

**Voices Around the Manger: A Community-Led Retelling
Christmas Eve Service
St. Peter's UCC Highland
December 24, 2024 – 9:00 PM
by Rev. Michael Erwin**

This service personalizes the nativity story by inviting several members to take on the roles of characters in the nativity story—Mary, Joseph, shepherds, angels, etc.—each with a brief scripted reflection on their experience of the birth of Christ. These vignettes are interwoven with carols similar to a lessons and carols format, giving people a sense of shared anticipation and wonder. Voices Around the Manger brings the nativity story to life through the perspectives of key characters, emphasizing the theme of God's work in unexpected places.

PRELUDE

RINGING OF THE BELL

INTROIT "" St. Peter's Choir

***CAROL #155, "Angels We Have Heard On High", verse 1**

***CALL TO WORSHIP**

Come, gather close—
like shepherds of old around a fire, sharing whispers of wonder.
Come, listen well—
to the voices of those who witnessed the holy night.
Come, and bring your own story—
for the same God who moved among them also moves among us.
Tonight, we light the flame of memory and faith.
We speak of doubt and hope, silence and song, waiting and joy.
We enter this sacred story once again,
and find ourselves drawn deeper into the mystery of God's love.

LIGHTING THE CHRIST CANDLE

CHRISTMAS EVE COMMUNION

***COMMUNION CAROL #144, O Come All Ye Faithful, 1st verse**

VOICES AROUND THE MANGER

AN INVITATION TO LISTEN

We know this story so well—the shepherds, the angels, the manger. But tonight, we invite you to hear it with fresh ears. Imagine you're in Bethlehem, drawn to the stable by whispers of something extraordinary.

Through the voices of Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary, and others, we will step into their experiences of faith, doubt, courage, and joy. These voices, though ancient, still speak to us today, reminding us that the story of Christ's birth is not just history but a living call to hope, wonder, and trust in God's promises.

So, settle in. Listen closely. Let these voices draw you closer to the manger, where heaven and earth meet, and the miracle of God's love comes to life.

ZECHARIAH'S JOURNEY OF SILENCE AND TRUST

I was a man of routine, a priest doing his duty, Zechariah. My day in the temple began like any other, offering incense and prayers. But then—an angel. Standing right there! My heart froze, and my legs felt like they'd give out.

The angel told me: "Your prayers have been heard. Your wife, Elizabeth, will bear you a son. You will name him John." John? A son? At our age? I couldn't believe it. I stammered out, "How can this be? We're too old for such things!"

The angel's reply silenced me—literally. He said, "You will be mute until these things come to pass." At first, I thought of it as a punishment. Silence can feel like a prison. But over time, it became something else.

In the quiet, I began to listen—not just with my ears, but with my heart. I watched Elizabeth's belly grow, her joy overflowing. And I began to hope. The God who called Abraham and Sarah had now called us. Our son would prepare the way for the Lord!

When John was born and my tongue was freed, I could only praise God. "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel!" I cried. For in my silence, I learned: even when we doubt, God's promises are true.

CAROL #124, Let All Mortal Fesh Keep Silence, 1st verse

ELIZABETH'S SONG OF GRATITUDE

They called me barren – Old Barren Elizabeth. It’s a cruel word, isn’t it? A word that carries shame and sorrow. For so many years, I thought it defined me. But God had other plans.

When I learned I was carrying a child, I could hardly believe it. My heart, once heavy with sorrow, was now full of gratitude. I hid myself away for five months, not out of shame, but to let the miracle sink in. “The Lord has shown His favor,” I told myself, “and taken away my disgrace.”

When Mary arrived, I saw in her the same wonder and joy I felt. As she spoke, the baby within me leapt, and I knew—her child was the promised Messiah. “Blessed are you among women!” I said. “Blessed is the child you bear!”

God has turned my sorrow into joy, my shame into praise. I am living proof that God’s promises are true, that nothing is impossible with God.

CAROL #130, My Soul Gives Glory to My God, verse 1

MARY’S COURAGEOUS YES

Courage. It’s not a word I thought much about before. My life was simple—Mary, just a quiet girl in a quiet village, engaged to a carpenter, preparing for an ordinary future. But the angel changed everything.

“Do not be afraid,” he said. I tried to still my heart, pounding with both fear and wonder. His words were overwhelming: “You will conceive and bear a son, and you will call him Jesus. He will be great, the Son of the Most High.”

