

I used this service three years ago and as I was planning for this year and looked at this, I like it and decided to use it again. Many of my folks were not here three years ago, so it will be new for them!

Christmas Eve Readings, Meditation, and Carols
Saint Athanasius Lutheran Church
December 24, 2016

The pages that follow contain the Scriptures, meditations, and hymns that were heard and sung this Christmas Eve. The meditations take into account the readings and use the words of the hymns that are sung with them, thus bringing together all into a cohesive whole to unite the message into the hearts of all who hear and sing. For truly, the hymns we sing are the church's sung confession of the faith, and this service seeks to utilize that to proclaim the message of this night.

A reading from Second Samuel, chapter 7.

“Go and tell my servant David, ‘Thus says the Lord: I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover, the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house. When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever.’”

Meditation on 2 Samuel 7:5a, 11b-14, 16 and
Hymns 379 (O Come, All Ye Faithful) and 376 (Once in Royal David's City)

You have come to adore Him, Christ the Lord. Son of the Father, Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing.

But even more than that, you have come tonight to receive from Him. For that is why He came down to earth from heaven, in royal David's city. He came to live with the poor and mean and lowly, with folks like you and me, that we be poor and mean and lowly no more. To be the king we need, the promised son of David who will sit on his throne forever and rule in holiness, righteousness, and love.

But before ascending to that throne in heaven, He must lie in a manger-throne and hang on a cross-throne. And in between He is our childhood's pattern - a pattern, however, that we cannot follow or keep. For He lives perfectly, we do not. He keeps all the Law completely, we do not. He loves at all times, we do not. So even more than our pattern, our eyes see Him as our Saviour in His redeeming love. For that child, that man, so dear and gentle, that condemned criminal on the cross is our Lord in heaven above, who is establishing His kingdom and building His house, His Church, through the forgiveness of sins He won for us.

And now He leads us on to the place where He has gone, that He who came to be with us might take us to be with Him forever. When we, His children, crowned, like stars, all in white, His praise will sound. When we will adore Him not just for a night, but forever.

A reading from Micah, chapter 5.

But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah,
who are too little to be among the clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to be ruler in Israel,
whose coming forth is from of old,
from ancient days.

Therefore he shall give them up until the time
when she who is in labor has given birth;
then the rest of his brothers shall return
to the people of Israel.

And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord,
in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.

And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great
to the ends of the earth.

And he shall be their peace.

Meditation on Micah 5:2-5a and Hymn 361 (O Little Town of Bethlehem)

Bethlehem. No one would have guessed there. It was too little, too insignificant, too ordinary. The Wise Men went to Jerusalem, for that's where a king should be born, right?

Well not if you're the everlasting light. He chooses differently than we do. He comes not with fanfare, but how silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given. So many didn't know. So many slept right through it. So many didn't care. No ear may have heard His coming, but they would hear Him later, when He spoke God's Word, God's truth, to a world in need.

And God is speaking still, for ours is a world still in need. Of Him. And so the holy child of Bethlehem is still descending to us today in His Word, and His Word in Baptism, and His Word in the Supper, to cast out sin and enter in, that being born in us we be born in Him, born from above. A wondrous gift still given. The gift of peace. The gift of being in the flock of this Good Shepherd.

So maybe Bethlehem was still that night, its streets dark, many in deep and dreamless sleep as the silent stars went by. But as the angels' great glad tidings told, so we tonight will not keep silent. And we will not only sing out these same great glad tidings, we will repent of our sins. For truly in repenting and receiving the forgiveness of our Lord Immanuel, we praise Him for who He truly is, and who He came to be: our Saviour.

A reading from Isaiah, chapter 9.

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;
those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness,
on them has light shone.
You have multiplied the nation;
you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest,
as they are glad when they divide the spoil.
For the yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder,
the rod of his oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian.
For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult
and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire.
For to us a child is born, to us a son is given;
and the government shall be upon his shoulder,
and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Of the increase of his government and of peace
there will be no end,
on the throne of David and over his kingdom,

to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness
from this time forth and forevermore.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

Meditation on Isaiah 9:2-7 and Hymn 412 (The People That in Darkness Sat)

The people who sat in darkness. *Deep* darkness, Isaiah said. That's not only the people back then, it's you and I tonight. For we sit not in the darkness of night, but the darkness of sin. If it doesn't seem too dark to you, that's just because your eyes - and hearts - have gotten used to it. But the darkness is no less now. Everyone doing was is right in his own eyes. Death descending on more and more every day. Death natural and unnatural, as they say. And God's perfect plan and design for us seeming to grow dimmer and dimmer.

But in this darkness a great light shines. The light of truth. The light of life. For to us a child is born, to us a son is given. To break the darkness of sin with His forgiveness. To break the darkness of death with His resurrection. To break the darkness of a lost and wandering world with His Word - His Word which is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path (Ps 119:105). For tonight, the Word is made flesh.

So there is joy tonight. A joy higher and deeper and wider and broader than just the bountiful harvest of gifts we receive, the spoils of the season - but the joy of war over, the joy of oppression lifted, the joy of a promised future that can never be taken away from us. For the light of the Word reveals that the gift we receive tonight is the Wonderful, the Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace. He gives Himself to us to make us His alone. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this, for He is zealous, in love, for you.

A reading from Luke, chapter 2.

And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed. (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.) And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:) To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped

him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.

Meditation on Luke 2:1-7 and Hymn 370 (What Child Is This)

What child is this on Mary's lap, sleeping? Mary knew. It was the child the angel Gabriel had told her about. The child conceived in her by the Holy Spirit. The Christ. The King. The Saviour. Son of God now also son of Mary. Now and forever God and man in one person.

