

Mill Grove Christmas Eve Communion Service

The Promise of Dawn



The service begins with a lighted candle on a map of the world, bread and wine, and the first scene on the triptych. There is reflective Christmas music.

Leader On Christmas Eve we pause to prepare our hearts as we revisit the manger, at Bethlehem. At the still point of the turning world, we are ready to receive God's gift of Jesus with fresh wonder. The three pictures of this year's triptych set the coming of the Christ-child within the Bible story: the Promise of the Dawn; Light Shining in Bethlehem; and, Eternal Day. During this communion service we focus on the first of these.

Song

Darkness like a shroud covers the earth;
Evil like a cloud covers the people.
But the Lord will rise upon you,
And His glory will appear on you-
Nations will come to your light.

Arise, shine, your light has come,
The glory of the Lord has risen on you!
Arise, shine, your light has come,
Jesus the Light of the world has come. *Graham Kendrick*

Leader Tonight as we gather near the Greenwich Meridian and remember friends and family around the world...
Starlight dances overhead.
Moonlight floods in cascades of shimmering ecstasy.
While the whole world hums with vibrant expectation.

Men Tonight...
Women Tonight is the night of hope.
Men Tonight...
Women Tonight is the time of release from the darkness of death.
Men Tonight...
Women Tonight is the night of restoration.
Men The night of the promise of dawn
Women The night of birth and new beginnings.

Sharing God's Gift of Peace

Leader In great love and wisdom, O God, you created this universe, making stars to dance and the light to sing, sunsets and dawns, seas to roar and waves to rise, mountains to challenge and inspire us, animals to leap and plants to flourish. You made humankind to be your children, so that we might walk, and talk freely with you, as your partners in caring for creation.

But we rebelled. Seeking freedom, we gained bondage to sin. Seeking wisdom, we found lies. Seeking immortality, we found death. Like rebellious children we ran from your presence; distanced ourselves from you and denied our heritage. When the promised dawn came at Bethlehem, we preferred darkness to light. But in grace and love You continued to reach out to us in Jesus Christ, your beloved Son, offering us restoration and healing, peace, and reconciliation through His death on the cross. As those who are made one in and through Him, let us share the Peace.

Leader May the peace of Christ be with you all

All And also with you

All share a greeting of peace

Hearing God's Word

Isaiah 9: 1, 6, 7

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; *on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned*...For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.

Isaiah 60: 1-3

Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the LORD is risen upon thee. For, behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people: but the LORD shall arise upon thee, and his glory shall be seen upon thee. And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to *the brightness of thy dawn*.

Malachi 4: 1-2

For, behold, the day cometh, that shall burn as an oven; and all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly, shall be stubble: and the day that cometh shall burn them up, saith the LORD of hosts, that it shall leave them neither root nor branch. But unto you that fear my name *shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings*; and ye shall go forth and grow up as calves of the stall.

NT Reading Luke 1: 76-79

And thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Highest: For thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways; To give knowledge of salvation unto his people By the remission of their sins, Through the tender mercy of our God; Whereby *the dayspring from on high* hath visited us, To give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, To guide our feet into the way of peace.

Triptych One: The Promise of the Dawn

Message

Anyone who takes the time to read, or even google, history will find that the default mode of humankind, individually and socially, seems to settle on darkness rather than light. But still the so-called “progressives” are always surprised when wars break out. Since Christmas 2021 it has been the Russian invasion of Ukraine that has provided the latest horrific evidence of the recurrence of darkness. We dream of things getting better than the “barbaric” old days. The favoured term for this dream is “Enlightenment”: when by human reason and effort we build a better world without reference to God or anything or anyone beyond the realm of “science”.

We avoid or ban words like “sin”, “evil”, “repentance” from our language, and like ostriches burying our heads in the sand, imagine that life today is like daylight. There is a denial of darkness: a defiance of the fact of fallen, helpless human beings, vulnerable, and overwhelmed by evil, suffering, and the finality of death. For such progressives there is a longing for utopia, heaven on earth, but it involves denying that humankind has shown no long-term collective ability or will to repent, and admit the futility and defeat of all human projects aimed at betterment.

For those like the great prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, the reality of sin, wickedness and gross thick darkness in every human civilisation and the niches of human heart, was painfully and acutely obvious. And they longed for a dawn, the dawn of a better age, of justice, peace and love.

But they had the humility to see that it would come not the labours of humankind, but by the grace of God.

And God revealed to them that although the darkness was indeed like a suffocating blanket, the light still shone, and the promised dawn would come. The four readings all refer to dawn in different ways (these are in *italics*). In time the message they received coalesced into a remarkable and counter-intuitive truth. Out of an unpromising shoot from the broken stump of Jesse would come a Saviour, and He would be God coming in human flesh: Jesus, Emmanuel.

It is our privilege to live in the period called AD or CE. This means we can see how the dawn came. But for them it was an act of trust and faith, that God would never leave nor forsake them. That dawn would come as promised.

