

Straight from the "Hart"

Worship Service from December 20, 2020

 HARTLAND

Sharing the journey
to know, love, and serve God

Opening Prayer

Let's pray. Almighty God, Creator of life, and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, we have gathered to praise you as we prepare to celebrate the birth of your only Son, Jesus, who is light of the world. Thank you for allowing us to recognize him as our personal Savior and Lord. Now may our worship embody Christ's grace and truth, that we may once again be renewed in our relationship with you. In these next moments, give us a respite from the frictions of life as you draw us to yourself and to each other. Amen.

Call to Worship – Advent Candles

Music #211 (v 7) O Come, O Come, Emmanuel
(Candles 1,2, and 3 are lit during the song)

*O come, Desire of nations bind
all peoples in one heart and mind.
From dust thou brought us forth to life;
deliver us from earthly strife.*



Reading – R1 Lay Reader R2 Pastor

R1: We lit the candle of hope because God comes into the world to keep us on track. We lit the candle of peace because God calls us to live in peace with all that we meet. We lit the candle of joy because God enters our wilderness to lead us home. Today, we praise God because he loves us.

R2: Every good and perfect gift comes from him.

R1: In trust, we open our hearts to him.

R2: He gives us courage to turn away from distractions and distortions

R1: and turn toward the home he has made, is making, and will complete through Christ.

R2: Help us to be instruments of your goodness by bringing your love to others.

R1: Say to God with the Psalmist,

R2: Whom do we have in the heavens except you? And with you, we have no other desire on earth. (Ps 73:25 LEB)

R1: We light the candle of love – for the One who, in love, comes to make his home among us.

Music # 211 (Refrain) O Come, O Come, Emmanuel
(Candle 4 is lit while the song is sung.)

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.

Music Intro

It is not only that we need God to come to us, and he has, he also gives us the opportunity to approach him in worship as well. One of my favorite hymns of the season invites us to do just that.

Music # 234 (vv 1,5) O Come, All Ye Faithful

Theme

I assume you know what a jumping jack is. Today's theme is a jumping john. Later on we will hear that Mary went to visit Elizabeth who was pregnant with John the Baptist. When Mary greeted her, John jumps in Elizabeth's womb. A week after John's birth, his father explains why -- among other things he said, **God has given us a powerful Savior** (Luke 1:69a) **[so that] we can serve him without fear.** (Luke 1:74b)

So back to today's topic -- a jumping John is when you stand, and reach down with your hands as close to your toes as you can (kind of like curled up in the belly) and then you say (something like what Mary did at the door), "Are you home?" Then you stretch out as tall and as fast as you can making you kind of jump and you lift your hands in the air as far as they go - but you don't clap them like that jack jumper, instead you say with happy energy "God has given us a powerful Savior!" and then you bend down again and say again, "Are you home?" You jump up again and say with happy energy "We can serve God without fear!" (Do this ten times each morning and you'll get your circulation moving and create a good attitude to move into the day! ☺).

Music Intro Like the Jumping John, we can be thankful and excited because God sent his Son Jesus to be our powerful Savior, and because Jesus came to a manger on this earth to save our life, to save us from sin, we can serve him without fear, and with all our energy and with a lot of joy -- because hope was born on the night Jesus came to live among us. Charles is going to sing...

Special Music Charles Kirkpatrick - 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

Refrain

Glory to God in the highest
 Peace on Earth, good will to all men
 Let all of the world sing the chorus of joy
 Because hope was born this night

I can hear the Christmas bells ring
 As softly as 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

Refrain

Gloria, Gloria, Gloria, Gloria, Oh Gloria
 (Repeat)

