**“Longest Night” Service**

**Preparing to Hear**

**Prelude**

**Welcome**

Welcome to this “Longest Night” service. The name comes from the season– during this season in December, we experience the shortest day and the longest night of the year. But the name also applies to the feeling that a number of us have about this season. It is the “long dark night of the soul,” the “winter of our discontent.” It is a time when the memories of past experiences and the pain of present experiences can become overwhelming. In this service, we will have some music which is appropriate to the season, recognizing that this is not necessarily a season of joy. We will invite you to meditate on the pain and anguish you bring, and to offer your pain to the Christ child. And we trust that you will find hope and comfort in knowing that you are not alone.

**Canticle #11 Third Song of Isaiah Prayer Book, p. 87**

**Carol #56 “O Come, O Come Emmanuel”**

**Prayer of Petition**:

Let us pray.

Gracious and Loving God, we come to you this Christmas season with pain growing inside us. As the nights have grown longer, so the darkness has wrapped itself around our hearts. In this season of longest nights, we offer you the pain in our hearts, the traumas that some of us cannot put into words, for we come to you with a multitude of situations. Spiritual agony is in our midst. As your children, we come before you, bringing all that we are, just as we are. We seek your healing touch so we can become whole again. We want to rediscover the joy and freedom of your Holy Spirit stirring within us. We want to live in your world with hope and share our lives with meaning.

For some, the trust we gave others has been violated. We have little confidence in ourselves; we turn away from others, fearful of getting involved. For others, there are feelings of being separated, isolated or far away from those we love. There is wrenching loss in our souls from divorce or death. We feel outside this season– trying to look in but failing to find the joy. We find ourselves looking over someone else’s shoulders and longing to be in the center.

God, we are grieving over what might have been. Dreams have fallen apart. We struggle with the unfilled hopes of yesterday. And this special time of year has changed. Someone has died. Someone has left us. We have moved away. We have lost a job. We have lost a dream. We find ourselves adrift, alone and lost in a terrifying new world. This season reminds us of so much–what used to be, what we never had, what might have been. Fear and depression, loneliness and painful memories float into our minds we are afraid of the future even as we fear the present. Our fears stifle us and our isolation and separation from You grows.

This is our longest night, dear Lord. Be near us now. Whisper into our souls your still, small voice of life. We ask this in the name of the child Jesus who came to show us the way to you. Amen

**Psalm 121 Prayer Book p.779**

**Carol #79 “O Little Town of Bethlehem”**

**Lighting of the Advent Wreath**

Leader: This first candle we light to remember those whom we have loved and lost. (Pause while the first candle is lit) We pause to remember their names, their faces, their voices, the memories that bind them to us in this season.

**All: May God’s eternal love surround them.**

Leader: This second candle we light to redeem the pain of loss, the loss of relationships, the loss of jobs, the loss of health. (Pause while the second candle is lit) We give thanks for all the love and support we have known.

**All: Refresh, restore, renew us, O Lord, and lead us into your future.**

Leader: This third candle we light to remember ourselves this Christmas time. (Pause while the third candle is lit.) We pause and remember these past weeks and months - the disbelief, the anger, the down times, the poignancy of reminiscing, the hugs and handshakes of family and friends, all those who stood with us. We give thanks for all the love and support we have known.

**All: Let us remember that dawn defeats darkness.**

Leader: This fourth candle is lit to remember our faith and the gift of hope which the Christmas story offers to us. (Pause while the fourth candle is lit) We remember that God, who shares our life, promises us a place in the kingdom and time to come when there is no more pain and suffering.

**All: Let us remember the One who shows us the way, who brings the truth and who** **bears the light.**

**Hearing the Story of Jesus’ Birth**

**Matthew 1:18-25 Born into Public Disgrace**

“Now 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. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But 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. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the LORD through the prophet: “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.” When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the LORD commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had born a son; and he named him Jesus.”

The story of the first Christmas is not really a happy story, but a story about life in the real world. Mary of Nazareth who is engaged, but not married, to the carpenter Joseph, discovers she is pregnant. Joseph wants to spare Mary the public disgrace of her pregnancy and so plans to break off the engagement privately. Like Mary and Joseph, we too may find ourselves in difficult circumstances that others misunderstand or ridicule. Like Mary and Joseph, the Lord has called us to trust Him in the midst of difficult situations that overwhelm us.

*Pause for silent prayer*

**We light this candle for all who find themselves under the weight of a heavy burden. Jesus said: “Come to me all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest” May the Light of Jesus’ birth bring rest and peace to their troubled souls. May they find courage to trust in God.**

**Luke 2:1-7 Born Far From Home**

“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.”

Have you ever felt the sting of these words: “There was no place for them in the inn”? Mary and Joseph were forced to leave the comfort of home in the last days of pregnancy and travel on foot to register their names with the occupying government. They were outsiders in their own land. Jesus himself was no stranger to being an outsider even in his home country, among his own people. Like Mary and Joseph and Jesus, we may be far from home. We may feel like outsiders and long to find places to be our truest selves and to be at peace. We may be feeling this Christmas there is no place for us in the inn. Yet we can trust in the hope of this story that a place was indeed provided for Joseph and Mary.

