

**The Longest Night**  
**7 p.m., Tuesday, December 21, 2021**

**Welcome, All, In the Name of Jesus Christ our Lord!**

**WELCOME**

Good evening. Welcome to Ascension Lutheran Church, and this service of healing and hope. Tonight is the night of the winter solstice, the longest night of the year. And for those who suffer with loss, grief, and despair, the darkness of night can be overwhelming. Tonight we shall acknowledge our hurts, pains, and sufferings. In a few more nights, we shall celebrate and worship the coming of the Child of Bethlehem on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. There will be fun and excitement and joy but we may not quite feel up to all that. And that's okay. For the Babe of Bethlehem is no ordinary baby, but God Incarnate. The God of all mercy. Tonight we come before this God made flesh, and offer our prayers of hurt and isolation, of confusion and grief, of anger and despair. And we ask God to continue the process of healing the hole in our heart created by our loss. And we ask God to empower us for the living of these difficult days and long, long nights. Heal us O God, we shall pray, and give us the strength to hear and feel the message of hope that comes in the manger.

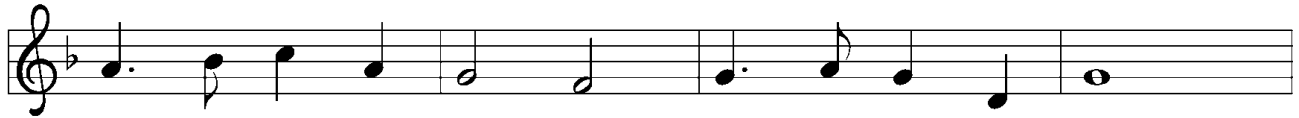
**OPENING POEM**

As we gather our hearts in this space, I invite you to close your eyes and take a deep breath. Inhale what is good. Exhale what is hurting. As we settle into this service of prayer and reflection together, we begin with a poem written by The Rev. Sarah Are Speed. Listen now to this honest reflection, and allow this honesty to mark this space as one set apart.

We are raw nerves, exposed and tender.  
We are weary bones, hunched and fragile.  
We are silent prayers, lips saying your name.  
We are wedding rings we can't take off, even though time has passed.  
We are the same pew, but it feels different now.  
We are a brave face when we have to be strong.  
We are tears in the shower when grief roars its head.  
We are setting the table, but there are empty seats.  
We are stuck in the swell, caught in the storm.  
We are moving on, caught in our guilt.  
We are okay some days, but some days we're not.  
We are familiar with the night, we know it by name.  
We are night-walkers, dream-makers, star-chasers.  
We are close to home, but home has changed.  
We are close to the surface, but the waters are rising.  
We are all of this, plus everything else, and we are here.  
We are here.  
Grief is here.  
God is here.  
The night is here.  
And all of this is true, and we are not alone.  
Take my hand.  
Take these words.  
Let them be your life raft.  
Let this be the longest night, and let it be whatever you need it to be.  
We are here.  
Grief is here.  
God is here.  
Take what you need.  
Amen.

## OPENING HYMN

## "In the Bleak Midwinter"



1 In the bleak mid - win - ter, frost - y wind made moan,  
2 Heav - en can - not hold him, nor . . . . earth sus - tain;  
3 What . . . can I give him, poor . . . . as I am?



earth stood hard as i - ron, wa - ter like a stone;  
heav'n and earth shall flee a - way when he comes to reign;  
If I were a shep - herd I would bring a lamb;



snow had fall - en, snow on snow, snow on snow,  
in the bleak mid - win - ter a sta - ble place suf - ficed  
if I were a wise . . . man I would do my part;



in the bleak mid - win - ter, long a - go.  
the Lord . . . God al - might - y, Je - sus Christ.  
yet what I can I give him— give my heart.

Text: Christina Georgina Rossetti, 1830–1894  
Music: CRANHAM, Gustav Holst, 1874–1934

## PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

God, we do not have night vision.

The sun has set on the world as we know it  
and we do not have night vision.

So today we come to your Word

hoping that this ancient truth found in scripture  
will feel like a hand in the dark.

Guide our feet.  
Move us through this wilderness season.  
Tilt our heads upward to see the stars,  
and let your Word be a blanket in the cold,  
a light on the horizon,  
and a friend to walk alongside.

We do not have night vision,  
but we know we have you.  
Move through us.  
Move among us  
and move through us.  
Gratefully we pray,  
**[C] Amen.**

## **SCRIPTURE READINGS**

### **Psalm 121**

*This is a psalm of comfort and hope, reminding us that our help comes from God, and that we never journey alone.*

- <sup>1</sup> I lift up my eyes to the hills — from where will my help come?
- <sup>2</sup> My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth.
- <sup>3</sup> He will not let your foot be moved;  
    he who keeps you will not slumber.
- <sup>4</sup> He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.
- <sup>5</sup> The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade at your right hand.
- <sup>6</sup> The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night.
- <sup>7</sup> The LORD will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life.
- <sup>8</sup> The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in  
    from this time on and forevermore.

*Silence for Reflection*

### **Lamentations 3:21-24**

*This passage is a prayer of honesty, both acknowledging individual pain while also declaring the choice to hope through tear-filled eyes.*

- <sup>21</sup> But this I call to mind,  
and therefore I have hope:  
<sup>22</sup> The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases,<sup>[a]</sup>  
his mercies never come to an end;  
<sup>23</sup> they are new every morning;  
great is your faithfulness.  
<sup>24</sup> “The LORD is my portion,” says my soul,  
“therefore I will hope in him.”

