



Mount Calvary Connected

December 29, 2022

Mount Calvary Connected is a weekly newsletter sent out at the end of each week. Our goal is to keep you connected to your church and your faith with messages from our pastors, information about upcoming activities at Mt. Calvary and more!

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LIVE STREAMING WORSHIP SERVICE INFORMATION

Mt. Calvary hosts live broadcasts of the liturgy at 8:45 AM Sunday mornings. The broadcast can be heard by tuning your radio to 88.3 FM if you are near the church. We also stream these services live over the internet. Simply visit www.mt-calvarylutheran.org and click "Live Radio Broadcast" from the home page on Sunday mornings.

Weekly worship bulletins can be found at: www.mt-calvarylutheran.org/bulletins/

Readings & Sermon from the Past Sunday

Listen to the readings and the sermon from this past Sunday on our website: <https://www.mt-calvarylutheran.org/sermons/>

A Message from Pastor Jonathan & Christmas Greeting from Bishop Paula Schmitt

Our celebration of Christmas continues! As many of you hopefully know, the "12 Days of Christmas" are actually AFTER Christmas in this week and a half or so which we continue the celebration before Epiphany.

In lieu of a message from Pastor Scott or I, this week we're sharing the Christmas greeting from Bishop Paula Schmitt of the Allegheny Synod.

Yours in Christ,
Pastor Jonathan

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' So, they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. Luke 2:15-16

Some people say that shepherds have it easy—all they do is stand in a field and watch sheep. Well, that isn't all they do and if you know anything about sheep, you know that a shepherd's job can be frustrating. Sheep are not the brightest of animals; they have a mind of their own; they scare easily and don't see well enough to get anywhere on their own. That's why they need a shepherd. The shepherds

who were watching their flocks by night in the Christmas story from Luke can add courage to their resumé.

An angel appeared out of nowhere with a message about a sign from God which terrified them. Then, they decided, even in their fear, to go, see and tell.

We don't know how far they traveled or how many sheep they had to manage on the way to Bethlehem. We do know that when they arrived in Bethlehem they found exactly what the angel proclaimed: a baby wrapped in bands of cloth lying in a manger and two ordinary people watching over this little one who would grow into the Savior of the world.

Going and seeing are not easy things to do—even if you have a message from an angel explaining what you will find. The real test of courage might be what comes next. The story tells us the shepherds "...made known what had been told them about this child." They told the story of Jesus to all whom they met.

As we celebrate this season, you are invited to be like the shepherds: go, see, and tell. Go to the place where you hear the message of Jesus faithfully proclaimed; see the way Jesus is opening for you to tell others of his love, grace and mercy. If it's scary, remember what the angel told the shepherds, "Do not be afraid."

Merry Christmas.

+Bishop Paula, Pastor Kevin and Michelle

Annual Congregational Meeting

Our annual congregational meeting will be held after worship on Sunday, January 15th. The purpose of the meeting will be to approve last year's minutes, adopt a budget for 2023, and appoint and/or elect council members.

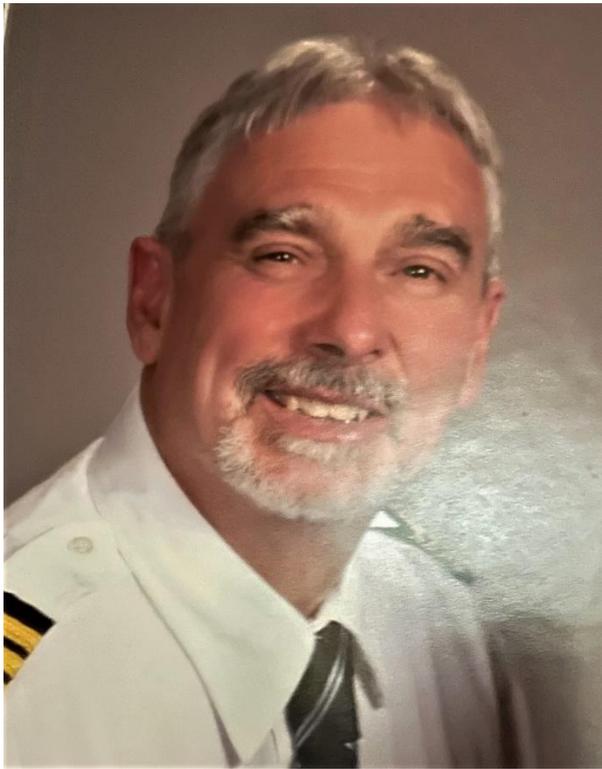
Missy Brodt, Todd Moss, Jeff Penrod, and David Raho have all been nominated for three-year council terms, with Cindy Solarczyk being appointed to complete a one-year term vacated by a previous council member. Pictures and bios are below.