*Pause for silent prayer*

**We light this candle for all those who are far from home. May the light of Jesus’ birth help them to know that they are always genuinely welcomed and truly belong in His company.**

**Matthew 2:1-6 Born Among those of Little Account**

“In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet; “And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.”

Jesus, whose parents were inconsequential people from Nazareth, was born in the shadow of glorious Jerusalem, in the insignificant town of Bethlehem. In the hustle and bustle of the holiday season our needs can be overlooked as unimportant. We can feel overwhelmed with feelings of low self-worth and that our lives do not matter much at all. We can become discouraged by our failures and faults. We can feel utterly alone.

*Pause for silent prayer*

**We light this candle for all those who are alone, for all those who feel worthless and forgotten, for all those who sacrifice of themselves so unselfishly to make life better for others. May the light of Jesus’ birth remind them that all people are of ultimate value to God and that in Christ we are loved beyond measure.**

**Matthew 2:7-12, 16-18 Born in the Midst of Death**

“Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.... When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah; “A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.”

King Herod, who ruled Palestine for the Romans, was known for his cruelty. He ordered the death of all children under the age of two in and around Bethlehem. For the people of Bethlehem, the birth of Jesus would always remind them of the deaths of their children. In the same way, Christmas may remind us of loved ones who have died and the emptiness and loss we feel instead of joy.

*Pause for silent prayer*

**We light this candle for all whose hearts are broken from the loss of someone they have loved dearly. Psalm 34:18 says: “The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.” and Psalm 147:3 “He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.” God is present with us even in the midst of the deepest pain of loss. May the Light of Jesus’ birth bring hope to those who are suffering.**

**Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23 Born into Insecurity**

“Now after [the wise men] had left, an angel of the LORD appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the LORD through the prophet, “Out of Egypt I have called my son.”....When Herod died, an angel of the LORD suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child’s life are dead.” Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, “he will be called a Nazorean.”

In the midst of Mary and Joseph’s joy over the safe birth of their son Jesus, a new crisis loomed. The holy family had to flee to Egypt. Sometimes we face circumstances in which we do not feel safe or secure. Our lives are often filled with uncertainty. There are so many things over which we have no control. We may be facing problems with our health. We might be in danger of losing a job. We may be desperately worried for our children who might be in some kind of trouble. We may have relationships in our lives with family or friends that are estranged or broken. We may feel depressed and not even be able to say why.

*Pause for silent prayer*

**We light this candle for all those whose lives are filled with anxiety about the future. May the Light of Jesus’ birth bring a gentle assurance that even though we do not know what the future holds, we know who holds the future, and we can trust Him.**

**John 1:1-5, 9-14 Born as Light for our Darkness**

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. . . . 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’s Gospel speaks of Jesus as God’s Word, in whom all things were created and given life. He is our light that shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot defeat him. He shines here, this very night. Jesus is the light that has come into our world of darkness. He offers himself to us so that we might receive the light of heaven he brings. In opening our hearts to Jesus, in welcoming His light to shine in us, we have an opportunity for new life in the midst of our struggles.

*Pause for silent prayer*

**We light this final candle as a prayer for all those who do not yet know the Light of the World, our Savior Jesus Christ. May they come to know him this Christmas. May the gracious light of his birth bring hope, life, understanding and the peace that passes understanding to all who suffer this night. We hear the words of John 3:16-17 “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”**

Carol # 93 “Angels from the Realms of Glory”

**Responding to God’s Word to Us**

**One:** In the Spirit of this season let us now confidently ask God for all the things we need; For ourselves as we participate in whatever way we can this Christmas. Lord, in your mercy,

**All: Hear our prayer.**

**One:** For our families and friends that they may continue to help and support us. Lord, in your mercy.

**All: Hear our prayer.**

**One:** For the persons we have loved that have died, for all the losses that we know, that all may be redeemed by your Easter promise. Lord, in your mercy,

**All: Hear our prayer.**

**One:** For all our family and friends that they may know love, peace and happiness in you. Lord, in your mercy.

**All: Hear our prayer.**

**One:** For the peace proclaimed by the Christmas angels, to come throughout the whole world, that there would be peace between nations and within nations. Lord, in your mercy.

**All: Hear our prayer.**

**One:** God of great compassion and love, listen to the prayers of these your people. Grant to all, especially the bereaved and troubled ones this Christmas, the blessings we ask in the name of Christ who has taught us to pray:

**All: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.**

**Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.**

**Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.**

**Passing the Peace**

One: The Peace of the Lord be always with you.

**All: And also with you.**

**Carol # 100 “Joy to the World!”**

**Blessing**

Go into this dark night knowing in your hearts the words of the prophet Isaiah: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; Those who lived in a land of deep darkness on them light has shined” (Isa. 9:1-2)

And the blessing of God Almighty: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, be upon you and remain with you always. Amen.

**Dismissal**

One: Let us go forth rejoicing in the power of the Spirit.

**All: Thanks be to God.**