**Sunday, December 18, 2016, the Fourth Sunday of Advent**

**RH 147 “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel**

**RH 159 “What Child Is This?”**

**RH 170 “O Come, All Ye Faithful”**

**Advent 4 Readers: Kayla and Robin**

**Lectionary Reader – David Goldston?**

**Lighting the Candles (Love)**

We light the candle of Love as a sign of the coming light of Christ.

**In Christ there is life and light for all people.**

Now lift up your heads and rejoice: your redeemer is drawing near.

**Prepare the way of the Holy One! All flesh will see the salvation of God.**

Christ has come to baptize us with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

**The Mighty One has done great things for us; holy is the name of God.**

**Glory to God in the highest, and peace to God’s people on earth!**

**Opening Prayer**

**Call to Confession**

**Prayer of Confession**

**Jesus our Christ, Prince of Peace, Savior of the Creation, we praise you.  We give you thanks for this holy time of preparing for your birth, of renewing our calling as your people.  And yet as get closer and closer to the stable, we acknowledge that we have fallen short of following Your Way.  We have allowed the allure of other gods in this season to draw us in.  We have permitted anxiety to rule our lives and fallen victim to the myth of scarcity when you have already prepared the Table of abundance for us.  We are always in need of your renewal, and so we open our souls today that the Baby in the Manger–full of trouble and full of opportunity - will be our only Guide. Walk alongside us O Lord our God, who is always birthing and renewing.  In Christ we pray.  Amen.**

**Assurance of Pardon**

**Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19**

Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel,
you who lead Joseph like a flock!
**You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth
before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh.**Stir up your might,
and come to save us!

**Restore us, O God;
let your face shine, that we may be saved.**

O LORD God of hosts,
how long will you be angry with your people’s prayers?
**You have fed them with the bread of tears,
and given them tears to drink in full measure.**You make us the scorn of our neighbors;
our enemies laugh among themselves.

**Restore us, O God of hosts;
let your face shine, that we may be saved.**

But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand,
the one whom you made strong for yourself.
Then we will never turn back from you;
give us life, and we will call on your name.

**Restore us, O LORD God of hosts;
let your face shine, that we may be saved.**

**Prayers of the People**

God, thank you for being there. For emptying yourself of your power to be born in a place of no special importance, to people who were of no consequence, until they found that you had a special calling for them. Mary and Joseph, called by you to be the Holy Parents of your son. Thank you for exemplars of righteousness, people who show us the meaning of faith and love. We pray that you nurture those things in us too, that we may live lives of love and joy for your creation.

Be with those suffering special needs this season.

Uplift the broken hearted…

You are the light of the world and we your reflections. Train our hearts to adequately shine your light. In the name of Jesus…Amen.

**Isaiah 7:10-16**

10Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying, 11Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. 12But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test. 13Then Isaiah said: “Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? 14Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. 15He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. 16For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.

**Matthew 1:18-25**

18Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. 19Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.20But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” 22All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:
23  “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
          and they shall name him Emmanuel,”
which means, “God is with us.” 24When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, 25but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

**Sermon “Love Stinks”**

Around the year 1980, a new thing started called “cable television.” And with cable TV, along came a TV channel called “Music Television,” known now as “MTV.” It was the year 1980 when a group called the J. Geils Band made a low budget music video of their song, “Love Stinks.” Simple lyrics: “You love her, but she loves him, and he loves somebody else, you just can’t win…. Love stinks. Yeah yeah.” The video attempts to humorously show just how much love can stink – a couple in a church wearing gas masks, a man waking up in bed with a giant fish, you get the picture. It’s kind of silly, but their point was clear: love stinks. Maybe the J. Geils Band was right. And if love doesn’t stink, it can be hard work. And maybe it’s supposed to be…

If you have ever raised a teenager, if you have ever stood by the bed of a dying loved one, if you have ever been the jilted lover, the spouse of a cancer patient, or anything like that, because of love, perhaps you might at least somewhat agree that love stink. Even if you can look back able to say you would do it all over again if you had to.

For Mary and Joseph, love probably was hard. They find out they have a baby that is not from Joseph, conceived before marriage, and one they weren’t exactly ready for. Joseph was a righteous man and obviously a considerate one who, according to the customs of the day, had every right and reason to let Mary go, when he learns she is pregnant by someone else. But he was willing to do it quietly to avoid disgracing her and her family. Only when they find out that this baby would be God’s answer to the world dwelling in darkness, they discover their sacred calling: to make this thing called love, work. Love, even though it was uncomfortable, scandalous, and fraught with dangers.

Remember what else was happened? It was all for love that they became refugees in Egypt, fleeing Herod’s death sentence to Jewish newborn boys. It was all for love that they raised this unexpected child, who happens to be vulnerable to all the usual problems we have, and it’s because they understood God’s plan for them meant salvation for the world.

Love puts us into uncomfortable positions. We know that it is God’s love that puts us here today on a cold and wintery day, for we are unable to let go of the love that compels us to cross icy streets to share in worship and fellowship - and leftover brisket. It is love that keeps us up at night praying for others, that keeps our telephones on the hook, should we need to be called out all of a sudden. It’s because of love that we fed about 45 or 50 people on Wednesday from the neighborhood, and because of love a few of us had achy feet that night.

It’s because God so loved the world. Because of love sometimes God says no to us on one thing so God can say yes to others. Love stinks. But it stinks just because we are sure that love is worth all the risk. God shows us that very thing by taking the ultimate risk, by entering into human flesh, entering into this world of pain and suffering. God loves the world that much, to be there for us all, not just an idea, but physically present.

Love is being there. And being there stinks. God took it all on for us, the worst of the worst, by becoming a human. To become a newborn baby meant God gave up His almighty power, became subject to the pain and suffering, disease, and cold temperatures that we all have known. He was born in a manger, a place of no consequence, a place where animals live. See, this is not just another cute story of a beautiful baby being born with animals all around, magical things happening like angels and stars and sheep. It’s that but more. It is about God choosing to be with us by because of love. That’s being there. That’s love.

So, we are called to the hard, messy Christmas love for one another. Let us celebrate God with us, Immanuel, by being there for one another, for those who cry out in the darkness. We can celebrate God being there for us, by praying for the needs of the world. By giving unexpected gifts to others who could use help. To dream of ways to make a difference where God’s love is needed most. Being there stinks, but by being there, it reminds us all of the power that love has to save the world. It’s messy. It stinks, but it is much better than to have never loved at all. Much better than to regret we never did it. Love without regrets. Amen.