

# Blue Christmas Service

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Date: 21 December 2020

Preacher: Pastor Cathy Hall Stengel

[ 0 : 00 ] Ch radigan Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

[ 2 : 55 ] Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you. And as we begin this first part of our service, which is called a liturgy of lament, the response is the same.

And you'll see it up on the screen in between myself and Pastor Bill sharing. For those of you who don't know, this is Pastor Bill Edmister.

[ 5 : 15 ] And we have some parts of our band here. And we have a guest accompanist, Roberta Senker, who is the accompanist at the Harris Hill United Methodist Church and a very long-time friend.

So let us begin. It's cold here.

I said the wrong thing. I said the wrong thing. I said the wrong thing. I said the wrong thing. Then I didn't say something I should have. All my relationships are messy and lots of them painful.

Restore us, O God. Restore us, O God. Let your face shine that we may be saved. It feels like too much. Too much for any one or two or 200 people to do.

To repair, to engage, to heal. Restore us, O God. Let your face shine that we may be saved. Amen.

[ 6 : 38 ] And you see all of this. You know all of us. You hear our cries. You feel our tears. And I really hope you really are coming.

Restore us, O God. Restore us, O God. Let your face shine that we may be saved. Oh, and please hurry. Amen.

Amen. I have traveled many moonless nights, cold and weary, with a babe inside.

And I wonder what I've done.

Holy Father, you have come. And chosen me now to carry your Son.

[ 8 : 30 ] I am waiting in a silent prayer.

I am frightened by the load I bear. In a world as cold as stone.

Must I walk this path alone? Be with me now.

Be with me now. Breath of heaven. Breath of heaven.

Hold me together. Be forever and near me. Breath of heaven.

[ 9 : 43 ]    Breath of heaven. Breath of heaven. Light in the darkness. Pour over me, your holiness.  
For you are holy. For you are holy. Breath of heaven. Breath of heaven. Through you are  
holy. Breath of earth. King for you are holy. Breath of heaven.

Breath of heaven. You are holy.

As you watch my face, if a wiser one should have had my place, God, I offer all I am for  
the mercy of your plan.

Help me be strong, help me, help me.

[ 11 : 09 ]    Breath of heaven, hold me together, be forever near me.

Breath of heaven, breath of heaven, light of the darkness.

For over me, your holiness, for your holy. Breath of heaven, hold me together, be forever  
near me.

Breath of heaven. Breath of heaven, light of the darkness.

Breath of heaven. Breath of heaven. Breath of heaven. For you are holy. Breath of  
heaven.

[ 12 : 34 ]    Breath of heaven. Breath of heaven.

Breath of Heaven Breath of Heaven Will you pray with me?

God of mercy and love We gather here today as hurting people bringing our pain, our  
sorrow and our confusion to this safe space tonight O God, meet us in our darkness and  
give us freedom to struggle together as we seek your presence We ask for strength for  
today courage for tomorrow and peace for the past Amen Have you noticed like I have  
that a lot of Christmas cards that we receive have a very simple but beautiful picture on  
them It's a manger scene Some in black silhouette Some in more elaborate detail Maybe  
a bright star overhead

A drummer boy Or maybe three kings bringing gifts Mary and Joseph looking down with  
love at the newborn baby Jesus as he peacefully sleeps in the hay This is how most of us  
grew up thinking of the Christmas story as one of the great joy and excitement forgetting  
that in reality It is a story of a young girl unwed and pregnant It is a story of a carpenter  
whose betrothed gets pregnant and not with his child It is a story of a baby born in a barn  
surrounded by the smell of farm animals There were no doctors nurses or midwives there

Not even a beloved family matriarch to oversee the birth to wrap the newborn baby up or  
to offer rest to the weary mother or hapless father It is a story of refugees who had to flee  
from a jealous king Now the likes of this story today are not to be found usually in the  
comforts of a starry sanctuary like this one or in the sparkle of a busy mall or even in the  
warmth of a private hospital birthing room But there are times when stories such as this  
play out in our own homes in our own lives in our own pain Sometimes our Christmas  
story contains fear disappointment sorrow and despair

[ 16 : 40 ]    During the Advent season we light the candles of hope love joy and peace and these  
candles remind us of God's gifts to us gifts that we celebrate not because we already have  
them but because we in our world so desperately need them We need hope to meet our  
despair We need love to meet our disappointment frustrations and loneliness we need joy  
to meet our grief and sorrow We need peace to meet our poor health our anger and our  
fear And we need a place where we can simply be be with our own pain and suffering and  
know that we are not alone that God is with us

Tonight we remember that God came into this world amidst violence oppression and despair and he brought forth life from the darkness Tonight we remember that God is with each one of us in our challenges and sufferings We remember that God has brought life to the world and that life is the light of all people The light shines in the darkness darkness and the darkness will never overcome it Amen It's been a year It's been a year And while I can stand here in this context of a blue

