**Sunday, December 20, 2015 Third Sunday in Advent**

**Lighting the Wreath Ron Wilmot, Lou Sims, Wayne Huffman**

In the beginning was the Word—
spoken and breathed,
a promise made and kept.

**Trust the good news—**

**God’s promise is true!**

The Word was in the beginning,

and through him all things come into being.

**Eternal and near at hand,**

**Already and not-yet,**

**God’s promise is the foundation of all life.**

Trust in God!Wait with faith, giving voice to Christ’s love for all.

~candle is lit~

**Responsive Prayer**

We come into your holy place, O God, hoping for a glimpse of your presence

**Silence us when we allow our voices to drown out yours.**

**Silence us when our words in the sanctuary and our actions outside do not line up.**

**Into that silence, speak again your word of life and your call to live the gospel.**

Help us to be still and know that you are God.

Make space in our hearts and minds to trust your word—and not just our hearts andminds,but also our choices and actions.

**Tune our voices to sing of your glory, to share your good news.**

**And then open our lips, and our mouths shall proclaim your praise. Amen**

**Call to Confession**

**Prayer of Confession (to the tune of "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel")**

**Forgive us, Lord, for times when love was lost,**

**And moments when we never thought to care,**

**For times when we destroy and subdue,**

**The Word that brings your people close to you.**

**Forgive, forgive, forgive us all our sins,**

**And help us love so newness can begin.**

**Assurance of Pardon**

**Responsive Reading Luke 1:46B-55**

My soul magnifies the LORD,

**and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,**

for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

**for the Mighty One has done great things for me,and holy is his name.**

His mercy is for those who fear himfrom generation to generation.

**He has shown strength with his arm;**

he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

**He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,and lifted up the lowly;**

he has filled the hungry with good things,and sent the rich away empty.

**He has helped his servant Israel,in remembrance of his mercy,**

**according to the promise he made to our ancestors,**

**to Abraham and to his descendants forever."**

**Prayers of the People**

Lord, we thank you for your mighty acts of love, including your mighty act of being born into this broken and fearful world. So that we might believe So that we might know of your love and proclaim it to all the world.

Teach us to overcome the things that scare us. Remind us daily of your mercy and peace. Fill us with your Holy Spirit anew when we are in need of courage, hope and grace.

This day we lift up our needs and the world's needs, for those needs do not go away completely during this season of joy.

Watch over your church, dear God, as we proclaim your praises this season. Make this a season of new trust and hope in you. Make those who discover your love for them, find it a sustaining force for all their lives. And we pray that this Christmas Eve we find in ourselves new strength and joy to carry out your purpose of peace and goodwill to all our neighbors. This we pray in the strong name of Jesus Christ, who taught his disciples first to pray saying, "Our Father....Amen."

**Micah 5:2-5a**

2But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,

who are one of the little clans of Judah,

from you shall come forth for me

one who is to rule in Israel,

whose origin is from of old,

from ancient days.

3Therefore he shall give them up until the time

when she who is in labor has brought forth;

then the rest of his kindred shall return

to the people of Israel.

4And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord,

in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.

And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great

to the ends of the earth;

5aand he shall be the one of peace.

**LUKE 1:39-45**

39In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, 40where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. 41When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit 42and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. 43And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? 44For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. 45And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

**Sermon: At the Crossroads**

"Our hopes and fears through all the years are met with thee tonight." Popular words this time of year. But have we thought of what this means? To tell Jesus the Baby in the manger, "our hopes and our fears of all time, are met with you..." In other words, when we sing "O Little Town of Bethlehem," we proclaim that Jesus Christ, the babe in the manger "meets" in the middle of all that we hope for and all that scares us.

In 1865, the Civil War came to an end and President Lincoln had been assassinated. The idea of love and peace was difficult to imagine for many who survived the war. And also in that same year, the Reverend Phillip Brooks, an Episcopal Priest from Pennsylvania, traveled to the Holy Land. As he rode up to Bethlehem on horseback one early early, he was compelled to write the words of what we now know as "O Little Town of Bethlehem." Now, Bethlehem is met with many fears, tension and violence. But his vision of Bethlehem that morning was one of utter stillness and the peace, perhaps the kind of peace the heart should hope to feel when we experience the love of our Savior.

