especially Brent Gorman, Sr.; Brent Gorman, Jr.; Reid Brasher; Dusty Dittmar; John Maertz; Ron Luedke; Randy Neuendorff; Pastor Alan Kethan; Kristi Weyand; Eric Weyand; Bradley Berger; Jon Berger; James Chollett; Edward Thraen, Jr.; Garrett Flores; Kyle Burris; Dylan Walcik; Brenda Henkes; Jan Willette, as well as those active duty military members including Jeanna Willett; Arturo Mares; Keven Rios; Michael Graham; Brian Anderson; Landon Cheatham; Bryan Kubena; Brad Bergfeld; Cody Jowers; Kyle Appelt; Montana Appelt; Douglas Neuendorff; Scott Cherniss; Kameron Page; Ryan Neisner; Anthony D'Angelo; Dalton Kapel; Kindra Dawson; and William Phillips that they are protected and kept safe.

A brief silence.

- A God of mission, we pray for the church throughout the world. May we all proclaim the good news of your love effectively. We ask, especially, that you would bless the ministry of our sister congregation, Cristo Rey in Peru, all Missionaries, especially St. Paul's supported missionary, Dina Anton de Espinoza, and our companion synod, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Central African Republic.

A brief silence.

- A Draw near to us, O God, and receive our prayers for the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

C Amen.

*** PEACE**

- P As Jesus shared peace, let us also share His peace with one another. *(Share the "Peace of the Lord" with your neighbors.)*

(We will be collecting offerings before and after worship each week. This includes Power of One dollars.)

PRESENTATION OF OUR GIFTS

"Power of One" is a ministry sponsored by your Stewardship Team. We are asking each and every one of our members to give \$1.00 above what your normal giving would be. We are asking each member to place this \$1.00 bill or change in the offering plate each week. The team is also inviting all children to participate to develop the habit of giving as part of their worship experience. Parents, a penny, nickel, dime, quarter, or dollar bill, any of these will do to help your children develop a habit of giving. These "Power of One" dollars will be used to support local ministries and ministries abroad. The purpose of this ministry is to demonstrate that something as small as one dollar can be used to make a difference in the lives of others.

*** OFFERING PRAYER**

- P Generous God, you have created all that is, and you provide for us in every season. Bless all that we offer, that through these gifts the world will receive your blessing. In the name of Jesus, Emmanuel, we pray.

C Amen.

*** REMEMBERING JESUS' WORDS, PROMISES, AND COMMANDS**

*** LORD'S PRAYER**

- P Lord remember us in your kingdom and teach us to sing.

**C Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.**

**For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours,
now and forever. Amen.**

*** INVITATION TO COMMUNION**

P Even as we watch and wait, Christ is here. Come and receive.

C Amen.

DISTRIBUTION OF COMMUNION (Continuous with Individual Cups)

{Distribution will be continuous. Please come down the center aisle starting from the front. Follow directions of the ushers, coming up one side at a time. Please keep 6 feet between those who are not your family members. Pastor will hand you the bread. If you wish to have a gluten-free wafer, please tell Pastor "Gluten-free, please." Afterward, you will choose either wine or white grape juice from the individual cups in the tray – white grape juice in the center with wine surrounding. Place the empty cups in the baskets located off to the side. Although communion is continuous, you are welcome to kneel at the rail in prayer after receiving communion. Please return to your seat by the side aisles.}

*** PRAYER AFTER COMMUNION**

P Gracious and abundant God, you have done great things for us, and we rejoice. In this bread and cup you give us life forever. In your boundless mercy, strengthen us and open our hearts to the world's needs, for the sake of Jesus Christ, our Lord.

C Amen.

*** BLESSING**

P The Creator of the stars bless your Advent waiting, the long-expected Savior fill you with love, the unexpected Spirit guide your journey, ✠ now and forever.

C Amen.

*** CLOSING SONG: HOPE WAS BORN THIS NIGHT**

**Tonight I can see a star shine, and its splendor fills up the sky.
It's the same that appeared and the wise men revered when hope was born this night.
Out upon the snowy fields, there's a silent peace that heals.
And it echoes the grace of our Savior's embrace, because hope was born this night.**

CHORUS:

***Glory to God in the highest! Peace on earth, good will toward men!
Let all of the world sing a chorus of joy, because hope was born this night.***

**I can hear the Christmas bells ring, as softly a church choir sings.
It's the song used to praise the Ancient of Days when hope was born this night.
There are angels in this place, and my heart resounds with the praise.
Like a shepherd so scared, I'll rejoice and declare that hope was born this night.**

LAST CHORUS:

**Glory to God in the highest! Peace on earth, good will toward men!
Let all of the world sing a chorus of joy, because hope was born this night.
Glory to God in the highest! Peace on earth, good will toward men!
Let all of the world sing a chorus of joy, because hope was born this night.
I know hope was born this night. Because Christ was born. . . this night!**

CCLI Song #5873296 Words and Music by Ben McDonald and Dave Frey
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*** DISMISSAL**

P Go in peace, carrying Christ in you.

