

God of the Dark and the Light

Christmas 2022 Worship Series

The Christmas season is full of all sorts of opportunities for worship. The thinking behind this series is to provide a thread that could run through some of the special services of this time of year. Some of the services included here have their own history or structure. We don't want to undo those traditions or force interpretations that are inappropriate to the meaning of the day. At the same time, we want to encourage communities of faith to embrace some of these traditions, especially if they haven't been a part of your local practice. Los Posadas comes to us from the Hispanic tradition, and Watchnight is significant in the African American tradition. By leaning into these observances, you are expressing solidarity with the wonderful diversity of the body of Christ.

While each of these services might stand on its own and provide worshipers with a unique experience of the meaning of the Christmas season, we believe there can also be a thread that connects them together. "God of the Dark and the Light" is our way of acknowledging God's presence in every human experience and emotion. That seems like a no-brainer, yet for many people, darkness speaks of the absence of God. We often see light as equivalent to God's presence, God's grace and glory, and dark as evidence of sin or abandonment. There are, of course, biblical precedents for this dualistic thinking, but we must be wary of what applications might be made. All sorts of implications of this thinking can lead us astray. We talk of dark moods and dark thoughts. Some might conclude, therefore, that light is better than dark, which could mean, for example, that light-skinned people are good and darker-skinned people are bad. This is just the most egregious example of how this dualism could influence people's thinking. We cannot recommend more highly the wonderful work of Barbara Brown Taylor in her book ***Learning to Walk in the Dark*** (Harper Collins, 2015) as a counter to the traditional dualism.

What the Christmas season tells us is that God does some of God's best work in the dark. We could even argue that in terms of faith, walking in the darkness requires a more complete trust in the guidance of the Spirit, as we can no longer lean on our own resources as easily. So, whether we are walking with the holy

family looking for a place to rest and give birth or standing on the brink of a new year full of both danger and promise and over which we have little control, we are called to embrace the God who inhabits the dark just as potently as the God inhabits the light.

Los Posadas

Beginning December 16 through December 24

[Psalm 80](#), [Malachi 3:1-6a](#), [Mark 1:1-8](#)

NOTE: Los Posadas begins on December 16 and ends on Christmas Eve, December 24. For the purposes of this worship series, we have set it on December 19.

Los Posadas is not really a preaching service, so there aren't any preaching notes this time. What we provide in this space is the encouragement to embrace this gift that comes from the Hispanic tradition. This too might be an opportunity for a cross-cultural partnership. Is there a church in your area with a significant Hispanic constituency that might provide an opportunity to share in an experience of Los Posadas? Or if you are a congregation used to this observance, whom could you invite to work with you this year? How could this event turn into something that creates an appreciation for a new culture or new expression of faith?

At the same time, this shared experience or embrace of a new cultural appreciation could be an opportunity for a more contemporary approach to this ancient story. Los Posadas is a reenactment of the holy family searching for shelter. There might be those in your midst for whom immigration is a vital issue. Just as Mary and Joseph struggled to find a place of shelter, so many who are refugees today also struggle. If someone has a contact with Exodus International or other refugee organizations, this could become part of the environment for this service.

Los Posadas can be a multiple-night experience or a single service. It can be done outside in the neighborhood or in a constructed location reproducing the experience of Bethlehem in symbolic ways. Here are some links that can provide further ideas about enacting this service.

“Los Posadas Service of Shelter for the Holy Family,”

<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/book-of-worship/las-posadas-service-of-shelter-for-the-holy-family>

“Service of Los Posadas for the Holy Family,”

<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/service-of-las-posadas-shelter-for-the-holy-family>

For this Christmas season series, emphasize the presence of God, even in this stressful reenactment of searching for shelter. God is present in the dark of this night, even when we feel alone and uncertain. The liturgy of Los Posadas speaks of this presence, of the God of the dark.

Blue Christmas

On or around December 21

[Psalm 22, 23](#), [Isaiah 40](#), [Luke 2:1-7](#)

PLANNING NOTES

NOTE: This service occurs on or around December 21.

The Christmas season is often presented as unending joy and peaceful family celebration from beginning to end. There isn't much room for grief, for a sense of loneliness, or for any other emotion considered to be negative. Except, emotions aren't negative or positive; they just are. Here space is created to allow participants to feel what they feel and to be accepted for that. More than accepted, they can find that God meets them where they are; Emmanuel enters in to bless us as where we are.

An important part of “Blue Christmas” or “The Longest Night” service is an opportunity to grieve and to remember those who are no longer present in this season of family and relationship. Sometimes this remembrance is done by lighting candles, writing notes, or simply sharing names – speaking those names aloud as if the loved ones were here with us. Because, of course, they are, even though out of reach.

Of course, our worship is always directed toward the Christ who comes. And this Christ meets us in joy and in pain, in certainty and in doubt. Let this service be space for all and a comfort and hope to any. You may need to adapt and add to in order to fit into your context and meet the needs of your community. Here are some links for suggested resources and outlines for the service.

“Blue Christmas: A Service of Reflection for the Longest Night,”
<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/blue-christmas-a-service-of-reflection-for-the-longest-night>

“Notes and Commentary on the Cathedral Church of Saint Andrew Blue Christmas Liturgy,” <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/notes-and-commentary-on-the-cathedral-church-of-saint-andrew-cosa-blue-chri>

PREACHING NOTES

This may not be a night for preaching. Rather, the acts of remembrance and the scriptural and liturgical acknowledgement of acceptance, even in the midst of brokenness might be the appropriate proclamation of grace that is needed here. Maybe space for silence or contemplative music could round out the service in significant ways. This is not to say that preaching is inappropriate for this service. It could be a fruitful way to bring a word of affirmation and acceptance during a difficult time for many attendees.

