

**FIRST SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS  
DECEMBER 31, 2023**



**Simeon blessing Baby Jesus**

**St. John United Church of Christ**

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**Rev. Rosemary Captain**

*Organist – Sharon Banjavcic*

*Ushers –*

*Liturgy – Rev. Dr. Cheryl A. Lindsay*

(NCH) New Century Hymnal - CCLI LICENSE #11164431

\*Please stand if comfortably able.

Respond with words in bold print.

**ANNOUNCEMENTS:**

**PRELUDE: “Yuletide Greetings” Chester Nordman**

**PENNIES FOR MISSION: UCC Christmas Fund**

**\*RESPONSIVE CALL TO WORSHIP:**

One: Let all of creation praise the name of the Holy One!

**Many: The rhythms of life praise the Everlasting God through the markings of time.**

One: Let all of creation praise the name of the Holy One!

**Many: The flowers, land, and trees praise the Divine Gardener through rest and renewal.**

One: Let all of creation praise the name of the Holy One!

**Many: Living creatures praise the Spirit of God through our breathing, living and being. Praise God!**

**\*INVOCATION:** Holy Love, You make us a community. You gather us as your offspring and knit us together with grace and mercy. In your presence, there is fullness of love, joy, hope, and peace. Thank you for being among us this day and with us in every moment of our being. Receive our praise, dwell in our midst, and create in us a heart that yearns for you and your kingdom. In the name of Emmanuel, we pray. Amen.

**\*CALL TO CONFESSION:**

Come, all who are slaves of their own passions. Approach God, all who are bound by habits that destroy. In God's temple, there are many surprises. In God's presence, dreams are fulfilled. By God's power, lives are transformed.

**\*UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION:**

**Eternal God, the dawn of a new year prompts us to reflect on our past and hope for our future. Help us live every day seeking your way and moving on your path. Help us commit to love and resolve to extend the grace and mercy we need from you and our neighbor. Make us new. Amen.**

**\*ASSURANCE OF PARDON:** The God who counts our days knows us intimately, loves us abundantly, and abides with us relentlessly. Receive the brand new mercies of this day. Hold the love of God closely, firmly, and freely. Transformation, grace, and new life is assured this day.

**\*GLORIA: Glory to the Creator, and the Christ and the Spirit so near. As it was from the start so it shall be forever, One God always here. (repeat two more times.) (end) One God always here. One God always here.**

**SCRIPTURE LESSONS: Isaiah 61:10-62:3**

<sup>10</sup> I surely rejoice in the LORD;  
my heart is joyful because of my God,  
because he has clothed me with clothes of victory,  
wrapped me in a robe of righteousness  
like a bridegroom in a priestly crown,  
and like a bride adorned in jewelry.

<sup>11</sup> As the earth puts out its growth,  
and as a garden grows its seeds,  
so the LORD God will grow righteousness and praise  
before all the nations.

**Jerusalem redeemed**

**62** For Zion's sake I won't keep silent,  
and for Jerusalem's sake I won't sit still  
until her righteousness shines out like a light,  
and her salvation blazes like a torch.

<sup>2</sup> Nations will see your righteousness,  
all kings your glory.

You will be called by a new name,  
which the LORD's own mouth will determine.

<sup>3</sup> You will be a splendid garland in the LORD's hand,  
a royal turban in the palm of God's hand.

**EPISTLE LESSON: Galatians 4:4-7**

<sup>4</sup> But when the fulfillment of the time came, God sent his Son, born through a woman, and born under the Law. <sup>5</sup> This was so he could redeem those under the Law

so that we could be adopted. <sup>6</sup> Because you are sons and daughters, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba, Father!” <sup>7</sup> Therefore, you are no longer a slave but a son or daughter, and if you are his child, then you are also an heir through God.

**\*GOSPEL LESSON: Luke 2:22-40**

<sup>22</sup> When the time came for their ritual cleansing, in accordance with the Law from Moses, they brought Jesus up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord. (<sup>23</sup> It’s written in the Law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male will be dedicated to the Lord.”) <sup>24</sup> They offered a sacrifice in keeping with what’s stated in the Law of the Lord, *A pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.*

**Simeon’s response to Jesus**

<sup>25</sup> A man named Simeon was in Jerusalem. He was righteous and devout. He eagerly anticipated the restoration of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. <sup>26</sup> The Holy Spirit revealed to him that he wouldn’t die before he had seen the Lord’s Christ. <sup>27</sup> Led by the Spirit, he went into the temple area. Meanwhile, Jesus’ parents brought the child to the temple so that they could do what was customary under the Law. <sup>28</sup> Simeon took Jesus in his arms and praised God. He said,

<sup>29</sup> “Now, master, let your servant go in peace according to your word,

<sup>30</sup> because my eyes have seen your salvation.

<sup>31</sup> You prepared this salvation in the presence of all peoples.

<sup>32</sup> It’s a light for revelation to the Gentiles and a glory for your people Israel.”

<sup>33</sup> His father and mother were amazed by what was said about him. <sup>34</sup> Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, “This boy is assigned to be the cause of the falling and rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that generates opposition <sup>35</sup> so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your innermost being too.”

**Anna’s response to Jesus**

<sup>36</sup> There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, who belonged to the tribe of Asher. She was very old. After she married, she lived with her husband for seven years. <sup>37</sup> She was now an 84-year-old widow. She never left the temple area but worshipped God with fasting and prayer night and day. <sup>38</sup> She approached at that very moment and began to praise God and to speak about Jesus to everyone who was looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

**Jesus as a child in Nazareth**

<sup>39</sup> When Mary and Joseph had completed everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to their hometown, Nazareth in Galilee. <sup>40</sup> The child grew up and became strong. He was filled with wisdom, and God's favor was on him.

