



**Mennonite
Church**
Canada

Resource Centre

From our Churches

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Longest Night Service

Prelude ending with recording of “Comfort Ye” from Handel’s Messiah

Light the “God Candle”

Call to worship (*based on Isaiah 45:8*)

O God, come to our assistance.

O Lord, hasten to help us.

Drop down the dew from above, O heavens,
and let the clouds rain justice.

Let the earth’s womb be opened,
and bring forth a Savior.

Invocation:

Let us pray:

“O God, come to our assistance.” We have gathered here this evening because we long for you to come to us, to save us, to comfort us, to bring us peace. As we approach the day when we celebrate the birth of Jesus, we grow in our awareness that we need you. We bring our grief, our pains, our disappointments, our fears and the chaos of our world, and we lay all that before you in this time of worship. As Jesus embodied your love for the world and became “God-with-us,” so now this night we pray that you would again, come, oh come, Emmanuel. Amen.

Hymn: “O come, O come, Emmanuel”

Welcome:

This is the longest night of the year. For those for whom night-time means heightened loneliness or fear, this is the night most dreaded, the night when hope is most needed.

We are surrounded in this season by the sounds and sights of joy – family gatherings, parties, and laughter. Some of it is real, some is forced, and some is a cover-up for various kinds of pain and disappointment. Many of us are reminded, by the very nature of the Christmas season, of those who are absent from our family circles. I’m thinking especially of those who have died, whether recently or some time ago. I’m also thinking of those from whom we are separated under various circumstances. Others are burdened by illness or

disappointment or anxiety. Some are acutely aware of the chaos of our world. And so we have come together this evening seeking comfort and strength from each other and from God. You are welcome in this circle.

We did not print an order of service, so let me tell you that we will be lighting candles, listening to scripture, listening to a read reflection, and praying, all interspersed with singing Advent and Christmas carols and other songs.

This evening we confess that we are profoundly in need of God's mercy, so let us sing "Kyrie Eleison," the Greek words meaning "Lord, have mercy."

Sung Confession: "Kyrie Eleison"

Assurance of God's Grace

1 John 1:5-7

Lighting the Advent Wreath:

Leader: We light the candle of Hope as we await the coming of Jesus, who is our source of hope. *(candle of hope is lit)*

People: Thank you, Lord, for the gift of hope, in our times of emptiness.

Leader: We light the candle of Peace, knowing that Jesus is the Prince of Peace. *(candle of peace is lit)*

People: Thank you, Lord, for the gift of peace in our times of uncertainty.

Leader: We light the candle of Joy, knowing that our comfort and help come from God. *(candle of joy is lit)*

People: Thank you, Lord, for the gift of joy in our times of sadness.

Leader: We light the candle of Love, knowing that God is love revealed to us in Jesus Christ. *(candle of love is lit)*

People: Thank you, Lord, for the gift of love in our times of loneliness.

Leader: In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

People: The Word became flesh and lived among us, full of grace and truth.

Leader: In him was life, and that life was the light of all. We light the Christ Candle, knowing that Jesus is our hope, our peace, our joy and the source of love.
(the Christ candle is lit)

Lighting our own Candles

All who wish, may come forward to light a candle in memory of someone, in prayer, or as a sign of hope – it is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness. During the lighting, we will sing "Come and Fill Our Hearts with your Peace."

Hymn: "Come and Fill Our Hearts with your Peace"

Scripture:

Our first scripture reading comes from the Book of Isaiah. It was written in a time when many

of the people of Judah had been taken as captives into exile in Babylon, and were feeling crushed and without hope.

Isaiah 40
Psalm 121:1-8

Hymn "Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence"

Silence

Gospel Reading:

Matthew and Luke describe Jesus' birth Bethlehem with stories of visits from shepherds and Magi. But John's gospel speaks of Jesus as God's word for all humanity, as God's word spoken through this one born into a hurting world. He also describes Jesus' birth as light in our darkness.

John 1:1-14

Silence

Reflection (*Excerpts from "Christmas is Good News, Isn't It?" Canadian Mennonite, December 21, 2009, pp 4-6. Used by permission.*)

If Christmas is good news, why then do so many people experience it as such a difficult and painful time? There are probably numerous reasons for this, but one of them has to do with what we have done with the Christmas season.

Think of how the typical Christmas cards portray the story: Beautiful sentimental scenes of a confident and calm Joseph, a radiant Mary and a peacefully sleeping baby Jesus, all surrounded by cute and cuddly animals. Is this the truth about Christmas?