C Thanks be to God, and we will.

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USHERS: Bethany Guthmann; Fay, Thomas & Timothy Ulbricht

LAY READER: Walter Guthmann, Jr.

ACOLYTE: Hudson Muir

ALTAR GUILD: Amanda Oppermann

WELCOME: With Mary we sing: "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior" (Luke 1:46-47, NIV). Welcome to worship.

ALTAR WALL FLOWERS are placed by Michael and Donna Maas in celebration of their 32nd wedding anniversary on December 16.

We extend our Christian sympathy to the family and friends of Robert Little who passed away this past week. May God comfort them during their time of loss.

HOPE FOR THE HOLIDAYS Ministry: A Special **THANK YOU** to all of you who helped with *HOPE for the HOLIDAYS*, the Christmas ministry for providing connection, phone calls and a small gift bag to brighten spirits with our homebound and care facility church "family". The ministry was funded and supported by St. Paul Council leadership, the Outreach Team and your Neighbor-to-Neighbor volunteers. On Thursday, December 10, 2020 volunteers gathered together to pack, call, and deliver 46 gift bags to our precious friends. **THANK** each one of you who shopped, donated, packaged, delivered and assisted in so many, many ways to make this a special Christmas for so many!! – *Deacon Sandye*

COLLECTION OF OFFERING: Offering for the worship services is collected before and after worship. Offering bowls are placed in the back entrance and inside the side sanctuary door for you to place your offering in. This includes "Power of One" dollars.

Amount needed for average weekly budgeted expenses: \$8,405.00

Attendance: Dec. 12 & 13, 2020 – 102
Power of One: Dec. 12 & 13, 2020 – \$37.00

Contributions: Dec. 12 & 13 – \$5,866.15

Thank you to those who contributed to last week's offerings. Loving God/Loving Neighbor.

Wednesday Night Attendance: – Wed., Dec. 16 – **6 Total**
BLAST/Confirmation: 5 **Support Staff:** 1

ATTENTION: Names on the prayer list *in the bulletin* will be printed for 2 weeks. After 2 weeks, the names will be removed from the bulletin unless the church office has been notified to keep them.

◆ **GLUTEN-FREE WAFERS:** For those who are allergic to gluten, we will have a few gluten-free wafers available at communion. Please tell Pastor when coming forward, “Gluten-free, please.”

** **NOTICE REGARDING BULLETINS:** Please take your bulletin home after worship. If you do not wish to take your bulletin home, please place it in the recycling container after worship. We will **not** be reusing them. Thank you! **

- **EXTRA CHRISTMAS EVE SERVICE:** An extra service has been added for Christmas Eve. It will be a regular Holy Communion worship service with Christmas hymns **at 2:00 PM.** ●

► **Masks for Christmas Eve:** Due to the uncertainty of attendance for the Christmas Eve worship services, we ask that you bring your mask. Please wear your mask when entering and leaving church, and be prepared to wear your mask if you are not able to be 6 feet apart. We have hand sanitizer available for your use at each entrance and also in the aisle to use before receiving communion. Thank you.

+ **WORSHIP CHANGES FOR DECEMBER 26 & 27, 2020!!** We will have face-to-face worship Saturday, December 26, 2020 at 7:00 PM. Worship for **Sunday, December 27, 2020** will be **one service posted on facebook only at 9:00 AM – no** face-to-face worship. +

** **Get the new year off to a good start!** 2021 Pocket Calendars are available for you to pick up in the narthex and church office for your use. They are a gift from the Evangelism Team. Enjoy!

► **2021 OFFERING ENVELOPES ARE HERE!!!** Please check the coat area of the narthex for your 2021 offering envelope boxes. You can also take the box of a family member, friend or neighbor and deliver it to them. That would be appreciated very much! The boxes are in alphabetical order. Thank you!



Share Your Christmas UPDATE: We are so fortunate this year to have the opportunity to service over 65 families through the Share Your Christmas Ministry. **Due to the increased number of families needing assistance and a decrease in the amount of funds available, we have decided to *extend the timeline* that the Share Your Christmas committee is accepting donations.** The Angel Tree in the narthex will remain up for one more week. Please consider donating to the ministry by dropping a check (*made out to “St. Paul Lutheran Church” with “Share Your Christmas” in the memo line*) or cash in the appropriate envelope in the offering bowls during worship or drop them off in the church office during the week. You can also mail a donation by using the self-addressed envelope. For questions, please contact Heather Thomas at 832-754-7726. Thank you!