There are also many scripture texts that could be used in this service; check the planning notes for some suggestions. Words of comfort and assurance can be found in many places in both the Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament.

The twenty-third psalm has been a beacon of the comforting grace of God for many. The six verses of the twenty-third psalm are probably among the most

familiar, if not the most familiar, in the whole Bible. Even people who don't claim faith seem to know these words. Even more, we all seem to take comfort in them somehow. You think you know them, and maybe you do. But it just might be time to take another look. Just in case there are surprises in store.

Verse one: *The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.* Some translators render this as "I lack nothing" or "I shall not be in want." Wanting is not a bad thing in and of itself. This isn't a prohibition to aspire to higher things or to desire something new and different. This is an acknowledgment that claiming God as shepherd, letting God lean, letting God provide, changes your desires. To lack nothing is to have basic needs met and to be satisfied with that. Verse one is about contentment, about finding the source of fulfillment not in the stuff of the world, but from God, from that fundamental faith relationship that tells you that you are whole, you are complete, you are loved just as you are. What else could you want?

Verse two: *He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters.* Frankly, lying down anywhere sounds pretty good to me most days. We get so tired running here and there and then staying up late, worried about tasks left undone. Or responsibilities on the horizon that daunt you and wear you out even before you get to them. Lying down sounds nice. But in fact, this verse is about more than rest. It is about sustenance. Green pastures mean plenty to eat; still waters mean safe water to drink. God provides. But what is the "he makes me lie down" mean? Well, I'm not sure. But it sounds like God provides but invites us to discover. He doesn't bring it to our lips; he makes us lie down and get it ourselves. He leads us to the water, but the choice to drink is still ours. God provides an abundance; we scarcity, so we hoard and fence out and overprice. There is another way it could work, but God makes us lie down. God leads us there.

Verse three: *he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.* An odd shepherd, don't you think? Sure, making the sheep lie down and eat, leading them to water to drink, that sounds shepherd-y. But restoring souls? Leading in right paths, ok, but for his name's sake? Do sheep bleat out a salute to God when they walk the right paths? Do we, for that matter? Let's come back to that later. Let's restore a soul for now. What's interesting here is that "soul" could

also be translated as “life.” He gives me my life back. Or it could even be translated as “passion.” He makes life worth living. He makes me alive—not just living, but alive—if you know what I mean. Another book full of shepherd images is the Gospel of John. We can’t help but hear Jesus as the Good Shepherd when we Christians read Psalm 23. “I came that they might have life and have it abundantly.” That’s the Good Shepherd talking, in John, chapter ten. Wow, it’s like Jesus read the Psalms or something.

Verse four: *Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff-- they comfort me.* We are used to reading the Valley of the shadow of death. But the original just says the darkest valley. Or a valley of deep darkness. It represents the worst fears. For most, that is death, of course. But maybe your worst fear is something else. Abandonment. Shame. Rejection. Our fears are almost too numerous to mention. Now here is the sobering part, the Good Shepherd doesn’t keep us out of the valleys. I know that is our preference. But it isn’t the promise. God doesn’t say, “Follow me, and there will be no valleys.” That almost makes you wonder what the point is. I mean if God isn’t going to keep us out of the valleys, what good is following God? Why bother? Psalm 23, and almost all of the rest of scripture for that matter, says valleys are inevitable. Unavoidable. They are the result of living in the world. They are the consequence of being human. The question then is not how to avoid valleys, but do you want to walk them alone? The promise is that you will never walk those valleys alone. The shepherd is there, with power. The rod and the staff are the tools the shepherd uses to keep beasts at bay. Tools like love and grace and acceptance keep the beasts of self-doubt and rejection at bay. Tools like life eternal keep the beast called death at bay. You are with me. Evil cannot win.

Verse five: *You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.* The scene shifts, we leave the sheep field and now move to the big house, the banquet hall where we are the honored guest. I don’t know what the phrase “in the presence of my enemies” means to you. But I used to imagine it was a taunt. A table was set up in the battlefield, and we would thumb our noses at the bad guys while we dined on fancy food. But I don’t think that’s what it really means. I think it is simply an acknowledgment that we don’t have to wait until everything is fixed before we can celebrate being God’s family. We don’t have to have everything in proper order; we don’t have to

have everything figured out and all the answers and all the doubts erased. In the presence of these struggles, God invites us to the table. And then God blesses us. We are the anointed ones; we are the ones whose cups are never empty because God stands ready to fill us up again. So, drink deeply, live powerfully; God will fill us up again.