These are the ancient words revealed to s anew.

**Thanks be to God.**

**MESSAGE: "Christmas Light"**

Christmas is a time for traditions; church traditions, secular traditions, and family traditions. Things like when do you open your gifts, Christmas Eve or Christmas Day? Do you go caroling with some organization or church community? Do you eat turkey or ham at your Christmas Feast and is your feast on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day or perhaps on a different day.

For many years my family celebrated Christmas together on December 15 or whatever weekend was the closest to December 15 because that was my husband's birthday. Plus two weeks before Christmas was a cheaper time to fly or stay at a hotel and the shopping malls were not as crowded. There were less activities going on so we could spend more time together at home. Another reason we celebrated on a different date was because the kids knew their mother worked on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day; she was the church organist.

As a child one of my favorite traditions was driving around to look at the lights some people put up in their yards. I bet your family still enjoys doing that. Why do people go to all that time and expense to have such elaborate yards? I guess they enjoy sharing something pretty and bright to their neighbors. More recently I had a neighbor that put up extravagant decorations plus they even had music and a movie going on in their yard. They asked for a donation to their favorite charity. So they did all that work to give back to others less fortunate than them. All those twinkling lights put the viewers in a holiday spirit. You couldn't help but smile when you drove by.

Is there another reason we enjoy lights at this time of year? Perhaps. There's a fascinating recurring theme woven throughout the Bible. It's the theme of light and darkness. We begin with darkness in only the second verse of the entire Bible. Genesis 1:2 says, "And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep."

And the first recorded words that God spoke in the Bible are found in Genesis 1:3, "And God said, let there be light: and there was light." And Genesis 1:4-5 continues the same theme when it measures the reaction of God and declares, "And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness. And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night."

From the very beginning of creation, light was important. In describing the coming of Jesus, the gospel writer John echoes that same theme from Genesis – but this time in the New Testament. John, chapter 1, says, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” (NRSV John 1:1-5)

Let’s think back to the birth story told in the Gospel of Luke that Sharon’s son read on Christmas Eve. How many times is light mentioned? When the angels visited the shepherds in the field, they brought light. “<sup>9</sup>The Lord’s angel stood before them, the Lord’s glory shone around them, and they were terrified.” And a verse later the angels told them, “<sup>12</sup>This is a sign for you: you will find a newborn baby wrapped snugly and lying in a manger.” <sup>13</sup>Suddenly a great assembly of the heavenly forces was with the angel praising God.” And who can forget the star that guided the three Magi to visit the baby?

However, there is light that isn’t physical. There’s the light that goes on in our heads when we learn something or finally understand something. We say the light bulb

went on. That’s the kind of light that Baby Jesus brought to the world and still shines for us today.

Jesus brought all of us out of the darkness and into the light of God. And THAT LIGHT of love, forgiveness, compassion, trust, and faith is brought to our hearts. We are different people if we see that light. And we can smile when we share that light with others.

Perhaps now you will think about the Light of Jesus whenever you see bright lights on a Christmas tree or in a candle or in someone’s yard. HE IS THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD FOR THE WORLD. Amen.

**PASTORAL PRAYER:** God of joy and mercy, we are grateful that your son was born to save us from our own sinful way of living. This is the season of love, peace, joy, and hope. And you have brought us all four, and we are thankful.

However, our job is to spread those four good words to everyone we know and all those we haven’t met yet. Jesus will teach us how to do that and the Holy Spirit will bring us the energy, the “how”, the “when”, the “where” to do just that. Jesus has already given us the “why.”

We ask the Holy Spirit to be with us as we pray for all people in all nations to have peace in their lives instead of fear and threats. Finding hope in bad situations is never easy, but the Holy Spirit will show us how.

We pray for all those who are sick, discouraged, grieving, and lost. No matter the situation God surrounds them with love and compassion, and will help them find hope.

We pray for all the workers who bring us comfort, such as doctors, nurses, medical professionals, those who grow, harvest, prepare, and serve us with nutritious food. We pray for all the civil servants who try to keep us safe, like police officers, firefighters, and EMT's. Let them know how much we appreciate them.

For all that you have done for us, gracious God, with give you all the praise and thanksgiving. Hear us as we pray together the prayer your Son taught us. . .

**THE LORD'S PRAYER: Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.**

**PRAYER RESPONSE: Third verse of "Away in a Manger"**  
**Be near me, Lord Jesus, I ask you to stay**  
**close by me forever, and love me, I pray.**  
**Bless all the dear children in your tender care.**  
**And fit us for heaven, to live with you there.**

**INVITATION TO GENEROSITY:** Let us put our trust in the Living God, who is faithful. Let us praise God for the abundance of creation in the sharing of our gifts of time, talent, and treasure.

**\*DOXOLOGY:**

**Praise God from whom all blessings flow;**  
**Praise God, all creatures here below;**  
**Praise God above you heavenly host;**  
**Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.**

**\*UNISON PRAYER OF DEDICATION:**

**Generous Love, bless these offerings. Stir up the gifts within for your glory, show your provision through the sharing of our resources, and empower us to steward our days as precious and holy. Amen.**

**\*RESPONSIVE BENEDICTION:**

Praising God is not enough.

**And so we will go to offer practical help to our sisters and brothers.**

Joyful noises do not feed those around us.

**And so we will go with Jesus to the food pantries and shelters, to care for those forgotten by our society.**

Songs of thanksgiving do not replace service.

**And so we will go to share the peace of the Spirit with a broken, yet hopeful world.**