My name is Anne Brodt. I am more commonly known as Missy Brodt. I have been a member of Mount Calvary for over 50 years. My parents, children, and grandchildren are members too. My grandparents were also members of Mount Calvary; meaning we're now in our fifth generation of participation. I taught Sunday school for 10 years while my children were growing up. I participated in the groundbreaking ceremony for the current church, helped on various committees including the one planning the church anniversary a few years ago, served on altar guild, and am currently on church council. During my first term on council, I helped with a wide array of administrative and financial tasks. When not at church, I enjoy spending time with family and friends and my pup Lady.



My name is Christopher "Todd" Moss. I was born in J-town in 1970. I am married to Jill Moss. I am also neighbors of Mark & Deb Rychak. I graduated from Richland High School in 1988. I am the owner of Penske Truck Rental in Johnstown. I was awarded 2nd Degree Black belt at Joe Goss Karate. I enjoy anything on two and four wheels, fishing, and spending time with my golden retriever. My faith journey has been a solo adventure, but when I am with my Mt. Calvary family, I realize I am at home. I truly love helping as communion assistant, participating in the music program, and attending bible study. I am honored to be nominated.



My name is Jeff Penrod. I am a long-time resident of Richland Twp and have 40 years of experience in the construction and aviation industry. Others have appreciated my professionalism, integrity, management skills, energetic personality, work ethic, and compassion for the needs of others. I care deeply about my community and serving as a council member for Mt. Calvary will allow me to bring my experience and confidence into a leadership role as I serve and walk with the Lord. I have 3 children and 5 grandchildren. I reside with my wife Susan and together we own Pilot Trucking & Excavating LLC. I am excited and proud to be part of council and am eager to contribute to the culture and growth of the church.



My name is David Raho. I was born and raised in Uniontown, Pennsylvania and have lived in Johnstown since 1995. I am an attorney who has a general practice with a focus on family law and criminal law. My office is located on Market Street in Johnstown. I have also been a part-time Cambria County Public Defender since 2000. Along with my wife Melissa and our son Luke, I live in Richland. I enjoy skiing and tennis and am an avid Miami Dolphins fan. My family has belonged to Mount Calvary for a little over five years now. I look forward to serving on Council and assisting with the continued positive growth of Mount Calvary.

Upcoming Meetings/Events

Coffee Social: January 1st at 8:00 a.m.

Property Committee Meeting: January 10th at 6:00 p.m.

Youth Committee Meeting: January 11th at 6:30 p.m.

Annual Meeting: January 15th at 10:00 a.m.

Volunteer at Family Kitchen: January 15th from 10-1

WELCA: January 16th at 6:00 p.m.

Church Council Meeting: January 17th at 6:30 p.m.

Social Ministry Meeting: January 19th at 6:30 p.m.

Snow Camp at Camp Sequanota: January 27-29

Coffee Hour

The evangelism team will be having a coffee hour the first Sunday of every month. We will be offering refreshments before the Sunday service from 8 a.m. until 8:45 a.m. Hope to see you there!

New Year's Day, Sunday January 1, is the 1st Sunday of the month, and we will have our coffee social beginning at 8 a.m. before service. Start the new year with us and have coffee and breakfast treats!