Verse six: *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.* Dwelling in God's house always sounded like a vacation home kind of image. But what it really means is that we will belong to God. We will be a part of the family. We will bear God's name. How long? The original Hebrew says, "for a length of days." Most translate that as forever. And that's not a bad translation. I came up with a clumsy one: "As long as I have days." As long as there is life to live, I will belong to God. And what does that mean, that belonging to God thing? Well, it means goodness and mercy shall follow me all those days. Really? Sometimes the opposite of mercy seems to follow us. Sometimes the absence of goodness seems to follow us. What I love in this psalm is that the word follow is a bad translation. Elsewhere in the Old Testament, it is translated as pursue. Chase after. Hunt down. It is, frankly, usually a negative image. Bad things are coming after you. But here, it is the most positive idea ever. God is relentless in bringing us goodness. God is tireless in offering us mercy. Even when we run away, run in the opposite direction, goodness will hunt us down. Just ask Jonah. Even when we give up in despair, mercy will find us at last. Just ask Peter. Goodness and mercy pursue us, even when our lives seem to be a denial of those very ideas. Just ask Paul, who came to write "In everything, God works for good for those who love him, who are called according to his purpose. He might have said, God pursues with good those who dwell in his house, those who are part of his family. How long? For a length of days. The long days that never end. The short days that are gone too soon. As long as we have days – and the promise is there is no end to the days we have.

Christmas Eve

December 24

[Isaiah 9:2-7, Psalm 96, Titus 2:11-14, Luke 2:1-20](#)

Colors: White, Gold

PLANNING NOTES

It's Christmas Eve! You have your traditions and practices. There are moments that must take place, or the community will rise up in indignation! Well, maybe not, but you know that there are expectations for this service. The worship team may have a desire to create something new, but it isn't necessary. Maybe there is space for a new element to be inserted here or there, but for the most part, people want the familiar; people are coming for the tradition. So, let there be tradition.

This year, of course, will be different from the norm because Christmas Eve falls on Saturday, and tomorrow is another time for worship. That will cast the whole event in a different light, no doubt. So, maybe this year is time for something new. Perhaps you could create a two-part worship event; one begins today, and the other continues tomorrow during worship time. Stay tuned for more. Maybe tonight you set the scene, tell of the birth, conclude the service with lighting your candles and singing "Silent Night," and then invite folks to leave quietly to let baby and mother sleep after such an exhausting ordeal before gathering again in the morning to sing "Joy to the World."

That doesn't mean that this service is incomplete (see notes on Christmas Day for more discussion), except that every worship experience is incomplete—or rather unfinished, open-ended. The benediction does not conclude worship until we gather again next time; it announces a transition from gathered worship to sent-out worship. Worship continues, always continues, as we live and work and love and serve each day. But the gospel is proclaimed, the word is given, Emmanuel, God is with us. Hallelujah amen.

Maybe we tell the story before, the announcement, the acceptance, the faithfulness and the journey, the struggle to find a place in a busy and distracted

world. We walk with Mary and Joseph as they seek to be faithful to God and be the space through which God comes. We listen to the angel song and gather with the shepherds who come from the fields to worship this child. We acknowledge the boundary-less nature of this proclamation, as the magi, foreigners from strange lands, also come and gift the child and worship him (or maybe we save that story for Epiphany). We sing the songs we love to sing, the ones that live deep in our hearts and souls and speak of this night and this event like nothing else.

In addition to caring for the hopes and expectations of the worshiping community, space must also be made for the occasional guest, the ones unfamiliar with your habits and practice and yet are responding to something deep within themselves to take the risk of showing up on this night. How will you welcome so as to include and to gather in rather than allow them to feel like outsiders? Who will be on alert to seek out and then partner with those who already feel out of place, so that they know they are family too? What instructions will you give during worship – even covering the things you are certain “everybody knows” – so that they can feel comfortable in their unknowing? And how will joy guide the order of worship, even if quiet and contemplative? Finally, how will you invite all comers to return the next day for the rest of the story?

PREACHING NOTES

I have a confession to make. It’s an odd little quirk even my family thinks is strange. I like to go shopping on the Saturday before Christmas. There, I said it. Laid it out right there in front of God and everybody. Like a twelve-step group or something. I’d say I was in recovery, but I’m not. I love it. Weird, I know. To say that you enjoy shopping on a day where you spend more time creeping through lanes and searching for parking spots than actually shopping; to claim some satisfaction when standing in long lines of people most of whom ran out of Christmas spirit a few stores ago, and the clean up on aisle nine is a meltdown of apocalyptic proportions; when the checkout clerks flinch when you clear your throat because they have been yelled at and complained to and snubbed in

disgust so many times, they are wary of the slightest sign of displeasure; who in their right mind would venture out on such an expedition?

Well, you got me there, that right mind thing. Never promised that. Still, I find some joy in the adventure. Call it a search for . . . well, a search. For the last-minute gifts that I'm always trying to secure; there is that, of course. But that's not it completely. There is something else that sends me out, even in a driving rain, to observe, to catch a glimpse. Something out there, bigger than just me and my wants and dreams, my hurts and my needs. Something beyond the pettiness of the politics of division. Something beyond the frustrations of family over-familiarity and frayed fellowship. And something beyond the ravages of consumerism and the confused notion that spiritual hungers can be satisfied with material goods.

That's what folks have told me over the years when I share this odd quirk with them. "It is materialism on overdrive, don't you know?" they tell me. "It is the worst of us in the season that should bring out the best in us. It is the opposite of what Christmas is all about." And they are right, these voices that I hear. I can't really argue with them. Yet . . . I go, and watch, and listen, and enter in the melee, the scrum, the . . . hopes and fears of all the years.

One of my favorite Christmas hymns is Rev. Philips Brooks' classic carol "O Little Town of Bethlehem." And while the scene I witness out and about just before Christmas is the exact opposite of the opening verse, it still seemed to speak to me about what I was wandering through.