Why lies He in such mean estate - wrapped in swaddling clothes - and where ox and ass are feeding - in a manger? Because He has come to be like us and to live with us. Our cashmere sweaters and designer clothes like dirty rags compared to the glorious dress of heaven. Our palaces and mansions like stables compared with the kingdom of heaven. So those things He leaves to be with us in ours. Higher than none, that He be for all. Peasant, king, or anywhere in between.

But even more than that: nails, spear, shall pierce Him through, the cross be borne for me, for you. This firstborn son will be given to redeem the world. The Father spared all the firstborn sons in Egypt, but He would not spare His own Son. The Father spared all the firstborn sons in Egypt covered by the blood of the passover Lamb, but He would give His Son to be that Lamb whose blood will cover us, so that death pass us over. The King of kings salvation brings - through His death and resurrection.

And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And so it is, that, while HE was HERE, the days were accomplished that WE should be delivered. So joy to all the world, for Christ is born, the babe, the son of Mary!

A reading from Luke, chapter 2.

And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find

the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men. And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us.

Meditation on Luke 2:8-15 and Hymn 380 (Hark! The Herald Angels Sing)

The Scriptures tell us that the angels of God surround Him always and never cease their song of praise. So it should be no surprise to us that when the Son of God comes down to earth and is born a man, there the angels are too. And they sing their song of praise to some shepherds, abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. They sing to shepherds, quite naturally, because they are singing of the Lamb, the Lamb of God in the manger.

But though they sing to shepherds, their good tidings of great joy are for all people of all time, everywhere. For you and me. For mild He lays His glory by to be born that man no more may die, born to raise the sons of earth, born to give them second birth. Yes, glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men. For this child is born to bring peace between God and man in the forgiveness of our sins.

Up until this time, the angels have been at work, but quietly, announcing this good news to Mary, to Joseph. But now that He has come, these messengers of God cannot contain themselves, so great their rejoicing! They herald this good news of the newborn king. That light and life to all He brings, risen with healing in his wings. Here is God with us. Here is God for us. The incarnate Deity, the godhead veiled in flesh, come for you.

So hear again the angels' eternal song, for they sing for you.

A reading from Titus, chapter 3.

But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom

he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

Meditation on Titus 3:4-7 and Hymn 362 (O Sing of Christ)

In the beginning, when God created all things, it was good. Very good. But it did not stay so long. The first Adam and his wife, Eve, lost this good God had created and given to them, choosing the lie over the truth, choosing sin instead of life. And they could not get it back. Now, Paradise was barred to them and they would live a life of hardship, labor, and strife. Such is the fruit of sin.

But God was not done with His good. The goodness and loving kindness of God our Saviour appeared in the world again, this time in a manger. The eternal Word was made flesh and bone. Upon our frail humanity, the icon of God's grace was traced. There was once again a perfect man on the earth, a second Adam, and they named Him Jesus.

He came to mend what sin had marred. He came to reclaim us as His own. He came to open Paradise again. And so as we heard, the angels are no longer barring the way with their flashing swords - they are singing of heaven open again. For soon, the grave would be opened by this one, and by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Saviour, Holy Baptism opens the grave for us too. Adam's sin is overcome by Jesus' forgiveness, Adam's death is conquered by Jesus life, Adam's defeat is reversed by Jesus' victory, given to us with water and the Word. And so by His grace we became heirs of eternal life, sharing His wealth and His name for all eternity.

Which makes Christmas more than just the birth of one son - it the birth of many. Because of His birth here below are we born from above, and so saved not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to His mercy.

A reading from Luke, chapter 2.

And [the shepherds] came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorify-

ing and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.

Meditation on Luke 2:16-20 and **Hymns 386** (O Sing We, Now Rejoice), **363** (Silent Night), and **387** (Joy to the World)

The angels had to sing, they couldn't contain themselves. The shepherds, too, returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them. And so now do we, taking this joy of a Saviour out into a world filled with sadness and gloom and need. For even as many sing Joy to the World this night, what their hearts feel is quite different than their words say. For many, joy and peace seem only a dream.

So we rejoice, not in a fleeting joy, but in joy anchored in the Word, in the one who came from on high to us, for we could not rise to Him. The one who has come to cheer our wearied spirits, wearied under the loads of sin, vanity, and death. And if that's you tonight, if you are here but feel no joy, if you sing but wonder where is your hope, if you see the lights but find only darkness in your heart, there is good news for you. For in this world where sins and sorrows grow, and thorns infest the ground of your heart, He comes to make His blessings flow. He comes to bless you with His forgiveness. That you have hope in Him. That if your heart and mind are raging this silent night, He quiet them with His love for you. For yes, He loves you. The proof is in the manger and on the cross. The proof is in these words: *I forgive you all your sins*. All He does, He does for you, for this. That you may know the wonders of His love, even in the midst of a world of sin and hate.

That is where joy is found - in Him. The holy ground where He puts Himself for you. A manger, a font. A cross, an altar. A mountain, a pulpit. Until a cloud, when we will be there with Him. The misery and sadness and strife of this world make us only long that we were there. Now! United with all His saints in praise. But not yet. Now He is here, with us, to bring Joy to the World. To you. I pray this night that it may be so for you. That whatever is happening in you or around you or to you, this be a silent night, a holy night, for you. That the tumult of your heart be calmed by the light of His love and the dawn of His redeeming grace.

For Christ, the Saviour - your Saviour - is born!