Refrain 2x

I know hope was born this night
 Because Christ was born this night

Pastor's Prayer

Let's pray. And so, our heavenly Father, we thank you for the hope that we find in the infant Jesus, the son of Mary, but also the Son of you, our God. He is your greatest gift to humankind. You fulfill your promises in astounding ways! When people see and experience Christmas celebrations, we pray they will ponder the significance of Jesus. Even though you sent him as a child among us, he has always been the Lord of all the world. In our hearts, we offer Jesus our devotion, our affection, and our soul, and we do so joyously; for he has come to us as your lovely, pure gracious gift to humankind. Empower us through your gifts to us to serve as faithful witnesses of your love through our words and actions -- to offer the light of Christ to people who are longing for your grace. It is in his name that

we offer our praises for the work that you are doing and are about to do in our lives and in our world. Specifically, this week we ask that you continue to be at prayer for those who are facing evictions, layoffs, illness ,and any other dire circumstances due to this pandemic. To give praise for the vaccines that are on their way and that they are effective. And Jan Martin has also requested prayers for her son's 11 year old daughter Kay Lynn who tested positive for the virus. For her son Raymond's safety as he travels to TN for his birthday, for his mother-in-law Pam who has stage 4 cancer and home from the hospital, and Pam's mother Doris who fell and is in the hospital. Jan would also like us to pray for a family friend McKensey, a 30 year old with heart problems, and friend Michael Glass who had an accident and his wife who is ill in the hospital. And all others we have mentioned previously, or not at all, but are still in need of prayer, which we lift in this next moment of silence... **SILENCE** Lord, you are the King of kings and the Lord of lords. You rule with wisdom and compassion. We are awed that you invite us to be counted among your children. Our times and lives are in your loving hands. We dedicate ourselves to following Jesus who gave himself for us, and who taught us to pray. **Lord's Prayer**

Bible Reading

As we prepare for the day we celebrate Christ's birth, we begin to hear – in Luke 1:35 and following -- glimpses of how special this family is...

The angel answered [Mary], "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High God will overshadow you. So the baby born to you will be utterly holy and will be called the Son of God. Furthermore, six months ago your Aunt Elizabeth – who was said to be unable to conceive – became pregnant in her old age. For every promise from God shall surely come true."

Mary said, "I am the Lord's servant, and I am willing to do whatever he wants. May everything you said to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.

At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home to visit Elizabeth. At the sound of Mary's greeting, Elizabeth's baby leaped within her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. She gave a glad cry and exclaimed to Mary: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so honored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? The instant I heard your voice, the baby in me leaped for joy. You believed God would fulfill his promises, that is why he has given you this wonderful blessing." (Luke 1:35-45, (NIV & TLB blended))

Music # 384 (vv 1,4) Love Divine, All Loves Excelling**Message Our Hearts Become God's Manger (Home)**

I'm not sure why the previous song isn't in the "Christmas section" of the hymnal, it is clearly Christmas, and is most appropriate for this "Love Sunday"... The song asks God to fix within us a dwelling for God. I believe the writer's intent for "fix" was to secure and establish, but I think there could be a sense in which the other meanings of "fix" can come into play -- that our sinful nature puts us in a fix (a dilemma) and our lives are in need of fixing (repairing) so that God can live with and within us. We cannot do that on our own. The first verse concludes with the invitation for Christ to enter, and the final verse asks Christ to perform the work of improving and perfecting us from the inside out.

The fact that Jesus came to the world through a lowly manger shows that when Jesus knocks at the door of our heart and we allow him in, he will enter no matter how humble or proud or neglected or damaged is our spirit, and he begins the work of restoring us to what we can fully become as new creations in Christ.

Let's unwrap our final gift of the Coming Home series. [unwrap gift: snowy house] I'm reminded of the phrases "Home is where the heart is" and "Be it ever so humble, there is no place like home". Of course, not everyone thinks about "home" as humble, be it a house, place of faith, a state or a nation.



In the age of the powerful and widespread Egyptian Empire. Times were stable, prosperous, reliable, and safe -- for the Egyptians. But for others, even within the land, it was unpredictable, unmanageable, and an unimaginable mess. It was for those living in the dark, oppressive side of that world that God's message came most clearly -- to one common shepherd out in the wilderness.

I remember an evangelist preaching that if it were up to him; he would have recruited some great charismatic orator, a powerbroker, a mover and shaker who would come with choirs and crowds that would intimidate and overwhelm the pharaoh when asking for freedom.

Instead, God chose a person who practically needed someone to speak for him. At times, people perceived God accomplishing his will through powerful bursts of nature, through shock and awe, through people who were powerful, but it wasn't the norm.

Back up to the beginning of Egypt's story. Granted, Moses was raised in the palace -- but only because he was hidden away from the male infant executions

pharaoh had ordered, and pharaoh's daughter discovered baby Moses crying in a basket on the Nile River.