O little town of Bethlehem / How still we see thee lie / Above thy deep and dreamless sleep / The silent stars go by / Yet in thy dark streets shineth / The everlasting Light / The hopes and fears of all the years / Are met in thee tonight.

The stillness was replaced by the flurry of activity both motorized and pedestrian. Instead of silent stars, there were the long lines of headlights and taillights piercing the gloom and gray, snow that was more drizzle than flakes, but the streets were "shineth-ing" something fierce. But was that everlasting light there? That's what I went to see; that's what I hope to find. Hopes and fears aplenty met in the latest gadget, in the thing of beauty that just might somehow convey to friend or family member something of what they mean to us.

Something to search for, something to name. That's what we hope for at Christmas, something we can name, something we can claim as real, as ours, something that puts all the pieces of our lives together. That's what we're looking for, even when we don't always know it. Even when it catches us by surprise and, frankly, scares us a little bit. Or a lot.

I guess what I'm saying is that I feel a little bit like the shepherds, keeping watch. I know, we are used to thinking that they were lazy, relaxing in the fields, dozing and drinking, time on their hands. We aren't the first to think that of them. That's why they were considered unclean. They were rough characters, kept from proper worship and proper interactions with the "good people." When Luke tells us that the people were "amazed at what the shepherds had told them," we rightly think about the wonder of the story itself. But the added ingredient to their amazement was the source of the story. It was the shepherds who told this story. The shepherds who, according to them anyway, got a voicemail from God. No, a direct message, better than a telegram, a visitation. A manifestation. An angel, a whole host of them, singing and dancing in the heavens, about a baby in a manger. Uh-huh. Just what did they keep in those leather flasks all night long anyway?

I'm sure that is what went through the minds of at least some of those hearing this tale. These are shepherds after all. But what if we've been a bit unfair to the shepherds? I read a commentator some years ago who said that we ought to see the shepherds as small business owners. They were hardly the only occupation who had to deal with ritual uncleanness; those rules were almost impossible to keep. Certainly, there were some in the business who were disreputable characters, but what business doesn't have its share of disrepute?

Maybe the issue was that the shepherds were busy. Luke doesn't say they were lazing about in the field. He says they were keeping watch. It was an important job. Someone even speculated once that perhaps this was not an ordinary, run of the mill flock of sheep. That maybe this was a group of the Temple lambs, ones raised spotless, unblemished, so that they would be worthy of that sacrifice. It seemed likely that in Luke's mind at least, this was symbolic, that the announcement of the child born to be the perfect sacrifice would be announced with full angelic accompaniment to those who were keeping watch over the

sacrificial lambs. Keep watch, says the child grown into a man, for you do not know when the day will come. Maybe he remembered the story as he said that. The story his mom told when he was little and would sit and soak up every word she said. The story about that night after a long trip to Bethlehem. The night when the stars seemed brighter than they do today. The night when a manger was the only refuge from the dark and the cold.

The night when they came, the shepherds, bringing with them the smells of the animals in their care. And how they told anyone and everyone who would listen what had happened to them. How they were keeping watch, doing their job, worrying about the predators and the hazards out there in the darkness. Worrying about how they were going to get the sick ones to eat and the angry ones to live in peace. Worrying about the fluctuations in the price of temple lambs, how they used to make a good living but now were just getting by. Worrying about how long it was going to be until their next day off, when they could go and see their families, and wash the smell of sheep off of them for a little while at least. When they could pretend to be just like everyone else.

And then the sky exploded. They thought their hearts would stop beating in their chests. They thought it was the end of the world. They thought they would never hold their little babies, or kiss their wives, or laugh with family ever again. They thought all their mistakes were coming back to trip them up, all their failings, all their doubts and brokenness, they thought what the villagers thought of them was going to be their legacy. They thought they were doomed to disappear into the dark like all the others they tell ghost stories about around the fire in the middle of the night, when they are trying to keep one another awake because the wolves are prowling.

As quickly as all these thoughts raced through their minds, came another, fast on its heels: Fear not. The voice spoke in their heads without having to go through their ears somehow. Good news. They heard or felt, or just somehow knew. To you is born a savior. "To you, us?" they thought. Surely not, maybe the "good" people in town. "Maybe the priests and leaders, the rich and powerful," they thought. A sign to you, a babe wrapped in cloth, lying in a manger. Now mangers, they understood. Mangers were their business, their language. Mangers and saviors seemed to make some odd kind of sense to shepherds.

Then the song began, and what a glorious one it was. It brought tears to the eyes of these rough and burly men used to the hazards of the wilderness. It made their hearts light, their minds rest, their hopes soar. It was glorious. When it ended, they didn't dare breathe for a long moment. When they did, they looked at one another, hoping they weren't the only ones to hear this message. But they could tell by the look on each face that it was real, and it was theirs." Let us make haste," they said. They made room in their busy schedule; they made their way, breathless and hopeful; like Moses and the bush, they turned aside to see.

What are you keeping watch over? I wonder. Maybe we're looking for something that will define us, something that will remake us, transform us. Some relationship, some hope, some love that will make us new.