SCHEDULE FOR THE WEEK:

Today (Sun., Dec. 20) – 10:00 AM – Called Congregational Meeting (sanctuary)
Mon., Dec. 21 – 9:00 AM – Staff Meeting
5:30 PM – CCC Board
Thurs., Dec. 24 – **Office Closed! (Christmas Eve)**
2:00 PM – Christmas Eve Service
4:00 PM – Candlelight Worship Service
7:00 PM – Candlelight Worship Service
Fri., Dec. 25 – **Office Closed! (Merry Christmas!)**
Sat., Dec. 26 – 7:00 PM – Holy Communion Worship in Person
Next Sun., Dec. 27 – 9:00 AM – Holy Communion Worship **on facebook only**

UPCOMING COMMEMORATIONS

Sunday, December 20, 2020 Katharina von Bora Luther, renewer of the church, died 1552

Born to an impoverished nobleman, Katie eventually took vows as a nun, but around age twenty-four she and several other nuns who were influenced by the writings of Martin Luther left the convent. Six children were born to Katie and Martin.

Saturday, December 26, 2020 Stephen, Deacon and Martyr

Stephen was a deacon and the first martyr of the church. He was one of those seven upon whom the apostles laid hands after they had been chosen to serve widows and others in need. Later, Stephen's preaching angered the temple authorities, and they ordered him to be put to death by stoning.

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OTHER READINGS 2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16

Instead of David building a house (temple) for God, God promises to establish David's house (dynasty) forever. Centuries later, after the Babylonian exile, no king sat on the throne. Even then, however, the people of Israel remembered this promise and continued to hope for a king, the messiah, God's anointed.

The reading begins:

¹Now when the king was settled in his house, and the LORD had given him rest from all his enemies around him, ²the king said to the prophet Nathan, “See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent.” ³Nathan said to the king, “Go, do all that you have in mind; for the LORD is with you.” ⁴But that same night the word of the LORD came to Nathan: ⁵Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the LORD: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? ⁶I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. ⁷Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, “Why have you not built me a house of cedar?” ⁸Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: Thus says the LORD of hosts: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel; ⁹and I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. ¹⁰And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more, as formerly, ¹¹from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house. ¹⁶Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever.

PSALM: Luke 1:46b-55

^{46b}My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, ⁴⁷my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, ⁴⁸for you, Lord, have looked with favor on your lowly servant. From this day all generations will call me blessed: ⁴⁹you, the Almighty, have done great things for me and holy is your name. ⁵⁰You have mercy on those who fear you, from generation to generation. ⁵¹You have shown strength with your arm and scattered the proud in their conceit, ⁵²casting down the mighty from their thrones and lifting up the lowly. ⁵³You have filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty. ⁵⁴You have come to the aid of your servant Israel, to remember the promise of mercy, ⁵⁵the promise made to our forbears, to Abraham and his children forever.

OTHER READINGS: Romans 16:25-27

Paul closes his letter to the Romans by praising God because, in the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, God has revealed the promised, divine plan of salvation for all humanity. Paul proclaims this gospel of Christ in order to bring about the obedience of faith among all nations.

The reading begins:

²⁵Now to God who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages ²⁶but is now disclosed, and through the prophetic writings is made known to all the Gentiles, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith — ²⁷to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever! Amen.

SERVICE OVERVIEW: THOSE WHO HEAR AND DO

Who is God’s family? Where is God’s home? In the church we often speak of our home congregation as a family. Many of us grew up thinking of the church building as God’s house. But the readings for this day call us to anticipate that Emmanuel might understand kinship and home in different ways. As we approach Christmas, which in our culture is increasingly a celebration of hearth and home more than a public festival, the inclusiveness of God’s promise rings out from these readings.

The temple often stood in the imagination of Israel as the “house of God,” but in 1 Samuel God expresses reservations before the temple is even built. The promise made to David is not about the building. Instead of the expected places of wealth and power, God chooses to dwell in a *people* instead of a “house of cedar.”

So if God is dwelling in a people, which people are included in that promise? Although no one disputes that Jesus is born of the “house of David,” Luke’s gospel stresses Mary’s lowliness instead of her bloodlines, reminding us that Christ became flesh in the most unlikely circumstances. Later in Luke’s gospel, when someone mentions his family to Jesus, he says his family includes all “who hear the word of God and do it.” In today’s gospel we see Mary acting out that definition of family.