Christmas service and say that no one I love who is close in my family has died this past year It's been a year of loss It's been a year of gain It's not all dark and sad but it's been a different kind of feeling of grief Grief about things not being the way they should Watching my son and his wife live in fear as they anticipated the birth of their first child really really afraid that one of them would end up with COVID which would mean that they would not be able to be together at the birth of their son and they were blessed that that did not happen and Charlie came into the world after a hard fight but he came into the world kicking and screaming as he would want

I thought maybe as grandparents our inability to be at the hospital to be in the room and to hold him and kiss his face I thought that would be a terrible awful feeling and yet we were there virtually and I had learned that that really could be a way of connecting it didn't prepare us for the months to come when Charlie got sick and not only could we not be at the hospital with him we could not even hold our son and his wife and the grief was great because the one thing parents have always thought that we could do is to bring reassurance when our children are hurting and the times when we cannot do that in this strange and sometimes awful year have created an environment where we grieve and we grieve differently people have not only mourned the loss of loved ones they've mourned the loss of mourning their loved ones because there hasn't been that sitting vigil at the hospital or in hospice or wherever we might find ourselves it's been that kind of grieving year big funerals with church dinners and lots and lots of people it just hasn't happened and so as I think about this journey of the advent and the waiting and the watching and the grieving and the light and life yes because

Charlie is well our son our other son faced life threatening infection and surgery and to be in a family where we had to choose either his father or his mother or his partner in life but not all of us and I think we all shed tears of grief and loss around that because it's just what we know to do when something's wrong we show up and as church people as people of faith families that's what we do we show up and so during this season of advent I was so moved when

[ 22 : 54 ] Nancy and the band did this song breath of heaven a few weeks ago because there was that part of it that allowed my heart to cry out hold the hurting that's now healed but you know I don't know about you but sometimes in the moment when things are stressful we just keep going we just keep moving and then sometime later on when things are better we'll hear a song or somebody will say something and all of a sudden we'll realize just how much we needed all of that strength and that courage and that faith that is described in the song breath of heaven hold me comfort me help me be strong it's a season of trying once again to remember to trust in Jesus there

Roberta actually introduced me to this book it's by Max Licato and it's called you are never alone trust in the miracle of God's presence and power and when you came in there were copies out there and I invite you to take them to take them and to read this and I just want to share a part of it he talks about how we find ourselves forgetting that we are under the care of God's ever-present help and that when we feel like we're like the weather veins on top of a church or house or a barn and we're flipping this way and we're flipping that way here are his words we are not weather veins whipped around by the winds of fate and chance we are the children of a mighty and good God who cares for us

John says in chapter 20 verse 31 Jesus is the Christ the son of God and there it is there's the hope the hope of John the hope of this book that we would believe not in our power and not in humanity's ability to help itself because we have seen that we're not always very good at that helping ourselves not in good luck but that we would believe in Jesus Jesus as the Christ the Messiah the anointed one Jesus as the son of God he wants you to know you are never alone you are never without help or hope or strength you are stronger than you think because God is nearer than you might imagine and hear this it's a poem but it's made up of scripture I know everything about you I know when you sit down and when you rise up

I've numbered the hairs on your head I've adopted you into my family before you were the size of a freckle in your mother's womb I knew you you are my idea and I have only good ideas you won't live a day longer or less than I intend I love you as my own child I will take care of you none of this love them and leave them stuff with me I love you with an everlasting love I can't quit thinking about you you are my treasured possession let's do great things together nothing will ever separate you from my love part of what advent has been for me in the music in this space is the holiness the sacredness of light light in the darkness and sometimes when grief washes over us I've described it a little bit like driving a truck down a dusty road and we're driving along I picture my great aunt and uncle's ranch in Oklahoma and they drive like the wind and the dust rolls and rolls and comes up behind them because it never rains and the roads aren't all paved and when they come to a stop at a stop sign if my great uncle decided to stop because you could see for miles that there weren't any other cars coming but if he did stop the dust would just roll over the car maybe that's why I didn't stop but I think that's how it is with grief that we go and we go and we go and it isn't until sometimes after that all of a sudden we find ourselves in a cloud of dust and we weep or we rage or we wonder or we find the relief that comes in the tears in the darkness

Jesus is the light of the world and there is nothing that can extinguish this light of the world MILLON Amen.

[ 29 : 33 ] Tonight we gather to mourn those whose lives have been lost around us and among us.

For so many, this pandemic has taken loved ones.

We mourn the loss of those close to us and those whose names we do not know. We mourn those who perished while working to save other lives.

We mourn those who died, not of the pandemic, but of other causes. And we mourn the loss in many cases of our ability to be with them as they passed.

Our loss of gathering together for comfort in the ways we needed so much. I invite you to repeat after me.

[ 30 : 47 ] We mourn this loss of life. We honor and remember these beloved. We pray for comfort and peace.

