

Christmas Eve Service & Livestream
NPMC – December 24, 2021 – 7 pm
Compiled by Co-Pastor Susanne Guenther Loewen¹

Prelude

SUSANNE: *Welcome to our evening Christmas Eve service, both to those gathered in the sanctuary and those joining via the livestream. We have a beloved tradition of reading the Bible's Christmas story and singing carols on this day. Today, we'll have a variation on that: a Canticles of Christmas service. The Canticles of Christmas refer to the four songs or poems included in the Nativity story at the beginning of the Gospel of Luke, in those familiar first two chapters (Luke 1:5-2:40). In more liturgical traditions, these are known by their opening words in Latin: the Song of Mary (also known as the Magnificat); the Song of Zechariah (Benedictus); the Song of the Angels (Gloria in Excelsis Deo); and the Song of Simeon in the Temple (Nunc Dimittis). In Luke, Jesus' birth is foretold, announced, and celebrated with songs, making our tradition of Christmas carols that much more meaningful.*

I'd like to thank our readers, Dean Stockdale, Colin Ens Funk, Ella Ens Funk, and Kelly Winder, as well as our musicians, the Musica Tribus group. Thanks also to James Ens Funk and Jeff Olfert for running the sound and livestream.

As we read through the biblical story from the NRSV of Luke's Gospel, when we get to a canticle, it will be sung instead of read, so watch for those four canticles as we prepare our hearts for Jesus' birth with story and song.

CONGREGATIONAL HYMN: VT 210 – O Come, O Come, Immanuel (v. 1, 4, 7)

KELLY: *Call to Worship*

**Giver of all that is good,
We thank you today for the gift of your Son, Jesus Christ,
Who was born into poverty in a hard and cruel time,
Who gives himself to us
And lives with you in glory.**

**We thank you for all your friends and prophets who have gone before us,
And those who taught us to celebrate this feast of the Nativity with beloved Scripture, and
beloved carols, and loud rejoicing;
Help us to teach those who come after us that Christmas is a holy time, a time to seek
reconciliation and peace.
Bless us, Lord, as we seek Christ in the lowly mangers of this world,
Bless us as we seek to honour the mystery of the Incarnation in our midst,
Remembering always that you made us, and all humanity, in your divine image.
Help us to gladly welcome, today and all days,
Your Wisdom, your Power,
Your Emmanuel, your Prince of Peace.² AMEN**

¹ Adapted from: Timothy Wilds, "The Canticles of Christmas," <https://www.reformedworship.org/article/september-1992/canticles-christmas-singing-songs-zechariah-mary-angels-and-simeon>

HYMN: VT 216 - Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming

The Birth of John the Baptist Foretold

SUSANNE Narrator: In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. ⁶ Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. ⁷ But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

⁸ Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, ⁹ he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. ¹⁰ Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. ¹¹ Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹² When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. ¹³ But the angel said to him,

DEAN Gabriel: “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. ¹⁴ You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. ¹⁶ He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

COLIN Zechariah: “How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.”

DEAN Gabriel: “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. ²⁰ But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.”

SUSANNE Narrator: Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. ²² When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. ²³ When his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

²⁴ After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion.

ELLA Elizabeth: ²⁵ “This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.”

Special Music – Carol of the Bells (Instrumental)

² Adapted from: *God with Us: Rediscovering the Meaning of Christmas*, ed. Greg Pennoyer & Gregory Wolfe (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2007), 129.

The Birth of Jesus Foretold

SUSANNE Narrator: In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth,²⁷ to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary.²⁸ And he came to her and said,

DEAN Gabriel: "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."²⁹

SUSANNE Narrator: But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

DEAN Gabriel: "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.³¹ And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.³² He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David.³³ He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

ELLA Mary: "How can this be, since I am a virgin?"

DEAN Gabriel: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.³⁶ And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren.³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God."

ELLA Mary: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

HYMN - VT 221 – The Angel Gabriel Called Mary Blessed

DEAN: MARY – by Julia Baker-Swann³

After visitation by living light,
she went where roses grew wild.
Held a layered bloom
in her trembled hands,

to be still

while a shaft of sun swirled
through each petal,
lit as if from within.
This pulsing
not just her astonished heart.
This pleasure
not just breeze on bare skin.

³ Julia Baker-Swann, *Summoning Advent Stillness: A Season of Contemplation and Resistance* (Detroit: Geez Press, 2020), 63.

This stir within her velvet womb
in resonance with the song
she has always heard
rippling through warmed roses.

The Cantic of Mary (Luke 1:39-55)

SUSANNE: Narrator: ³⁹ In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰ where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴² and exclaimed with a loud cry,

ELLA Elizabeth: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³ And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴ For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

SUSANNE: Narrator: ⁴⁶ And Mary said,

SPECIAL MUSIC - VT 412 – My Soul Cries Out

SUSANNE Narrator: And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.