O holy Child of Bethlehem / Descend to us, we pray / Cast out our sin and enter in / Be born to us today / We hear the Christmas angels / The great glad tidings tell / O come to us, abide with us / Our Lord Emmanuel

What I go out to see in the muddle of our world is not necessarily the Christ child, or the light that glows within. No, I think what I'm going to find is the world that he came to save. The masses of humanity who think they can find salvation in the stuff of this life, like I know I do sometimes. When I forget. A world that has room for a Savior, even when we've forgotten it. And part of what I'm keeping watch for is to see whether we can make room. Room for grace, room for joy, room for peace, even at our worst. At our most needy. And most helpful, and grace filled. Keep watch.

Christmas Day

December 25

[Isaiah 52:7-10, Psalm 98, Hebrews 1:1-4 \(5-12\), John 1:1-14](#)

Color: White, Gold

PLANNING NOTES

I love Christmas Day on Sunday. I think it should always be on a Sunday. I think it would be easier to hold on to the “real meaning of Christmas” if it were on a Sunday and the day began not with the frenzy of presents under the tree, but with worship in the family of God. I think that is the way it ought to be.

Now, that being said, I realize that I am in the minority. And that even some of the most devout and eager worshipers in your congregation see this calendric sleight of hand as an offense against the family’s observance of the day. Many churches surrender and cancel services all together or hold some brief, modified or drop-in service for those diehards who will show up whenever the door is open. Others decide to have a party of some sort, a celebration of family and faith and friends. Some determine it is a children’s day, let them come in their pajamas, and bring a gift to talk about.

Do what seems best to you in your setting. Do what works and what the community will support or at least tolerate. But also remember that this is not really our day or the family’s day. This is about Jesus. First and foremost, this is the day when the distance between heaven and earth was removed and God set up camp among us; God moved into the neighborhood or “tented among us,” which is what the Gospel of John says (John 1:14 – lived among us literally is tented in our midst). It is about the closeness of the living presence of God, incarnate in the one we call Jesus.

So, this is a day of praise. If part two of our two-day celebration, then now is when the trumpets blow and the shouts go up. This is “Joy to the World” time; this is “Hark! The Herald Angels” time. It is hard to be too loud or too happy today. It is hard to be too exuberant or overly playful today. Let it out as you sing, as you pray, as you greet one another on this glorious Christmas morning.

But keep in mind those who are struggling today—those who are grieving and feel the loss of a loved one most keenly today. Accept their sadness, even as you welcome them with joy today. And don't expect to replace what they are missing, but remind them in tangible ways that they are not as alone as they feel today.

Do you change schedule today? Offer only one service? If there was a day that called for change, this might be it. If you decide to change, to reduce or simplify, then do so with conviction and with grace. On the other hand, if you decide to keep the usual schedule, let it be a witness that this day is repeated every time you gather together as a community of faith for worship and fellowship. There is no clear "right" way to observe this day, except that whatever you do, make sure that Jesus takes center place.

PREACHING NOTES

Bishop William Willimon tells of meeting with a young couple while he was Dean of the Chapel at Duke University. They came to talk about marriage. They were in love and therefore sure that any barriers could be overcome. But their parents weren't so sure. See, he was a devout practicing Jew; she was a Christian. True to her culture, the young woman spoke, with some exasperation, "But surely there isn't any real difference in what we believe. Is there? Except for that Jesus thing."

Ah yes, that Jesus thing. In one sense, it is such a small thing. Such a one-off thing. A minor point in a complex theology. A single figure in a rich history full of amazing people. What is one person more or less in that line?

Of course, we could argue that this one person was a pretty special person. Wise beyond description, brave in amazing ways, uniquely self-sacrificing, and loving in ways we would dream of being. But a person, exemplary, but a person.

And we would be right. Yet wrong at the same time. This is why the Jesus thing is so difficult to comprehend. There is always a "yes, but" when it comes to Jesus. Or maybe it is a "yes, and." Words fail us in the end. Words capture pieces and pictures, but not the whole of that Jesus thing. Even the creeds wrestle with a description of Jesus. The longest part of the ancient creeds is devoted to Jesus. Not simply because they had a lot to say about him, but because there was always more.

The Apostles' Creed says : *And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord: who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; the third day he rose from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.*

Whew. You have to draw a breath after the Jesus thing. It is both a statement of who he is, and of who he is in relationship to God and us. As if he exists for himself and yet chooses to be defined in community with God and with humanity. "His only Son" and "our Lord." And then what God did with him and what we did with him: it's all there, in this complex and yet terse statement that overwhelms us in its simplicity and depth.

But if you think this is something, check out what the Nicene Creed does: *We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father. Through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.*

They wanted to try and define him; they wanted to comprehend him; they wanted to nail him down. But they should have learned from the first attempt to nail him down. This Jesus thing defies definition. This Jesus thing is beyond our comprehension. He defies our attempts to categorize him. Simply because once we have him figured out, then we wouldn't need him anymore. This Jesus thing would become one more thing that we have conquered, one more thing that we have figured out and then left to the side as we move on to other puzzles to solve or other mountains to climb.

So, what is left? We need some handles on the Jesus thing, don't we? We need some way of grasping, of clinging, even if we don't have full comprehension. Without a place to grab onto, then Jesus becomes another of those

incomprehensible realities like black holes and quantum physics that wrinkle our brows but don't really impact our lives.

What's left is poetry. At least that is John's response. When explanation fails, go for poetry. Or for music. Our text for this week is a song of praise to the nature of Christ. It is a theological doxology. Well, what would you call it?