According to popular tradition based on the Gospel of Luke, Jesus was born in a stable. A stable is a place where animals are kept. Stables come complete with certain animal byproducts and the annoying flies these byproducts attract and the pungent odours they give off. But where in the Hallmark cards do we see the manure, the flies, the cobwebs, the stench?

In the Hallmark version of Christmas, the stable has been pressure-washed, the animals have all showered recently, and Mary looks absolutely nothing like an exhausted young woman who has just gone through hard labour after a long journey and given birth to her first baby in a barn far from the familiarity of home and family.

It is easy to see why Christmas cards don't tell the truth. Realistic portrayals of the birth of Jesus are not likely to sell very well. And so we sentimentalize and romanticize Christmas, and turn the story of Jesus' birth into a perfect event that lacks the pain, agony and unpleasantness that characterize the story as told in the New Testament.

Maybe it is precisely this false perfection that prevents many people from experiencing Christmas as good news. Christmas in our society has become about perfection. Christmas cards give us a perfect stable, a perfect Mary and perfect animals. Television commercials

promise us the perfect gift received in the context of a perfect family. No wonder Christmas is not experienced as good news by many people.

No wonder the men at the hostel feel their loneliness and alienation all the more intensely at Christmas. No wonder poor and marginalized people feel their poverty and marginalization all the more acutely at Christmas. No wonder grieving people feel overwhelmed by the waves of pain. When there is deep pain and brokenness in your life, there is not much good news in a perfect Christmas. People who are hurting are not likely to find themselves at home in a perfect Christmas.

But the real good news of Christmas is that Jesus was born in a barn. The Lord of this universe came to us as love incarnate in the form of a baby born to poor peasants. This baby was born in a dark, stinky, fly-infested stable.

And that is good news. God comes to us not in and through perfection. Jesus the Christ was born into a world where there is manure, obnoxious disease-spreading flies, and where far too often life stinks. And that is good news. Christmas is not about Jesus being born into perfect stables or perfect families or a perfect world. Christmas is about Jesus being born into a world that is deeply broken and hurting, a world in need of healing and redemption. Our Christmas cards, malls and TV commercials want us to deny, or at least turn away from, the pain, suffering and brokenness of our world. But there is not much good news in that, because if we dare to be honest with ourselves we know that many forms of brokenness are all too real in our world.

The good news of Christmas is that God does not turn away from precisely such a world, but God decides to become immersed in it. God sends Jesus the Christ to enter into the world's pain, and to bring light and hope and joy and peace and new life. The good news of Christmas can be summarized by the words of John 1:5: *"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."*

Christmas is ... about Jesus Christ entering the darkness of every ... time and place (including ours), to bring light, healing, forgiveness, renewal and abundant life. Christmas is about Jesus coming into the darkness with God's promise that some day all of creation will be bathed and illuminated and renewed by the healing light of God, and that we can receive and walk in that light today. Indeed, Christmas is good news, isn't it!

Silence

Prayer:

Let us pray:

God of compassion, you have given us your own Son, Jesus Christ, to be for us the great physician, making the broken whole and overcoming even the darkness of death and despair with new life and hope. We thank you for the one who touched the untouchable, reached out to the dying, and brought healing and wholeness to those who had despaired of mending.

Touch our wounds, relieve our hurts, and restore us to wholeness of life, through this same Lord Jesus Christ. Set our troubled souls free, O Lord, from restlessness and anxiety. Uphold us by your strength. Anchor us upon the rock of your faithfulness. Give us your peace and power and so keep us that in all times of trouble and distress, we may know you hold us close.

Indeed, you are faithful, O God. You not only give us your word that can be trusted but you also lend us your ear for our comfort. Hear us now as we offer silently our prayers for the people and situations represented by the candles, and for the needs that are hidden deep within our spirits. *[Silence]*

Grant us, O God, the fullness of your promises. Where we have been weak, grant us your strength; where we have been confused, grant us your guidance; where we have been distraught, grant us your comfort; and in all times and circumstances grant us your peace.

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 blessing we ask in the name of Christ who taught us to pray together saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven
Hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.
Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil;
For yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory for ever.
Amen

Hymn: "Silent Night"

Benediction:

It may be that some of you would like to have someone pray with you personally, and there are people who are ready to do that. After the benediction our associate pastor, and some of the deacons and I will be available here at the front to pray with anyone who comes forward and requests that. Now I invite you to join in the final blessing:

Jesus Christ is the light of the world,
the light no darkness can overcome.
Stay with us, Lord, for it is evening,
and the day is almost over.
Let your light scatter the darkness
and illumine your people.

Postlude