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION:

Throughout Advent we continue the theme that God comes in the past in the history of Israel and the incarnation of Jesus, in the present in the word and sacrament of worship, and in the future at the end of all things. Only in this fourth week do the readings refer to the story of Jesus’ birth as an arrival of God among us. Welcome to worship! In baptism, we too are filled with the power of the Holy Spirit so that Christ will dwell in us. At holy communion, we too become houses for God.

Even as we wait for Christmas to dawn, this week we are on the move through time and space. On this fourth Sunday, an angel visits Mary to announce good news of promises made and promises kept. Hearers of today’s scripture are reminded that the birth of Jesus is God coming to dwell among us, offering faithfulness and steadfast love for all. For countless generations, God’s people have moved, and continue to move, without homes, without safety and security, without birth plans, and against all odds. Yet Jesus comes to dwell not only with teenage Mary, but in each of us, throughout every generation — ancient and modern.

Two weeks ago we heard Isaiah prophesy that the Lord’s coming would entail a hefty landscaping project: the mountain and hills would be brought low and the valleys lifted up. This week we find Mary walking on foot, her belly not yet grown large with the miraculous baby inside. The great equalizing everyone thought would be achieved with tractors and dynamite instead arrives into creation by the quiet work of the Holy Spirit and the gracious agency of a faithful young woman who believes. God is come, and by Christ’s coming all creation can equally rejoice in the reconciling, saving activity of God.

Mary's joyful confidence can be heard in her revolutionary song of praise and hope that still resonates all around the world. We hear her words of security in God's promise that the lowly will be lifted up and the powerful brought down. It is a promise to cling to today as much as ever. It is after the moment of divine inspiration that the difficult and uncharted path begins, and God's blessing goes with us the entire way no matter the perceived difficulty. This is a significant moment in Mary's life. The significant moments in our own lives, like the special celebrations we share at Christmas, are only passing experiences in God's long work of blessing.

Mary proclaims, "Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed" and God's "mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation." What blessings and mercy are being passed from generation to generation in our community? What trauma and judgment? Is God's blessing something you think of when remembering previous generations? How so? What about God's mercy do you hope your descendants will see when they look back on your life and community? What story are you telling people younger than you about God's goodness?

KID STUDY:

Some people put a star at the top of their tree. That's a good choice. After all, a special star played a very important part in the story of Christmas. Some people like to put an angel at the top of their tree. That's a good choice too, because angels also played a very important role in the Christmas story. Angels are messengers from God. An angel named Gabriel was sent by God to deliver a message to a young girl named Mary who was engaged to be married to a man named Joseph. Gabriel told Mary that she would have a baby who will be called the Son of God. God could have chosen anyone to give birth to Jesus, but he chose Mary. She wasn't a powerful or important person, but she was important to God. God still chooses unimportant people to perform important tasks. He has given you and me the task of sharing the good news of Jesus and his love to the whole world. Can you imagine a more important task? This year, as we celebrate the birth of Jesus, let us, like Mary, answer God's call. "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION:

St. Bernard declared there are here three miracles: that God and humankind should be joined in this Child; that a mother should remain a virgin; and that Mary should have such faith as to believe that this mystery would be accomplished in her. The last is not the least of the three. The virgin birth is a mere trifle for God; that God should become human is a greater miracle; but most amazing of all is that this maiden should credit the announcement that she, rather than some other virgin, had been chosen to be the mother of God. Had she not believed, she could not have conceived. She held fast to the word of the angel because she had become a new creature. Even so must we be transformed and renewed in heart from day to day. This is for us the hardest point, not so much to believe that he is the son of the virgin and of God, as to believe that Son of God is ours. God feeds the whole world through a Baby nursing at Mary's breast. This must be our daily exercise: to be transformed into Christ, being nourished by this food. - Martin Luther [Martin Luther, The Martin Luther Christmas Book, trans. Roland H. Bainton (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1948), 22-23.]

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Next Week's Theme (December 24): Christmas Eve – Birth of Jesus

Next Week's Scriptures (December 24):

First Reading: Isaiah 9:2-7
"Light shines: a child is born for us."

Psalm: Psalm 96
"Let the heavens rejoice and the earth be glad." (Ps. 96:11)

Second Reading: Titus 2:11-14
"The grace of God has appeared."

Gospel: Luke 2:1-14 [15-20]
"God with us."

Next Week's Theme (December 26 & 27): Presentation of Jesus

Next Week's Scriptures (December 26 & 27):

First Reading: Isaiah 61:10- -62:3
"Clothed in garments of salvation."

Psalm: Psalm 148
"The splendor of the LORD is over earth and heaven." (Ps. 148:13)

Second Reading: Galatians 4:4-7
"Children and heirs of God."

Gospel: Luke 2:22-40
"The presentation of the child."