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in 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.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

We could, of course, analyze these words to wring out every thought. That would be a way of approaching understanding. And there are a few things we do want to notice together. But in the end, it is the power of the words that speak most profoundly. Or if not power, then beauty. There is something here in this Jesus thing that catches our breath when we gaze at it. There is something that makes our hearts pound and tears come to our eyes. It may be unexplainable, but it speaks clearly to the deepest longings of our soul.

In this hymn that John has written we discover that it is about us as much as it is about Jesus. Yes, it adds a layer of eternity to the man from Nazareth. And it wrestles with that thorny doctrine called Trinity. (Is he Son or is he God, separate or the same - or somehow both?)

But when the song begins to include us, we move to the edge of our seats. When John sings of the life that is the light of all people, we hold our breath because we have both seen and touched it and have wept for the lack of it. We lean forward toward that light, like a plant seeking sustenance from the sun. We have beheld that glory. And we have known him not. We are both - acceptors and deniers - often at the same time. Too good to be true, we find ourselves saying. Too good not to be true, we hope.

We have tasted, we have received grace upon grace, and sometimes it is enough. Other times we wrestle with the world, with our doubts, with our sin. We do lose our grip from time to time. And we wonder what it is all about. We wonder if it is worth the struggle, the misunderstanding. Don't we all believe the same thing in the end? Wouldn't the world be better if we just stopped worrying about what it is that we believe? Couldn't we give in a little bit on that Jesus thing?

That Jesus thing, according to John, is nothing less than life itself. Life in all its fullness. Life in all its depth and meaning. Life as we long to live it. We can't be who we are, or who we long to be without that Jesus thing.

Merry Christmas.

Watchnight

December 31

[Ecclesiastes 3:1-13, Psalm 8 \(UMH 743\), Revelation 21:1-6a, Matthew 25:31-46](#)

PLANNING NOTES

There is an opportunity here for the church. With New Year's Eve on Saturday and New Year's Day on Sunday, it would be possible to observe both the vigil of hope and Covenant renewal and to add in an Epiphany observance on Sunday. Yes, it would be possible to do that all on a Sunday, but it might be a lot for one service to carry. Of course, you have to be aware of "what the congregation will support." But there is nothing wrong with stretching or with being aspirational in terms of gathering as a community on these high and holy days. Plus, a few can represent the whole. So, if you plan a covenant service for watchnight, then whoever comes can be representative of the whole body. Then the worship team and leaders can consider how the rest can be invited to join in the covenant, either on Sunday morning or through other means such as through email or livestream, small groups or Sunday school classes.

Watchnight services have been important in the African American traditions. This might be an opportunity to partner with another congregation of a different ethnic demographic. If you are an Anglo congregation, is there an African American church nearby to whom you could reach out to ask how you might partner together to provide this worship opportunity for both congregations? If you are part of an African American church, is there an Anglo church nearby that you might invite to join you in the sacred observance? Here is a way for our communities to reflect something of the beloved community when we share our histories and traditions together.

For some, this is a quiet observance, spent in prayer and reflection in anticipation of the new year to come. Others use the opportunity for a joyous celebration of the grace already shared and the promise of God's presence in the future. Either is appropriate, and both can provide opportunities for the Wesley Covenant prayer, or even the whole covenant service as a way of entering into the new year

fully committed to making and being made disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

Here are some links to suggested outlines or ideas for shaping worship from previous years. Feel free to adapt and add to and create an experience that suits your context.

“Watch Night: Claiming the Promise,” <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/are-we-there-yet/new-years-eve-watch-night-year-a-planning-notes>

“Watch Night Vespers and Vigil,”
<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/watch-night-vespers-and-vigil>

“Watch Night Owlah Service,”
<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/watch-night-owlah-service>

PREACHING NOTES

Maybe preaching isn’t something that is needed for this service. This could be a time for silence or for singing, for reflection or celebration. But should there be space for a proclamation, it seems that time and the use of time would be an appropriate subject. Maybe a difficult one, but perhaps necessary. Matthew 25, of course, calls us to use the time we are given wisely, in service and in witness. Revelation 21 holds out the vision of the end of time, or the fulness of time, when the kin-dom will be manifest in unmissable ways. Psalm 8 could be a reminder of the divine potential in all of creation and how we can see God if we look.

But what about the overly familiar passage from Ecclesiastes? How might that lead us into the new year or deeper into a covenantal relationship with God?

There is a poem by Delmore Schwartz, an American poet of the early twentieth century. He lived in New York, and many of his poems are of the observational type. He simply looks around him and describes what he sees. It is often the very mundane: people walking in a park or sitting on a bus, but in his description it becomes something more. Something eternal, in a way.

The poem I am referring to is titled “Calmly We Walk Through This April Day.” You can read it here <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/42633/calmly-we-walk-through-this-aprils-day>

The poet observes that things are passing by. And then he reminds us that all we see will one day be gone.

*Time, like an ever rolling stream,/ Bears all its sons away; / They fly,
forgotten, as a dream / Dies at the opening day.*

Maybe those lines seem more familiar. The hymn “O God Our Help in Ages Past” has as the fifth verse the somewhat depressing realization that we are helpless in the face of the march of time.

Perhaps our having just come through a worldwide ordeal and pandemic and seeing continuing war and gun violence makes me see things through a glass dimly. Perhaps you are coming to this end of year moment feeling the weight of all that is broken. Maybe self-examination is a fearsome prospect this night. The reordering of life, the re-examination of time is a difficult process that weighs on us more than we know. “Time is the fire in which we burn,” Schwartz writes. And it isn’t easy, this being burned up thing. This being burned out.