I could have run. I could have said no. But something inside me whispered, “Trust.” Not in my own strength, but in God’s. “I am the Lord’s servant,” I said. “May your word to me be fulfilled.”

Courage doesn’t mean there’s no fear. I’ve felt it—a shadow in the quiet moments, a question in my heart: Why me? How can I bear this responsibility? But courage means moving forward anyway, trusting in the One who calls us.

Now, as I carry this child, I feel the weight of this calling, but also its joy. God has chosen me—not because I am strong or important, but because God is faithful. I don’t know what the future holds, but I know this: God is with me, and I can face whatever comes.

CAROL #162, What Child is This, 1st verse

JOSEPH WRESTLES WITH GOD'S PLAN

I had plans. Simple ones, really. Mary and I would wed, build a home, and raise a family. But God had other plans.

When Mary told me she was with child, my heart broke. I loved her, but how could I trust what she was saying? I decided to end things quietly, to spare her as much shame as possible.

But then, God intervened. An angel came to me in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. The child is from the Holy Spirit. He will save His people from their sins."

It wasn't the life I had planned, but it was the life God was calling me to. I chose to trust, even when I didn't have all the answers.

Now, as Mary and I prepare to welcome this child, I marvel at how God is using ordinary people like us to do extraordinary things. I may not understand it all, but I trust the One who called me.

CAROL #153. It Came Upon the Midnight Clear, 1st verse

THE INNKEEPER'S REGRET AND WONDER

I've replayed that night in my mind a hundred times. It was so busy, with travelers everywhere, and the inn was bursting at the seams. I barely had time to think, let alone notice a young couple at my door.

I told them, "No room." I had nothing to offer. But when I saw the woman—so young, so tired, and so close to giving birth—I couldn't send them away completely. "There's a manger out back," I said. "It's not much, but it's yours."

I wonder sometimes, could I have done more? Found a corner, asked someone to move? But then, I remind myself: they didn't need luxury. They needed space, however humble, to welcome their child.

And what a child! The shepherds told me about angels, and their words still echo in my heart: "A Savior has been born." Me—a simple innkeeper—had a small part to play in that story.

I didn't know it then, but God works through the smallest of offerings. Even a manger.

CAROL #144, O Little Town of Bethlehem, 1st verse

THE ANGEL'S WONDER

You might think angels would be sent to palaces, to announce the birth of a king among kings. But that night, I was sent to shepherds—ordinary men, keeping watch in the fields.

"Do not be afraid," I told them. "I bring good news of great joy for all people. Today, in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you." I watched their faces change—from fear to wonder, from confusion to hope.

I gave them the sign: "You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." And then, heaven couldn't stay silent. A host of angels joined me, singing, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace!"

But what amazed me most wasn't the song. It was the shepherds. As soon as we left, they went to see the child. They believed, without hesitation. God had chosen them—not kings or priests, but shepherds—to be the first witnesses of this holy birth.

CAROL #155, Angels We Have Heard on High, 1st verse

THE EXTRAORDINARY SHEPHERD

I never thought someone like me would be part of something so holy. I'm a shepherd—an ordinary person with an ordinary life. My nights are spent under the stars, keeping watch over sheep.

But that night, everything changed. The sky burst into light, and an angel stood before us. I was terrified—who wouldn't be? But the angel said, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy for all people. Today, in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you. He is the Messiah, the Lord."

The words felt impossible. Why us? We're nobody, just shepherds. But there it was—the angel's invitation to go and see for ourselves. "You'll find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger," the angel said.

And then, the sky erupted. A multitude of angels filled the heavens, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace.” I had never seen or heard anything so extraordinary.

When the angels left, we didn’t waste a moment. We ran to Bethlehem, to the stable, and found Him—the child, lying in the manger, just as the angel said.

We knelt there, in awe. We were ordinary people, but in that moment, we were part of something extraordinary.

We couldn’t keep it to ourselves. We had to tell everyone what we had seen and heard. Some laughed, but others believed. And even now, I marvel: God chose shepherds to be the first witnesses.