Family Kitchen Opportunity

Mt. Calvary will be helping out at the Family Kitchen on Sunday, January 15 from 10-1. They are still doing take out on weekends so our responsibilities will include packing/taking out meals, washing dishes, and cleaning the kitchen. If you would like to volunteer, or donate cookies, please contact Mike Kozak at 244-6880. This is a great event to start the new year by helping those in need!

Scheduled Worship Help

Ushers:

Saturday, December 31st: Dave & Stacey Saloka

Sunday, January 1st: Mayket Family

Saturday, January 7th: Hiltz Family

Sunday, January 8th: Mayket Family

Saturday, January 14th: Hiltz Family

Sunday, January 15th: Mayket Family

Saturday, January 21st: Jackie Carpenter & Jack Weisbrodt

Sunday, January 22nd: Mayket Family

Saturday, January 28th: Jackie Carpenter & Jack Weisbrodt

Sunday, January 29th: Mayket Family

Readers/Communion Assistants:

Saturday, December 31st: Jack Weisbrodt (Communion Assistant: Joan Bunnell)

Sunday, January 1st: Ray Leverknight

Saturday, January 7: Cindy Buday & Todd Moss

Sunday, January 8th: Rebecca Daly

Saturday, January 14th: Jack Weisbrodt & Ida Mary Williams

Sunday, January 15th: Carter & Laura Bower

Saturday, January 21st: Mark & Paige Williams

Sunday, January 22nd: Laura Bower & Marybeth Heinze

Saturday, January 28th: Kevin Oleksa & Cindy Solarczyk

Sunday, January 29th: Ray Leverknight

Those interested in volunteering may contact Pastor Scott to sign up.

Snow Camp!

The snow camp is for Grades 6-12 and is at Camp Sequanota. Registration is online at the camp's webpage, or see Pastor Jonathan for more info!

Children's Sunday School

Children's Sunday School for youth in preschool, elementary, and middle school is ongoing! See Pastor Jonathan for more information.

Poinsettias

Given in Honor of:

Loved Ones, given by Stan & Debbie McQuaid

Children & Grandchildren, given by Gayle Swartz

Logan, Jillian, Carson, Jocelyn & Cole, given by Mimi (Missy)

Jerry & Ruth Pozun, given by Children & Grandchildren

Hunter & Casey Bergman, given by Mom & Dad

Bethe H. Shaffer, given by Kim Stayrook

Children & Grandchildren, given by Bob & Cindy Solarczyk

Family & Loved Ones, given by The Layton Family

Children & Grandchildren, given by Paul & Krista Miller

Given in Memory of:

Loved Ones, given by The Solarczyk & George Families

Zakary Lonsinger, given by Mark, Shari, Kelsie & Jared

Loved Ones: Linda McQuaide & Zakary McQuaide Lonsinger, given by Bill, Cara, Kyle & Jordan Lonsinger

Barbara L. Barker, Florence Barker & Clair Barker, given by Jim, Caryn, Harrison, Health & baby Ondesko