That might be why our text is one we avoid at all costs. Oh, it is familiar enough, thanks to the folk-rock group the Byrds and their song “Turn, Turn, Turn.” We know it, but do we embrace it? Or even understand it? Read it again. (And try not to let the tune enter your head while you do!)

If you read the full text to verse 13, it might seem a bit long (longer than we are used to, anyway). We usually stop before verse 9, which raises a question we’d rather not think about. We can’t help but feel as we read on from there that the preacher (the author of Ecclesiastes, while tradition believed it was Solomon, calls himself Qohelet, which is translated as the teacher or the preacher) says, “What’s the point? Just eat, drink and be merry, cause that’s all there is!”

Some have tried to find some significance to the list of things there is a time for in the first part of the reading. Declaring that these are the weighty matters of life, these are the things that God makes time for, and anything else ought not to be engaged in—sort of an ancient “never be triflingly employed” that John Wesley quoted much later on. And maybe there is something to this list. On the other hand, it seems like an arbitrary list (a time to seek and a time to lose) that we could continue almost ad infinitum – a time to sleep in and a time to get up, a

time to eat Cheerios and a time for toast, a time to play ping pong and a time to read your Kindle, and on and on and on. And on.

So, what do we do with this seemingly meaningless existence? Do we just enjoy it while it lasts? Or do we find something bigger to live for? Something more profound to build our existence around? And how do we find that in the midst of the ever-rolling stream that bears all our sons, our loved ones, ourselves away?

I don't know for sure, to be honest; and I hope that you can figure it out in time to preach this watchnight service. In the meantime, I offer you the conclusion of the poem that I found as perhaps a pointer to that something. Take a look:

*Time is the school in which we learn,
Time is the fire in which we burn.*

Maybe that's what we're left with. Yes, there is the fire that burns; yes, there is loss and grief and that which is no more. But there is also the school in which we learn. We are the result of our experiences and our encounters. I have learned from the past and from those I have known in the past. While some are now gone, what I have learned remains with me and becomes part of what I have to teach and to share with others.

Maybe this fire that burns isn't a consuming fire but a purifying one—one that makes us stronger, better. Maybe when the preacher says that God has appointed a time for every matter, we are that matter; a time for every work, we are that work. Maybe time is a gift— our gift and how we use it, what we fill it with is our response to that gift.

What time is it? Maybe that is a deeper question than we realized. Maybe it is more theological than we usually admit. What time is it? Your time. My time. God's time. It's time.

New Year's Day

January 1, 2023

[Matthew 2:1-12](#)

Color: White

PLANNING NOTES

The focus of this Sunday service depends on what else went on in the life of the church. Was the covenant the focus of a watchnight service? Or is that the center of this day? Do we look ahead to Epiphany, which takes place on the sixth of January, or do we leave it for next week? Or do we realize that Sunday, January 1, will be a small crowd and maybe just continue with a New Year's observance and talk about resolutions? Or do you somehow blend them all together? Whew, lots of deciding to do here. Isn't there a clear and definitive requirement for this day?

Well, no there isn't. Tradition makes this Epiphany Sunday, one of the great festivals of the church usually observed on the Sunday before the actual Epiphany date, unless you happen to be in the liturgical tradition of holding midweek services for Epiphany.

On the other hand, if this day is given to Epiphany and last week was Christmas day, then there is no Christmas season (or Christmastide) this year. So, should we bring out the Christmas songs for one more week and bask in that glow? This is just confusing you more, isn't it?

As a hint toward one resolution, our next worship series is titled "Glimpses of the Kin-dom" and begins on January 8 with the Baptism of Jesus. Perhaps leaning into Epiphany this week wouldn't be a bad choice. And Epiphany and the Wesley Covenant Prayer can work together if that wasn't used on New Year's Eve.

In this Christmas series of sorts, "God of the Dark and the Light," we have acknowledged the presence of God even in the darkness. On Epiphany, we embrace the light that is the Christ, but not as a denial of the God who dwells in the dark. Instead, it could be an awareness of the journey that continues, sometimes in certainty and sometimes in doubt, sometimes in clarity and sometimes in confusion. We make our declaration, like the prayer says, that when

we have everything and when we have nothing, when we are of use and when we are laid aside, we are still committed to God, we are still dedicated to Christ. We follow Christ when we can see him clearly and when we have lost sight of him. Still we follow.

So, let us lift up the name of Jesus today; let us make our pledge and follow his star. Let us be about the one who guides us, who finds us even when we are lost and gives us direction and hope. Let our worship be full of songs of praise of the name of Jesus, and let our prayers be prayers of commitment to follow.

How will you give the community the opportunity to make their covenant visible? Do we come forward for an altar call as we make this prayer? Do we write a commitment on a card and bring it forward to be prayed over or posted on a wall of covenant? Do we carry a sign of the covenant with us, a thread or a ribbon that speaks of our commitment to Christ, a wallet or purse card with the words of the covenant prayer on it or a reminder phrase or two? What can I do so that when I leave I remember that I am committed to being made a disciple of Jesus Christ? How does worship continue when I leave this place? Because continue it must, especially this day.