Worldwide tonight there are those longing for dawn in their personal lives, households, communities, and nations. The night has been long: those in slavery, in prison, ruled by dictators, those suffering loss, experiencing grief, the hungry, homeless and without heat or light; those without hope.

And this is where Christmas brings a ray of light and hope. God has already come among us, moved into our neighbourhood, and so the first signs of dawn have arrived. There is no short cut or miracle solution, but nothing can now separate any human being from the love of God in Christ.

However black the darkness, the Promised Dawn has come, and no power or institution can prevent its rays reaching into the darkest and seemingly most God-forsaken places. This is why we can pray in Christ with confidence...

Praying for our Family and World

Candles are lit from the Bethlehem candle and placed on different parts of the world. The location, and one or more of the extended family associated with that place, are named so that we can pray for them together in the silence.

Breaking Bread Together

All Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hidden: cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy name; through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Leader Jesus Christ came as the Sun of Righteousness, the Dayspring from on high, to dispel the darkness of our hearts. In his light let us examine ourselves and confess our sins.

A Time of Silence

Leader Lord of grace and truth, we confess our unworthiness to stand in your presence as your children.

All We have sinned: forgive and heal us.

Leader The child who was born for us lived without sin.

All We have sinned: forgive and heal us.

Leader We have preferred darkness to light. Your precious gift to the world was despised and rejected. Forgive the ways in which we have neglected or spurned your grace.

All We have sinned: forgive and heal us.

Leader The One for whom, and through whom, all things were created, showed us how to live in harmony with each other, and with every part of the natural world.

All We have hurt each other and planet earth: forgive and heal us.

Leader The One you appointed to be ruler of the world was crucified. Forgive the ways in which we have been unfaithful to our rightful Lord.

All We have sinned: forgive and heal us.

Together Almighty God, who forgives all who truly repent, have mercy upon us, pardon and deliver us from all our sins, confirm and strengthen us in all goodness, and keep us in life eternal, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Leader With thanks and praise, O God, we come to your table of love. For Jesus our Christ on the night in which he was betrayed took bread, gave thanks and broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat, this is my body which is given for you. Do this, as often as you eat in remembrance of me." After the supper, Jesus also took the cup and when

he had given thanks, he gave it to them, "Take and drink, this cup is my blood which is shed for the many for the forgiveness of sin. Drink all of it in remembrance of me." God so loved this world that he gave us the gift of his Son. Rejoice and be glad for this child of Mary is the Saviour through whom we have eternal life. Father God, send your Holy Spirit now so that we may dance for joy in the light of your promise of hope.

All Let this gift of salvation be ours for time and eternity.

Leader God's grace has called us here; let us partake of Christ's gift for all ages.

All Amen.

The Bread is taken and broken, and shared with the words:

The body of Christ was broken for you...Thank you.

The Wine is poured, and shared with the words:

The blood of Christ was shed for you...Thank you.

Leader May God bless you and keep always in the arms of Christ, the love of God given to us for all eternity. **All** Amen.

Declaring our Faith

We believe in God the Creator, who made us and all things, giving us all the gift of life, who set us on our path in this world.

We believe in God the Saviour, who is one with the Creator, who rescued us and all creation from the dire consequences of our violations against God and creation. This man, Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, the Light of the World, took on human form having been born of Mary through the power of the Holy Spirit. He lived and worked in this world among people just like us. He walked God's path to death on a cross, and rose from the dead to open our pathway to eternal life.

We believe in God the Holy Spirit, our Counsellor and guide, who is one with the Creator and the Christ, who through the body and blood of Jesus brings us into communion with all people, past, present and future; who calls us to walk a sacred way of life through this world, caring for creation and the people we meet on the way, loving them, helping them, welcoming them without prejudice, being God's hands and feet in the world, being God's messenger of the good news of Jesus Christ.

The candles are taken and placed beside the map as the final song by Timothy Dudley Smith is sung, leaving just the candle on Bethlehem.

The darkness turns to dawn, the dayspring shines
from heaven,
for unto us a child is born, to us a son is given.

The Son of God most high, before all else began,
a virgin's son behold him lie, the new-born Son of
Man.

God's Word of truth and grace made flesh with us to dwell;
the brightness of the Father's face, the child Emmanuel.

How rich his heavenly home! How poor his human birth!
As mortal man he stoops to come, the light and life of earth.

And still God sheds abroad that love so strong to send
a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord, whose reign shall never end.

Blessing

Leader May we know the light and warmth of His indwelling this Christmas and for evermore. We say The Grace together as we wait for the dawn.

All The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit
be with us all evermore, Amen.

The candle on Bethlehem remains, a sign that the Light of Christ still shines in the darkness. Quiet music is played.

(This 2022 service follows a pattern developed over many years at Mill Grove. It is adapted each year so that the theme can be explored all through. This year it has been shared online as a resource in households everywhere. The words and music of the two songs, and the Bible passages, can be found online. If there is anything you would like to discuss or share with us, please let us know by email: millgrove@btinternet.com.)