Luther & Kathleen Horner & Jenneal F. Crowley, given by Cindy & Al Buday

Catherine Oleksa & Albert Sojak, given by Keven & Chris Oleska

Clair & Florence Barker and Barb L. Barker, given by Rian Barker

Mike & Pauline Nider and Paul & Ann Kormanik, given by the Nider Family

Thomas/Petkosh Family, given by Rodger & Debbie Thomas

Ami & D.J. Shaffer & Donald Shaffer, Jr., given by Kim Stayrook
Andy Peretin, given by Nancy Peretin & Family
Loved Ones, given by Marge Balogh
Our Loved Ones, given by Jerry & Marybeth Heinze
Mary Pauline Read and A. M. Read, given by Nancie Read
Linda McQuaide, Dale Middleton & Zak Lonsinger, given by Stan & Debbie McQuaide
Elaine & Dean Sterner, given by the Sterner Family
Kelly Michaud, given by Randy Sterner
Doreen Griffith, given by Sterner Family
Denise Hayes, Jane & Harold Penrod, given by Susan & Jeff Penrod
Raymond & Dorothy Hite, Sr., given by Joyce, Jason, Suzanne & Sophia Hite
Ray Hite, Jr., given by Joyce, Jason Suzanne & Sophia Hite
Benny & Phyllis Petrarca, given by Joyce, Jason, Suzanne & Sophia Hite
Dan Warman, given by Susan & Rachael Brandau
Norma Culp, given by Michael, Ashley, Gabriel & Elias Kozak
Loved Ones, given by Hadley, Harper & Hudson Pozun
Linda McQuaide, given by Mark, Shari, Kelsie & Jared
George & Pearl Pearson, given by Krista & Paul Miller
Leroy & Avonel Miller, given by Paul & Krista Miller
Paul Swartz, given by Gayle, Chris, Tiffany, Wendy, Keith & Grandchildren
James & Dorothy Pozun, given by Children, Grandchildren & Great Grandchildren
Mary & Otto Kendzora, given by Joyce, Jason, Suzanne & Sophie Hite
Glenn A. & Laverne Trent, given by Daughter, Joyce Spangler & Granddaughter, Brittany Spangler

World Hunger Gifts

Given in Honor of:

Children & Grandchildren and In Memory of Loved Ones, given by Dick & Lois Sholtis
Shannon, Justin & Kate, given by Gloria Reed
Parents & Grandparents, given by Jamie & Katie McMullen
Grandchildren, Hadley, Harper, Hudson and Penelope, given by Ruth & Jerry Pozun

Given in Memory of:

George, Jean, Debbie, Linda Jean & Brian Tressler, given by Wayne Tressler
Parents: Charles & Louise Ling and Sister: Beverly Kocis & Sister-in-Law Maxine Ling, given by Kathy Ling & Karen Giunta
Loved Ones given by Susan & Rachael Brandau
Kathryn Zeger, Rev. Henry Reed & Violet Reed, given by Gloria, Shannon & Justin

Rev. Ron Reed, given by Gloria, Shannon, Justin & Kate
Departed Loved Ones, given by the Layton Family
Howard Hiltz, given by Wilma Hiltz & Family
Parents & Loved Ones, given by Rick & Lois
Parents, Kenneth & Stella Stull, given by Sharon E. Stull
Parents, given by Ruth & Jerry Pozun

2023 Offering Envelopes Available in the Narthex

The envelope numbers have been changed from the prior year. Those who donate apart from an envelope should make note of their new number once the new year begins. Those who presently don't have envelopes, but desire them, should contact the church office.

Altar Guild

We are reorganizing for 2023. We can never have too many helpers for this important service, so if we haven't approached you yet, please tell anyone you see cleaning up after services that you'd like to help. Join us any time. We'll show you what to do!

Communion Bread Sign-ups

Communion bread sign-ups for 2023 are low. Though a number of families have signed up for a month at a time lately, this is not necessary. Please sign up to donate bread for even a week so we might be reminded of how there is one bread for the one Body of Christ.

"Looking to heaven without looking past earth"

by Jonathan Tran

In the evangelicalism I grew up in, people talked about heaven a lot. We longed for the pearly gates. And why not? Heaven meant being with God forever. We shared the gospel in hopes that others would get saved and get in. "Got heaven?" we asked. We promised a dreamy world beyond this world's nightmares. We read scripture, sang songs, and tried to be patient for that one day at the end of our days. We couldn't wait for heaven.

Not so much now. Heaven seems to have dropped off the Christian radar, even in the evangelical world I still largely inhabit. It now feels more like a distant memory than a future hope. It doesn't come up in theology books. Hardly a word gets said about it at church. One might catch a glimpse of it in a sermon, but things quickly move on to what really matters, whatever that's taken to be. The mention of heaven always risked offending non-Christians. Now it seems to offend Christians too.

My evidence for a sea change on all things afterlife is largely anecdotal. But if it is true, how did heaven end up with such a bad rap?

Much of the problem lay with the evangelical idea of heaven itself. Heaven is rhetorically anti-world. Whatever we don't like about this world, heaven promises the opposite. Those who hunger here dine in heaven, finally arriving at that unending buffet. Those suffering now will dance later on streets

paved with gold. Injustice will be met with justice, brokenness with wholeness, loneliness with intimacy. All these heavenly promises can't help but make this world feel rather glum.