CAROL #167, Go, Tell It on the Mountain, 1st verse

SCRIPTURE, Luke 2:1-7

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

THE VILLAGER: HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT

I wasn’t looking for a miracle that night. It was just another evening in Bethlehem. The census had turned our little town into a crowded mess. Every house was bursting, every inn overflowing, and the streets were noisy with travelers. If I’m honest, it was all a bit much. I was tired—bone-tired—and ready for the world to settle back into its usual rhythms.

My house wasn’t far from the main road. I’d spent the day watching strangers come and go, keeping to myself, busy with chores. When night fell, I locked the door and settled in, grateful for a quiet moment. But just as I was about to drift off to sleep, I heard voices outside.

I peeked through the shutters and saw a man and a woman. They looked exhausted, worn from the road. The woman—she was pregnant. She was very pregnant. They stopped at the inn, and I watched as the innkeeper shook his head. I knew what that meant. No room.

I felt a pang of sympathy, but what could I do? My house was full as well. I watched as the innkeeper gestured toward the manger out back, and the couple slowly made their way there. I shook my head and closed the shutters. Poor souls, I thought. But life goes on.

And that's the thing, isn't it? Life goes on. We get so caught up in the busyness, the noise, the endless demands, that we miss what's right in front of us.

Hours later, the town grew quiet, but my mind wouldn't let me sleep. Something tugged at me—a feeling I couldn't shake. I went to the window again, and that's when I saw them: shepherds, hurrying through the streets, their faces alight with something more than the glow of their torches.

Curiosity got the better of me, so I followed them. They were heading to the manger. At first, I stayed back, peering around the corner. But then I heard their voices: "It's just as the angel said!"

An angel? What were they talking about?

I crept closer and saw them kneeling. And then I saw Him. A baby, wrapped in cloths, lying in a manger. His mother and father were there too, looking tired but full of a kind of peace I can't explain.

I felt a lump in my throat. This wasn't just any child. I don't know how I knew, but I knew. This child was different. Holy.

As I stood there in the shadows, I thought about how close I'd come to missing this moment. The Son of God—right here, in my town, in a manger of all places—and I almost missed it because I was too busy, too tired, too focused on my own little world.

And isn't that how it so often is with God? He doesn't show up with fanfare or flashing lights. He comes quietly, in unexpected places, through ordinary people. A stable. A manger. Shepherds. A carpenter and his young wife.

I almost missed Him. But thankfully, God has a way of breaking through our distractions, of opening our eyes to what's been there all along.

That night, I didn't go back to bed. I stayed by the stable, watching and listening. The shepherds left, spreading the news to anyone who would listen. As for me, I stayed a little longer, whispering prayers I hadn't said in years.

Now, whenever I think back to that night, I remind myself to look closer, to listen more carefully. Because God's work is still happening, often hidden in plain sight. In the kindness of a stranger, in the laughter of children, in the quiet moments when the world feels heavy but hope still stirs.

The miracle of that night wasn't just that God came to us—it was that God came in such a way that we could easily have missed. And maybe that's the greatest lesson: God doesn't always meet us where we expect. God meets us where we are, even in the middle of our messy, busy lives.

***SHARING THE LIGHT OF CHRIST**

Lights Down!

***CAROL #145, Sing first verse, then hum**

"Silent Night, Holy Night"

ANNA AND SIMEON: FAITHFUL IN WAITING

We waited. For years, we waited.

Simeon: The Spirit had whispered to me that I would see the Messiah before I died. Day after day, I came to the temple, watching, praying, wondering when that promise would be fulfilled.

Anna: I lived in the temple, fasting and praying. Decades passed, and still, I held onto hope, trusting that God's timing was perfect.

And then, one day, He came. A young couple entered the temple, carrying a child. The moment I saw Him, I knew.

Simeon: My heart leapt as I held Him in my arms and said, "Now, Lord, you let your servant go in peace. My eyes have seen your salvation."

Anna: I praised God and told everyone who would listen: this child is the Redeemer, the one we've waited for.

We waited, yes. But our waiting wasn't in vain. God is faithful, and His promises never fail.

Lights Up!

*CAROL #143

"Joy to the World"

*BENEDICTION

"The Work of Christmas", Howard Thurman

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the Star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the Shepherds are back with their flocks,
The work of Christmas begins:
 to find the lost,
 to heal the broken,
 to feed the hungry,
 to release the prisoner,
 to rebuild the nations,
 to bring peace among our brothers and sisters everywhere,
 to make music in the heart. Amen.

POSTLUDE