PREACHING NOTES

Did they know? Lying face down on the rough wood of the floor, tears flowing unbidden from their tired eyes, muscles aching from a journey that covered too many miles and too many worlds, hearts pounding from a longing too deep to define. Did they know? As they gazed into the red-faced infant, inexpertly wrapped in a threadbare blanket by a mother way too young for this responsibility, this gift, did they know? Or did they only hope?

In the silence, between the falling to the floor and the rising to open their treasures and offer their gifts, their blood roaring in their ears, did they retrace the steps of this journey? From the euphoria felt in the sighting of the celestial event, to the hurried decision to go where it called them to go, to the painfully slow plodding steps of the camels across the miles of rock and sand, it seemed to take forever, as though they would never arrive at the place they needed to find. Maybe it was that frustration that caused them to detour to Jerusalem. That stop

never made much sense, really. They stopped to ask directions, of all things. They had gone miles and miles following a star with unerring accuracy, and now, for some “God knows why” reason, they stopped in Jerusalem to ask directions to the birthing unit. Maybe their assumptions kicked in and they couldn’t imagine such a birth taking place anywhere but in the seat of power. Maybe their lack of political understanding led them to believe that the current king would be celebrating this birth with as much enthusiasm as they would. Maybe they rode through the mean streets of the big city and were startled to find no party breaking out, no bunting hanging from the balconies, no sellers of souvenirs lining the streets with royal baby themed items spilling from overloaded carts and wagons. Nothing worth celebrating seemed to be going on anywhere. So, they decided to ask.

Their accents and clumsy command of the language drew attention to them as outsiders, but their questions of kings and succession made them dangerous, targets of a suspicious puppet king serving at the pleasure of Rome. So, they found themselves in Herod’s receiving room, where the bath-robed despot was quizzing them about their quest. Maybe they gave him their answers with the innocence of true believers, maybe they caught a scent of his fear and machinations and held back the details. When he sent them off to Bethlehem with the smarmy political handshake and empty promises, they stumbled out into the night with their heads spinning and their hearts pounding.

Maybe it was because of their doubts about Herod and the wisdom of involving the powers that be in the quest for hope and salvation that caused them to look again. Maybe they lost sight of the star for a time, which caused them to wander off course, and their unsettling encounter with a despot desperate to keep his tenuous grip on power made them look for direction elsewhere. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with relief and a little bit of embarrassment. And they climbed up on their camels and high-tailed it out of Jerusalem, barely exchanging a word or even a glance at one another as they rode all the way to the front door of a little nondescript house on the edge of this suburban wasteland. The house couldn’t be any more different from the one they just left; as plain as the other was opulent, as vulnerable as the other was fortified. Had they stopped long enough to think about it, their questions would have returned; their doubts would have surfaced.

But instead, they leapt from their weary camels who were clumsily choosing this spot to finally lie down, because if no one else did, the beasts of burden knew they had reached their destination. The wise men ran up the stoop and barely paused to knock before spilling into the room, startling the young mother who hastily covered herself from feeding an infant who always seemed hungry.

When they rose from the floor and into the hands of a confused and bewildered girl, they thrust gifts richer than she had ever seen, let alone could hope to own. Then with hearts in their throats, they asked if they could hold him. With trembling hands, they took the offered child and felt his warmth, smelled the warm milky breath and wept more tears they couldn't explain.

They staggered out into the night, blinking at the light from the star still showering glory down on them. No, they thought, not on them, on him. That child. That singular, yet seemingly ordinary child. Did they know as they made their way home on yet another unfamiliar road? But then any road would have been unfamiliar because the whole world had changed with that one encounter, with an act of worship, with an offering of treasures and of self. Did they speak to one another as they rode, comparing impressions, sharing visions and dreams, asking questions? Did they dare to ask their questions?

Of course they did. They could see it in the child. He was one for questions. He would grow to be asked more questions than anyone before or since. And he would answer them all. With truth. No, with Truth. Truth that was sometimes hard to take, often hard to understand, and always needed to be dwelt upon, pondered, claimed. Or else it wouldn't be the Truth that we need.

What we don't know about the wise men could fill whole encyclopedias. Oh, we've made up stuff because we don't like mystery all that much. We've given them history, given them names, given them a story so that we can wrap our minds around them a little more comfortably. We've constructed a scenario that makes sense, that sounds nice, that fits into the narrative we've created for ourselves.

But Matthew doesn't care about all of that. They are a plot device, a means to an end. The wise men don't matter to Matthew. Except as a way of announcing this birth. They are a sign pointing to something beyond themselves. Something that gives them meaning and purpose, something that makes them characters in the

story, something that defines them. They are who they are and who they have come to be because of what they found. Who they found.

Did they know? Do we? Or is faith enough? Is hope enough? Can we live without knowing, taking the glimpses we have been privileged to receive as sustenance on the ongoing journey of faith?

If you look up the word “epiphany” in the dictionary, you find, alongside the religious definitions, a Christian festival celebrated on January 6th commemorating the manifestation of the Christ to the gentiles in the persons of the magi, or an appearance, especially of a deity - you find something else. Something that implies a stumbling upon, a glimpse, a revelation, an intuitive perception into the reality or essential meaning of something, usually initiated by some simple, commonplace occurrence or experience. Not knowing, as much as grasping. Receiving. And maybe that is enough to get us through. To keep our feet moving. To make our commitments, to make a covenant. Maybe it is enough to give our lives away to this child, to this story, to this gospel and this truth. Maybe. Maybe it is enough. Happy Epiphany.