Valorizing this world with the next required casting this world as decidedly meh—by surrendering much that makes the world good. Believing that the coming world entailed this world burning away, we set in motion a self-fulfilling prophecy. The world literally started to burn, with death-dealing global warming arising as too many Christians had already moved on to greener pastures. We ignored cries for justice, reasoning that only God's final justice would save us. We disregarded bodily life and health, looking past earthly bodies for heavenly ones.

We didn't know how to look to heaven without looking past earth. So we gave up both—and lost sight of how, in the Christian theological imagination, the two go together.

Now we've overcompensated for our mistakes. Now the world takes up all of our attention, fills out the Christian imagination. It's not that we've rejected heaven so much as that it no longer occurs to us.

When the fate of the world is the crux of the story, the afterlife is an afterthought. Why think about justice later when we can pursue justice now? We don't want a new heaven and a new earth; we want a more heavenly version of this earth. We want our eschatologies realized, the apocalypse now; anything else would be a tease.

I've been party to this move. In my work as a theologian, I've worried out loud that overmuch attention to heaven is a convenient distraction from community, environment, and creation. In a recent book I called *Christians to God's justice and mercy now*, justice and mercy I claimed as natural to this world because they're natural to God.

I don't think I was entirely wrong, but clearly I was reacting to something. Nowadays I'm rethinking things again—and wondering if those embarrassing evangelicals weren't onto something we all need to recoup.

As I turn 50, I find myself longing for heaven like never before. Perhaps at 50 one has seen enough go wrong that one just wants things to be put right. I've lost enough people who I want to see again. The persistence and pain of injustice make final justice look pretty good. The world's many estrangements make God feel that much farther away, deepening a hunger for a proximity that this world can at best only approximate. At 50, one becomes more aware of what's past than what's to come, of life's countless disappointments, the pain of broken relationships, and the losses of a life, all of which heaven promises to redeem.

In *City of God*, a book almost entirely about the lessons heaven has for life on earth, Augustine says this about heaven: "There we shall rest and see, see and love, love and praise. . . . For what other end do we set for ourselves than to reach that kingdom of which there is no end?" Recent decades have seen Christian theologians at pains to soften Augustine's dim view of this world, of what he called "the unhappiness of this life." They did so in good faith, in hopes of regaining territory Christians surrendered under the spell of too much heaven talk.

Now that the pendulum has swung the other way, perhaps it's time to return to Augustine's sense that we can only appreciate this world by appreciating its temporary nature, that the best way to love it isn't absolutely, that we see it best when we see through it to all that God promises beyond it, that we make the most of it by not making too much of it. Proper faith in the world means coming to terms

with the fact that all things will be made well—but not here, not now. Some things are so broken that nothing in this world, neither the king’s horses nor the king’s men, can put them back together again.

Wanting the best for this world means wanting its proper end, its final rest in God. Longing for heaven is for Augustine the way of Christianity, journeying from this world to the next.

Jonathan Tran teaches theological ethics at Baylor University in Waco, Texas.

Alpha Course

Mt. Calvary will be hosting the Alpha Course beginning February 21st. The 11 weekly sessions will explore Christian faith. Watch for sign-up information in early 2023.

Birthdays and Anniversaries for the Week: January 1 – January 7, 2023

Jan. 1 - Melissa Raho

Jan. 2 - Ed Brandau & Natalie Williams

Jan. 3 - Jeffrey McKool

Jan. 4 - Jacob Shaffer

Jan. 5 - Susan Kimmell, Donald Sauter, & Dolores Schneider

Jan. 7 - David Brehm IV

Remember those that prayer has been requested for:

Linda & Dick, Claudia Plows, Maddie Pierce, Gladys Haupt, Bill & Linda, Jose & Family, Dave, Tom, Lt. Hunter Bergman, and Lt. Dylan Merchant, Harold, Rick, Shirley, Debbie, David, Lauren, Billy, Barb, Sara Solarczyk, Jackie Janak, Jack, Corinne, Joan, Dan, Natalie Zerby, Pastor Scott Custead, Luella Koontz, Al Lindner & Family, Bob, Dawn, Stacy & Josh, Bob Trotter, Bill Layton, Deb Zilch, Bennett, Cassy Sojak, Paul Miller, Keith Mayket, Ruth, Pete, Teplitza Family, Ken, John Nerone, Dane Wisner, Jeff, Irene, Karen, Erin, Susan Dyers, Bob McMullen, Wyatt George, Larry Hockensmith, Jean Pellon, Mike, Corey, Pastor Jonathan & Family, Roxanne Horner, Miriam Horner, Becky Lilja, Kathy P., Al Johnson, Chris, Donna & Danny, Cheryl, Jennifer & Family, Jaime, Matt & Ashley, Landon, Linda Haberkorn, Lorraine, Joe, Donna, Danny & Family, Becky Jo, Bill, Linda & Family, Mary, Mary Jane, Janice, Rick, Don, Mabel Ann, Betty, Cathy, Cindy, Jill, Theresa & Family, Dean, Madi & Family, Patty & Family, Sydney & Family, Paulette, Ron, Andrea, Mary Ann, Midge, Rayford, Lois A., Nicole, Trent, Kyle, Anna, Beverly, Sondra, El Warshel, Audrey Rubis, Carol, Katey, Janice, Trina & Family, Jake Wissinger, Candi Walker, Dave Brehm, Chrissy-Baby Emma, Wyatt, Gerald Barrick, the Shreffler Family, Louise, Kim, Devin, Laura & family, Dorothy, Jo Ann, John Alt, Jan Mertz, Denny, Jill Lisson, Jaci, Dominic Megia, Jackie Hauger, Sharon, Barbara, Louise & Family, Dennis, Mary M., Joel Penrod, Tim Miller, Cathy T., Paul Brodt, Kim Stayrook, April & Schuyler, Alan, & Pastor David Louder.

Condensed Worship for Christmas Eve, December 24, 2022

Prayer of the Day

P: Almighty God, you made this holy night shine with the brightness of the true Light. Grant that here on earth we may walk in the light of Jesus' presence and in the last day, wake to the brightness of his glory; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

First Reading: Isaiah 9:2-7

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. You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

P: The word of the Lord,

A: Thanks be to God!

Psalm 96

P: Sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth.

A: Sing to the Lord, bless the name of the Lord; proclaim God's salvation from day to day.

P: Declare God's glory among the nations and God's wonders among all peoples.

A: For great is the Lord and greatly to be praised, more to be feared than all gods.

P: As for all the gods of the nations, they are but idols; but you, O Lord, have made the heavens.

A: Majesty and magnificence are in your presence; power and splendor are in your sanctuary.

P: Ascribe to the Lord, you families of the peoples, ascribe to the Lord honor and power.

A: Ascribe to the Lord the honor due the holy name; bring offerings and enter the courts of the Lord.

P: Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness; tremble before the Lord, all the earth.

A: Tell it out among the nations: "The Lord is king! The one who made the world so firm that it cannot be moved will judge the peoples with equity."

P: Let the heavens rejoice, and let the earth be glad; let the sea thunder and all that is in it; let the field be joyful and all that is therein.

A: Then shall all the trees of the wood shout for joy at your coming, O Lord, for you come to judge the earth.

P: You will judge the world with righteousness and the peoples with your truth.

Second Reading: Titus 2:11-14

The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.

P: The word of the Lord,

A: Thanks be to God!

Gospel: Luke 2:1-20

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.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

P: The gospel of the Lord.

A: Praise to you, O Christ!

Sermon by Pastor Scott Klimke

For several months this year, a number of us gathered to take a look at select psalms. We started with the psalms most used in worship and worked our way down the list, with plenty of psalms still remaining. I believe the first psalm we spent some time with was Psalm 98. We don't get Psalm 98 tonight. It's appointed for use tomorrow, on Christmas Day. Tonight, we get Psalm 96. But the two psalms do share some things in common.