"O Little Town of Bethlehem" does not deny that there are fears in this world. It acknowledges that even in our most settled, peaceful moments, injustice reigns, this is a fearful world, and violence is all around. And it also acknowledges that even though we profess faith in Him, we too feel fears and hopes, mixed up inside our hearts. Our fears range from very tiny to very big. I am fascinated with what scares children, for the fears of a child often seem so small from a grown up's perspective. I remember one of my fears was an unlikely fear that a tree would fall on the roof of our house. Our house, was a two story Colonial and the trees around our house were not quite big enough to represent a threat. But my fear would keep me up at night, afraid, as I could hear the tall slender pine trees creaking and swaying in the wind.

Grown ups can rationalize that kind of fear, but a child cannot.

What if God sees all of the fears we have, even the fears we have as grown ups, and, like a loving parent, chuckles at our childishness, or, perhaps God feels a little sad that we don't trust him more to care for us.

The birth of Jesus, God incarnate, is all about the message of love and trust. God so loved us that He chose become like us, a vulnerable baby . And perhaps this was God's way to show us how much we can trust Him. That God loves us so much that God took this great risk so we might have more faith, so we would see God's love in action, God's love incarnate? Mary mother of Jesus, and her soon-to-be husband Joseph, had plenty to fear. They feared being ostracized by their community because Mary was pregnant before marriage. Joseph considered divorcing her. They probably worried about the safety of this new baby destined to become king. Great leaders are also targets for assassination. Child mortality rates were horrifically high.

But, look at what happens when Mary trusts the message from the angel Gabriel. And when Joseph has chosen to stand by her, rather than divorce her, Mary becomes, to quote theologian Cindy Rigby, a "force to be reckoned with." She becomes a poet and singer, praising God, breaking into song almost like one of those old Hollywood musicals. She leans right into this message of love, trusting it, and she finds her calling and purpose in life, as the mother of God. And she goes to see Elizabeth, Elizabeth validates her calling, when, filled with the Holy Spirit, proclaims that Mary is "mother of her Lord," "Blessed she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." Blessed is she who believed.

Now, most of us don’t have the Angel Gabriel appearing to us. So believing God's love may be most difficult thing we ever do in all our lives. For it is the thing that directs and controls how we respond to everything else. And maybe just maybe working towards trusting God is the most important journey we will ever take. Our lives are full of fear, and I believe God calls to us to trust him and with his help conquer our fears. So with every little fear you have, consider it a way that God calls you to a deeper faith. Instead of running away, discern a way for God to meet you where you are, just as God met this fearful, dark world, face-to-face as a vulnerable baby.

From God's point of view, nothing is impossible, nothing is frightening. God calls to you through all your hopes and your fears to a new level of trust. And God's love is so great and God is so powerful, it's time to work on our trust in Him. Who knows? If we trust God enough, we too might break out in song, we too might become vessels of joy so others may trust God anew. But for us, in the birth of our Lord, He has taken the first step for us, to meet us where we are, at the crossroads of all our hopes and all our fears. Thanks be to God! Alleluia! Amen.

**Reception of New Members - Theresa and David Goldston**

Elder: On behalf of the session I present Theresa and David Goldston, who have been received into the membership of this congregation by reaffirmation of faith.

Amy: You come to us as members of the one holy catholic church, into which you were baptized, and by which you have been nurtured. We are one with each other, sisters and brothers in the family of God. We rejoice in the gifts you bring to us. As you join with us in the worship and service of this congregation, it is fitting that together we reaffirm the covenant into which we were baptized, claiming again the promises of God which are ours in our baptism.

(please stand if able) Hear these words from Holy Scripture:

Gal. 3:27, 28 As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are in Christ Jesus.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, our baptism is the sign and seal of our cleansing from sin, and of our being grafted into Christ. Through the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Christ, the power of sin was broken and God’s kingdom entered our world. Through our baptism we were made citizens of God’s kingdom, and freed from the bondage of sin. Let us celebrate that freedom and redemption through the renewal of the promises made at our baptism. I ask you therefore, once again to reject sin, and to profess your faith in Christ Jesus, and to confess the faith of the church, in which we were baptized.

Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world? **I do.**

Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Lord and Savior, trusting in his grace and love? **I do.**

Will you be Christ’s faithful disciple, obeying his Word and showing his love? **I will, with God’s help.**

With the whole church, let us confess our faith.

**The Apostles' Creed**

You have publicly professed your faith. Will you be a faithful member of this congregation, share in its worship and ministry through your prayers and gifts, your study and service, and so fulfill your calling to be a disciple of Jesus Christ? **I will, with God’s help.**

Ever-living God, guard these your servants with your protecting hand, and let your Holy Spirit be with them forever. Lead them to know and obey your Word that they may serve you in this life and dwell with you forever in the life to come; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

**Welcome our New Members!**