*Silence for Reflection*

### **John 14:27-28**

*This passage is a moving reminder from Jesus that there are different seasons of life and faith, but that God is always returning to us.*

- <sup>27</sup> Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. <sup>28</sup> You heard me say to you, ‘I am going away, and I am coming to you.’ If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I.

*Silence for Reflection*

### **PRAYER OF THE PEOPLE**

God who always welcomes us home —  
tonight is a long night.

We gather together heavy with prayer concerns.

They tumble out of our mouths, they saturate every word we sing, they lay over us like a quilt, weighing on our spirits.

We are a million combinations of weary and sad,  
lonely and grieving, angry and hurt.

It is obvious that we need you, so together we sing...

***Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel  
shall come to you, O Israel.***

[L] God, we need you in the messy middles,  
in the unclear paths forward, the transition seasons, and the  
splinterings of what once was.

God, we need you in the grieving places,  
in the dining rooms with empty chairs, in the empty wombs, and in the  
dark of the tomb.

God, we need you in our failed dreams,  
in shame that rises quickly, in the unknown next steps, in the  
discernment that is always easier said than done.

And so we sing...

***Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel  
shall come to you, O Israel.***

*Add your prayers for our nation, the world, and/or your individual city.*

[L] O come, Emmanuel.  
Flood our grieving hearts.  
Pour out your Spirit on this world.  
Where there is suffering, loneliness, poverty, abuse, addiction,  
depression—  
be there.  
Be all there.  
Wrap your arms around those hurting places, and carry us to your  
promised day. Until then, we will continue to sing...

***Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel  
shall come to you, O Israel.***

[L] Now using the words your son taught us to pray, we say together:

**[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.**

### **INDIVIDUAL PRAYER**

[L] Having prayed together as a community, we now shift our attention to the individual prayers that weigh on our hearts.

#### *Prayer Prompts*

- *Write five words that describe how you're feeling in this moment.*
- *Write down the names of people you carry in your heart today.*
- *Write down one area of your own life where you could use God's help, comfort, or guidance.*
- *Write down a prayer for your faith journey.*
- *Write down a prayer concern you have for our world.*
- *Take a minute to write any lingering prayers you have at this moment.*

**MUSIC ..... "The Hurting Times"**

### **CANDLE LIGHTING**

*In this time of prayer, you are invited to think of a person, incident, experience, or need in your life that you wish to lift up to God. Come to one of the two prayer stations, to light a candle and offer your prayer.*

*Pastor Christina is available as a prayer partner for those who so desire.  
Anointing with healing oil is offered.*

**MUSIC ..... “Close to Home”**

**SENDING**

*As you return to your seat, take a few moments to look around the room at each person present. Look into your neighbor’s eyes, acknowledging that we can never fully know what it is that each of us carry. Scan the room and find another person to look eyes with, gazing upon them with care and empathy. For a moment, hold them in your heart. Now speak together this litany.*

Repeat after me...

[L] We are here.

**[C] We are here.**

[L] I see you and your pain.

**[C] I see you and your pain.**

[L] I see you and your hope.

**[C] I see you and your hope.**

[L] You are my neighbor.

**[C] You are my neighbor.**

[L] We belong to one another.

**[C] We belong to one another.**

[L] We are not in this alone.

**[C] We are not in this alone.**

[L] Thanks be to God for the love that binds us.

**[C] Thanks be to God for the love that binds us.**



[L] Amen.

## **BENEDICTION**

[L] As you leave *this* service, *your* service begins:

Comfort the homesick.

Open your doors to others.

Seek sanctuary.

Be brave enough to go home by another way.

And remember that here in God's house,

all are welcomed— so come back soon.

In the name of our Foundation— God, Spirit, and Son— go in peace.

Dawn is coming.

Amen.

## **POSTLUDE**

*You are welcome to remain for silent prayer (worship leaders will be available if you need to speak with one of them) or you may depart in silence.*

Liturgy

Prayers and words for worship by Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed | A Sanctified Art LLC | sanctifiedart.org.

Music Attributions

"In the Bleak Midwinter" Words: Christina Georgina Rossetti, Tune: CRANHAM, c. 1872, Public Domain

"O Come, O Come, Emmanuel"

Words: John Mason Neale, Tune: VENI EMMANUEL, 1851, Public Domain.

"The Hurting Times." Written by Becky Bliss, performed by Barnaby Bright, produced by Nathan Bliss, Gus Berry, & Hugo Dunn-Vereker. 2020. [youtube.com/watch?v=Eb7aUpuz88U](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Eb7aUpuz88U).

**Participating Today**

Ministers:

The Rev. Christina Auch, Pastor, Ascension Lutheran Church

*Please join us for Candlelight Holy Communion  
on Christmas Eve, Friday, December 24, 2021 at 7 p.m.*

*Special music will begin at 6:30 p.m.*



## **Ascension Lutheran Church**

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**Steve White and Cathy Hubbard, Organists**

**Rose Cook, Financial Secretary**

**Ludy Wilkie, Council President .....704-487-4269**