For one, both the psalms begin with the charge to sing a new song. To be specific, Psalm 96 calls us to sing to the Lord a new song. And then, changing it up just a bit, Psalm 98 calls us to sing a new song to the Lord. What's the new song we're to begin singing tonight?

On a night when we sing golden oldies, and wouldn't have it any other way, this may not be an easy question to answer. Thanks to Dan Gresh and his helpers, we've got a few unique, musical wrinkles to our service. I've often heard Bach's "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring" played or sung at weddings. Tonight, we've got it on Christmas Eve and it works quite nicely; with this being the night that divinity and humanity forever get married in Jesus Christ. Thanks to Dan for the good idea. But beyond a wrinkle or two like this, it's the usual fare. We don't have "Jingle Bells," "Frosty the Snow Man," "Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer." But we do have "Joy to the World," "Away in the Manger," "Silent Night," and more in the same vein. As I've said, there's nothing really new here. But we're still called to sing a new song. What is it?

Thankfully, Psalm 96 and 98 can be of further help. Another one of their common features is that they have our non-human neighbors singing with us. In Psalm 96, seas, fields, and trees ring out with joy, as the heavens join in for good measure. As for Psalm 98, it adds clapping rivers and ringing hills to the choir first introduced by Psalm 96. And, in spite of what I suggested earlier, some of our traditional Christmas carols do pick up on this. Think "and heaven and nature sing!" Think "fields, floods, rocks, hills, and plains repeat the sounding joy!" Might this be what makes the song we're to sing tonight "new"? Might our song be "new" because it includes not just us humans, but the rest of creation too? There's likely something to this, but what is it? What could get fields, floods, rocks, hills, and plains to repeat our sounding joy?

One answer would be an end to the human overreach and rebellion so costly to our non-human neighbors. In our reading from Isaiah, we hear that the birth of the Prince of Peace shall lead the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood to become fuel for the fire. What's warfare other than human overreach; a bloody feud caused by someone's dissatisfaction with what they have in life. And then in our reading from Titus, we hear that the grace of God which has appeared in Jesus Christ is meant to teach us self-control. What's self-control, if not the absence of overreach! Maybe some of what we hear tonight is meant to illustrate what St. Paul is getting at in the eighth chapter of his letter to the Romans when he says nature longs and pines for more than we have given it. Maybe fields, floods, rocks, hills, and plains are ready to party tonight because they think we're about to learn from Jesus that it's a joy and a privilege to be who we are in our own small corner of the universe; such a joy and a privilege in actual fact that we have no need whatsoever to rebel against our identity and place in life in the ways that have long been so costly for the rest of creation.

Think about it! If our non-human neighbors have something to teach us, it may very well be that we can be at peace with who we are, where we live, and what we do. A trip Julia and I took to celebrate our wedding anniversary this spring confirmed this for me over and over. Traveling throughout parts of Arizona, Nevada, and California proved to be one of the most spiritual experiences of my life. I didn't see it coming, but maybe I should have.

The fact is that my soul has always been touched by the sight of blooming rhododendron in the spring of the year. I very much like having rhododendrons in our yard and I used to like the sight of blooming dogwoods just as much. The flowers come and go rather quickly. But they don't squawk or fuss. They know they're beautiful and worthwhile and that God will take care of what lies beyond their reach. Might this be a lesson for us?

Well, let's consider the sequoia tree as well. These trees stand in the same place for thousands of years at a time. Their travel itinerary and list of cultural experiences is rather limited. It's the same place and the same scenery always. But are they ever regal. And the size of their pine cone certainly shows no sign of supersized ego. Or what about the Joshua Tree, the Barrel Cactus, the Prickly Pear, the Saguaro Cactus, and all sorts of other desert flora I don't know by name? I couldn't get enough of these creatures. They're all different. They have our individuality and obviously so, but they don't move; guarding their rather meagre lots as if they were the most precious real estate imaginable.