But he had grown and rejected that life in favor of his own people. In fact, pharaoh had already ordered his execution. His own people had also rejected him. He ends up a married shepherd in Midian where he laments, "I am a foreigner in a foreign land." This was no mover and shaker.

Like that evangelist, we often think it is more natural and logical for God to choose to speak in majestic, public, peals of powerful thunder rather than in a still, small, private voice, and through powerful movers and shakers rather than humble shepherds. This thought inspired someone to ask a rabbi, "Why did God speak to Moses from a thorn bush?" The rabbi replied, "To teach you that there is no place on earth where God's glory is not, not even in a humble thorn bush."

When God called Moses through a burning bush that did not burn up, the display caught Moses' attention, but it wasn't overpowering, it was an intriguing curiosity. It didn't scare him away but drew him in close where God could talk to him.

Flash forward. While we have romanticized and made spectacular the Christmas story, and it certainly is on the divine and spiritual level. But from a strictly human perspective, it was the age of the powerful and widespread Roman Empire. Times were stable, prosperous, reliable, and safe -- for those loyal to Rome. But for others, even within the land, it was unpredictable, unmanageable, and an unimaginable mess. It was for those in the dark, oppressive side of that world that God's message came most clearly.

The Son of God willingly left the palatial riches of heaven to be born a baby boy to a young, yet to be married, poor female and her intended, whom the government had forced to be on the road for a census, into a town where they found no room.

Jesus was born in a stable, probably a cave -- a small, cramped, congested, messy, smelly place. Later, he had to flee -- to Egypt of all places -- to avoid the male infant executions that were ordered by Rome. He grew and returned to be rejected by his own people, and laments, "O... Jerusalem... so many times I have longed to gather your wayward children together around me, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings—but you were too stubborn to let me. And now it is too late..." (Luke 13:34-35a). (I am a foreigner in a foreign land).

By human standards and expectations, we'd think the Creator of the Universe should have sent his Son to be born as a Roman noble, a power broker, where his influence would have a natural and immediate impact. Who wouldn't obey a Roman ruler with all power of the mightiest military of the world behind him?

With that in mind, we ask the question, Why did God speak to us through paupers staying in a stranger's manger -- amid dusty animals, mucky straw, sneaking vermin, spilled grain, and all the usual smells and sounds and sights found in a cave stable.

This whole thing was out-of-place, out-of-sync, chaotic, congested, convoluted -- what a mess. But this is the mess in the "mess-age" of Christmas: There is no place in our world or in our lives that is too poor, too remote, too outcast, too "other", too messy, that God cannot speak to us. He did not come to scare us but to draw us toward him. Indeed, it is especially in the midst of these troubling times that God's message can ring most clearly -- to those who can open their hearts to it.

Author and professor Roger Rosenblatt wrote, "I have never believed that life is revealed in its cataclysmic moments, its 'wake-up calls,' but rather in repose, when people go about the quieter business of being who they are. Journalists tend to turn to where the *noise* is. [We need to remember] to look where the noise is not.

Back then, the movers and the shakers of the Roman world, if they had not been tipped off about signs and rumors of a revolutionary king -- would have paid no attention to a poor unmarried couple having a baby in a "barn". Babies are born all the time. It seemingly has no impact.

Yet anyone who has been a parent, grandparent, or sibling knows that with every new birth into your own family or perhaps even extended family, it is not "no news", it is dramatically life changing -- every time. Family dynamics will never be the same. Look at Mary. Her whole life is turned upside down. The life she dreamed of is gone. She's an unmarried teenager. She didn't get pregnant the normal way. She must have been numb with shock.

Back up in this story. We find Mary and Elizabeth, one was thought too pure to have a baby, the other too old. Both are pregnant. In a scary present and an unknown future, they came together -- and they find the *stable*-ness of their lives. It wasn't in the power of their personalities or the convenience of their circumstances. As they delved deep into their souls, they found a courage that comes from a place beyond themselves, beyond their own limitations and fears. They reached for and found God's presence and promises in the thick of it all.

We heard one of the reassuring signs: Mary greets Elizabeth, John the baptizer kicks and leaps for joy inside Elizabeth, who then assures Mary that she is blessed for believing the Lord would fulfill his promises in and through her.