The Cantic of Zechariah (Luke 1:68-79)

SUSANNE Narrator: ⁵⁷ Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. ⁵⁸ Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.

⁵⁹ On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. ⁶⁰ But his mother said,

ELLA Elizabeth: "No; he is to be called John."

SUSANNE Narrator: ⁶¹ They said to her,

ALL: "None of your relatives has this name."

SUSANNE Narrator: ⁶² Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. ⁶³ He asked for a writing tablet and wrote,

COLIN Zechariah: "His name is John."

SUSANNE Narrator: And all of them were amazed. ⁶⁴ Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. ⁶⁵ Fear came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. ⁶⁶ All who heard them pondered them and said,

ALL: “What then will this child become?”

Narrator: For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.

⁶⁷ Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy:

SPECIAL MUSIC – Words: VT 223 – Bless’d Be the God of Israel; Tune: VT 546 (see Lynn’s transcription)

SUSANNE Narrator: ⁸⁰ The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.

The Birth of Jesus

SUSANNE Narrator: In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ² This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³ All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴ 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. ⁵ He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷ 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.

HYMN: Singing group: VT 268 - Helpless and Hungry & congregation: VT 267 - What Child is This?

Helpless & Hungry v. 1 (singers) followed by What Child is This v. 1 (congregation)

Helpless & Hungry v. 2 (singers) followed by What Child is This v. 2 (congregation)

Helpless & Hungry v. 3 (singers) followed by

What Child Is This v. 3 (congregation) with Helpless & Hungry v. 3 sung simultaneously

The Canticle of the Angels (Luke 2:14)

SUSANNE Narrator: ⁸ In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them,

DEAN Angel: “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹ to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.”

SUSANNE Narrator: ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

HYMN: Angels We Have Heard on High (VT 249)

SUSANNE Narrator: ¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another,

ALL Shepherds: “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.”

SUSANNE Narrator: ¹⁶ So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

The Canticle of Simeon (Luke 2:29-32)

SUSANNE Narrator: ²² When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord ²³ (as it is written in the law of the Lord,

KELLY Reader: “Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord”),

SUSANNE Narrator: ²⁴ and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord,

KELLY Reader: “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.”

SUSANNE Narrator: ²⁵ Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. ²⁶ It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. ²⁷ Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, ²⁸ Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

SPECIAL MUSIC – VT 833 – Save Us, O Lord – congregation can join on the Evening Refrain; singing group sings all English verses

SUSANNE Narrator: ³³ And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. ³⁴ Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary,

KELLY Simeon: “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed ³⁵ so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

SUSANNE Narrator: ³⁶ There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, ³⁷ then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. ³⁸ At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

³⁹ When Mary and Joseph had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. ⁴⁰ The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

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COLIN: There is a tradition in France of children helping to prepare the nativity scene piece by piece in preparation for Christmas. “For each prayer or act of kindness that they perform during the season, they place a piece of straw in the manger. With each token of straw, the children are preparing the place for Christ to be born...

DEAN “The custom of preparing the crèche [or nativity scene] mirrors the act of Christians preparing their hearts for the arrival of Emmanuel, God with us. On this night, the eve of the Nativity, we open our hearts to receive the gift of the Christ child, born among us. All through Advent and now on this first night of the Christmas season, we ourselves become the manger, inviting Christ to dwell within us just as he found rest in that Bethlehem stable.”<sup>4</sup>

ELLA In the words of 14<sup>th</sup>-century mystic Meister Eckhart, “We are all meant to be mothers of God,” bringing God to birth in this world in acts of love.

**KELLY: Benediction** – Blessed are You Who Bear the Light by Jan Richardson<sup>5</sup>

Blessed are you  
who bear the light  
in unbearable times,  
who testify  
to its endurance  
amid the unendurable,  
who bear witness

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<sup>4</sup> “Christmas Eve: History of the Feast” in *God with Us: Rediscovering the Meaning of Christmas*, ed. Greg Pennoyer & Gregory Wolfe (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2007), 118-119.

<sup>5</sup> Jan Richardson, “Blessed Are You Who Bear the Light,” *Circle of Grace: A Book of Blessings for the Seasons* (Orlando, FL: Wanton Gospeller Press, 2015), 47-48.

to its persistence  
when everything seems  
in shadow  
and grief.

SUSANNE: Blessed are you  
in whom  
the light lives,  
in whom  
the brightness blazes—  
your heart  
a chapel,  
an altar where  
in the deepest night  
can be seen  
the fire that  
shines forth in you  
in unaccountable faith,  
in stubborn hope,  
in love that illumines  
every broken thing  
it finds.

*Closing Hymn: VT 244 - Silent Night (v. 1 German, v. 1, 2, 3, 4 English)*

*Postlude*