And then you've got water-washed caverns; horseshoe curves; grand canyons; mountains; waterfalls; rock faces of some renown and other rock formations which could hold their own with Mount Rushmore and Crazy Horse. All of these non-human neighbors contentedly occupy their own small corner of the universe, vying for nothing more, and have still managed to astound and thrill and amaze generation after generation. They teach us that so much of our angst, so much of existential dread, so much of our internal disquiet, so much of our self-medicating lust, so much of our self-effacing envy is a complete waste. It's good to be who we are. It's good to occupy our own small corner of the universe. It's good to experience the whole spectrum of existence. Otherwise, Jesus wouldn't have left the glories of heaven to become one of us in every respect and without a single revolt or rebellion. The clear message is we don't have to be more than who we are. Being who we are most of the time is just fine; a joy and a privilege if truth be told. It's what nature teaches us. It's what Jesus, God-in-the flesh, teaches us. And on this night, there is at least some evidence that it's all beginning to sink in.

We find this evidence in our reading from Luke. On the night of Jesus' birth, after angels speak and sing, the shepherds party like it's 1999 and Mary is as quiet as a church mouse. I'd suggest to you these are two sides of the same coin. As the opening lines of Luke's account of Christmas shall forever remind us, the shepherds and Mary were members of a supposedly backwater nation under the greedy and ruthless thumb of Imperial Rome. And this wasn't the only thing that would have made them feel like second-class citizens. As shepherds in one case, and a woman in another, they would have ranked down at the bottom of the social pecking order of their time. But in spite of what everybody else said and thought, including maybe Mary and the shepherds themselves from time to time, in the city of David a Savior who was Christ the Lord had been born for them. With the referenced Savior on the scene, most of the time there was no need for sleepless nights; no need for self-loathing looks in the mirror; no need for get rich or get out of Dodge schemes. Even with some jagged edges needing attention from time to time, Mary and the shepherds could be who they were more often than not and Christ the Lord who was their Savior would take care of the rest. Jesus had been born for them, not as they might be, but as they were. In keeping with its intent, this filled Mary with the peace which surpasses understanding. On the other side of the coin, and also in keeping with its intent, the same news filled the shepherds with a joy which couldn't be stifled or contained. With

heart, mouth, or both, Mary and the shepherds were with the rest of creation ready to sing to the Lord a new song; thanking the Lord with the rest of creation for the love and the almighty care which made being themselves in their own small corner of the universe a joy and a privilege. In, by, and through the Holy Spirit, may we join this new song often. Amen!

Prayers of Intercession

P: With wonder and thanksgiving for Christ's coming into the world, we pray for the church, the life of the earth, and the whole human family.

P: Your infinite love is born to us this night. With choirs of angels, the church proclaims the good news. Send us out as messengers of the hope that has come to all people. God of grace,

A: hear our prayer.

P: You are pleased to dwell with your creatures and the whole earth sings for joy. Renew the splendor of creation from the smallest cell to the widest galaxies. Guide us to be wise stewards of your gifts for the sake of generations to come. God of grace,

A: hear our prayer.

P: Your authority is over the nations. Break the rod of oppression in every land and free all people from fear. Bring peace where there is war, compassion where there is suffering, and healing where there is disease. God of grace,

A: hear our prayer.

P: You cherish those who are most vulnerable. Protect infants and children and bless those who care for them. Watch over women giving birth, attend the dying, and relieve any who are in pain (especially). Shelter refugee families and those who have no home. God of grace,

A: hear our prayer.

P: Your lovingkindness embraces everyone in need. Help any for whom this season is lonely or joyless. Comfort those among us, or known to us, who are experiencing distress of body or mind, missing loved ones, or grieving (especially). God of grace,

A: hear our prayer.

P: You welcome those who have died into the joyous light of glory. We give thanks for the saints of every time and place who have praised you with lives of faith and humility. Inspire us by their example to love you by serving others. God of grace,

A: hear our prayer.

P: Pondering the mystery of eternal love made flesh in Christ Jesus, we commend all for whom we pray to the mercy of God.

A: Amen.

Blessing

P: Grace from God's own heart, peace from the ✝ Child in the manger, and strength from the Spirit of life be blessings for you today and forever. **Amen.**