For this particular birth -- seemingly insignificant to the rest of the world at the time, would not only change family dynamics for Joseph and Mary and Zechariah

and Elizabeth, it would turn the whole world upside down, for through the birth of Jesus, God made the world his home and has initiated its restoration, redeeming it through love by grace.

Bolstered by the collaborating witness in Elizabeth's prophetic words, (not only saying Mary was also uniquely pregnant, but that Mary was the mother of her Lord); Mary found courage that came from her faith and trust in God. She is inspired to offer up a beautiful prayer of praise which amplifies what we have been talking about: Our anticipation of God's very public powerful and splashy display versus God's consistent strategy of coming quietly and gently to the humble. Some of Mary's words:

'My soul declares that the Lord is great, my spirit exults in my saviour, my God. He saw his servant-girl in her humility; from now, I'll be blessed by all peoples to come. The Powerful One, whose name is Holy, has done great things for me... His mercy extends from father to son, from mother to daughter for those who fear him. ⁵¹ Powerful things he has done...: he routed the arrogant through their own cunning. Down from their thrones he hurled the rulers, up from the earth he raised the humble. The hungry he filled with the fat of the land, but the rich he sent off with nothing to eat. He has rescued his servant..., because he remembered his mercy... just as he said to our long-ago ancestors...' (From Luke 1:46-55 (NTE))

If our life feels fragile, and perhaps not very stable, if our situation is "humbling", if our schedule seems "too busy", if our circuitry is hovering near overload, if someone is "standing on our last nerve", don't think God cannot come close. If we live in an unpredictable, unmanageable, and unimaginable, dark oppressive side of our world, then we could be on the very verge of experiencing a genuine burning bush, (metaphorically speaking), a "stable time" in our life. Open up to it, exalt in it, and be willing to let the Spirit of God "do great things for you."

Can we be as courageous as Mary? In the midst of dire circumstances, Mary was willing to receive Christ, physically, into her womb. Are we willing to receive Christ into our hearts? Can her song be our song? Can we refuse to give in to the fears that the world constantly pushes at us? Can we reject the notion that everything is spinning out of control, and embrace that the world is turning just as God intends it to turn? Mary courageously sees God's transformation of the world in Jesus' coming birth, and in all those who have followed Christ since.

And the reason is because the birth of Christ is not just some unknown birth long ago and far away that has no impact. For those who believe in him; we are invited, accepted, and adopted into God's personal family, and as I said, whenever someone is born anew into a family, the dynamics of living changes forever.

God is still coming to his world -- most often in the unexpected, unknown, and often stormy places of life, making his home in the heart of those whose lives are unpredictable, unmanageable, and an unimaginable mess. If we want to experience him, we will respond as the shepherds and sages and women did so long ago. Seek and pursue him in those unusual, unexpected places (including in the depths of our souls) and not just to see and experience him, but in devotion, open our hearts to become the manger, the home, where Christ is welcomed. Not only to work in us and on us, but through us -- so that others -- whether they are living on the stable side of things, or in times of uncertainty, may also find God's hope, peace, joy, and love -- because the manger isn't just for you and yours and me and mine. For God so loved the *whole* world, that he gave His Son -- and the Son desires no one to perish, but everyone to join his heavenly family.

Prayer Let's pray. Lord, sometimes it is difficult for us to imagine that there is no time, no place, no person, no event that is so earthly that you would not want to go there, working your grace. We sometimes arrogantly believe some people and some things are beyond your desire to reach. But nothing and no one has plummeted to the depths that can escape your efforts to offer yourself as a master builder.

There are so many moments where earth is crammed with heaven, Bethlehem moments where something divine is birthed through very commonplace human events. Awaken our hearts to notice the meek and unassuming way that you characteristically come to make this world your home, and help us to rejoice in the news of Christ's birth in the manger, and his birth in the hearts of men and women everywhere, including us -- again -- today. Amen.

Closing Music # 2100 (vv 1,2) *Thou Didst Leave Thy Throne*

Closing Blessing

Know without a doubt that the great mystery of our faith is confirmed by the Spirit, seen by angels, and announced to the nations, believed in throughout the world: that Jesus Christ is the Son of God who makes his home around - with - and in -- all who will welcome him.