Amen. Amen. A prayer for bow is to never.

I hope. Pardon? Thank you.

Tonight we mourn the loss of livelihoods and security. For so many, this year the pandemic and all that it brought with it has taken security.

For some food, for others shelter, the security of care for families and medical care. We mourn the loss of businesses that could not withstand the circumstances.

[ 32 : 18 ] These were not just businesses, but dreams born of passion and hard work. We mourn those who find themselves needing to rely on others for help, when what they really want to do is to be able to help others.

Would you repeat after me? We mourn this loss of livelihood. We mourn this loss of livelihood. We honor and remember the dreams now deferred.

We honor and remember the dreams now deferred. We pray for sustenance and resilience. We pray for sustenance and resilience. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Thank you.

Thank you.

[ 33 : 59 ] Thank you.

We mourn this loss of love. We honor and remember the work of prophets who proclaim justice. We honor and remember the work of prophets who proclaim justice.

We pray for compassion and change. We pray for compassion and change. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

We mourn this night the loss of liveliness.

[ 35 : 41 ] For so many, this year has robbed us of energy and enthusiasm, our sense of well-being.

We mourn teachers and leaders and caregivers and workers who are struggling to help those in their care, themselves exhausted and needing the sustenance that they give to others.

We mourn the loss of all who are suffering with anxiety and depression, who are finding it difficult to live each day with fullness or to find hope for tomorrow.

We mourn those we have lost to suicide. We mourn those who find themselves addicted to substances in order to ease the pain that feels unbearable.

We mourn those who are experiencing their place of shelter as an abusive place from which they struggle to escape. Would you repeat after me?

[ 36 : 40 ] We mourn this loss of liveliness. We mourn this loss of liveliness. We honor and remember that each person is precious and whole.

We pray for recovery and renewed vigor.

We pray for recovery and renewed vigor. Amen.

And now we light a fifth candle, just as we will do later this week on Christmas Eve. We light this as a sign of our belief.

We believe in the light that has come and is coming. This light casts its glow on all the surrounding prayers we have prayed.

[ 37 : 34 ] This light resides within us, perhaps dim for a time, but always lit, an ember of the holy inside of us.

This light reminds us that we are not alone. In Isaiah 2, Isaiah 9, starting in verse 2 and verses 6 and 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 upon his shoulders, and he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Of the greatness of his government and peace, there will be no end. So you have these candles and you have these cards.

And so what I would like us to do is, Roberta is going to play In the Bleak Midwinter. We talked a week or so ago among the staff about what hymns or songs have been in our heart in a way that maybe moves us more this year.

[ 39 : 01 ] And the staff gathered and the answers were, O come, O come, Emmanuel. Come thou long-expected Jesus in the bleak midwinter.

And we realized that every one of these songs or hymns was us crying out to God to come to us. Come to us. Come, Jesus.

Come, Emmanuel. Come in this midwinter and light the flame to remind us of your presence. So as Roberta plays, if you would like to bring your candle up and your card bill, we'll speak the name.

And Roberta will be playing, but it's okay. We hear it. And we will light your candle. Joseph Zupo, my father.

90-year-old Betty Wokovlo, dear friend. 60-year-old Julia Steli, cousin.

[ 40 : 33 ] Beloved husband James Phillips. Mark Ketz.

Mark Ketz.

Virginia Mesor. Midland Leffler. Elmer Leffler. Helen Mesor.

Frank Mesor. John Scapelli. Phillip Golson.

James Wagner. Naomi Himes. Jim Phillips. Rhonda George. And Brzeskas family.

[ 41 : 37 ] For those who are grieving, lost by death, or lost by dreams.

The Sinkler family. The DeLong family. All those struggling due to mental illness. Dies computation for us.

homelessness will always get away with us. Hud legga. Jim Viopi. oleg bendischen Steliizondes. him to be possible of wisdom to carry possiamo back in start, our responsibilities with ■■■■■ Ramon Lord.

Giving us down, dear obligation, giving Vit Calbes, his food and good welcome. Imagine our hearts will be presented as a healing. Paul ■ år tastes like comida, Thank you.

Thank you.

[ 43 : 30 ] Thank you. Thank you.

As we go from this place, I would invite us, Adrian, can you lower the lights? Take in the lights, the candles, the wreaths.

Recognize that every one of us walks sometimes through the darkness. Sometimes we find ourselves in the blue of Christmas.

And so we come time and time again. Oh Lord, light our way.

And may we be the light that can sometimes light another's way. Be the light, Lord Jesus. Be the light.

[ 45 : 22 ] You may go in peace. I invite you, as I said, to take a book. You can take your candle if you would like. Just be careful that you don't spill hot wax on yourselves.

Thank you again for the beautiful music, for Adrian's help, and for Pastor Bill joining me in this space. May it be well.

Amen. Amen. And we go here.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.