

**St. Peter's Evangelical Lutheran Church & Elementary School**  
**Our Mission: Learn God's Truth, Share Spirit's Healing, Follow Jesus' Ways.**  
**NATIVITY of CHRIST**

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**The CHURCH'S GATHERING**



**CONFESSION and FORGIVENESS**

We bless and praise the God of the Trinity,  
Holy Child, † Heavenly Father, and Spirit of Life,  
whose steadfast love is everlasting. **Amen**

In hope and joy, we confess our sin in the presence of God and of one another. *Silence is kept for reflection.* God-with-us, **we confess that we have turned away those seeking shelter, claiming there is no room when we have plenty. We have made power and wealth our idols, while you show us true glory: a baby in a manger. We have overlooked the shepherds, expecting good news in prettier packaging. Too often, we have valued violence instead of your peace. Turn us from our ways to your ways. Grant us the grace to begin again. Free us from all that keeps us bound, and forgive our sin, through Jesus Christ, who gives himself for us. Amen**

Hear the good news and rejoice! You are God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, † forgiven in Christ, and freed to respond in joy. **Amen**

**CAROL "O Come, All Ye Faithful"**

1 O come, all ye faithful,  
joyful and triumphant!  
O come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem;  
come and behold him,  
born the king of angels:

*Refrain*

O come, let us adore him,  
O come, let us adore him,  
O come, let us adore him,  
Christ the Lord!

2 The highest, most holy,  
light of light eternal,  
born of a virgin, a mortal he comes;  
Son of the Father  
now in flesh appearing! *Refrain*

- 3 Sing, choirs of angels,  
sing in exultation,  
sing, all ye citizens of heaven above!  
Glory to God  
in the highest: *Refrain*
- 4 Yea, Lord, we greet thee,  
born this happy morning;  
Jesus, to thee be glory giv'n!  
Word of the Father,  
now in flesh appearing: *Refrain*

Text: attr. John Francis Wade, 1711-1786;  
tr. Frederick Oakeley, 1802-1880, sts. 1, 3-4; tr. unknown, st. 2

### **GREETING and PRAYER of the DAY**

The grace of our Savior Jesus Christ, the Son of God  
sent from heaven above, is with you all. **And also with you.**

Holy God, **hear our prayer.** *A brief silence.* All-powerful and unseen  
God, the coming of your light into our world has brightened weary hearts  
with peace. Call us out of darkness, and empower us to proclaim the birth of  
your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you  
and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

### **GOD'S WORD**

#### **FIRST READING: Isaiah 52:7-10**

*Isaiah proclaims news of great joy: "Your God reigns!" Just as God saved the  
people from oppression in Egypt, God delivers Israel from exile. All the earth  
will witness the saving acts of God.*

This is a responsive reading from the prophet Isaiah.

How beautiful upon the mountains

are the feet of the messenger who announces peace,

**who brings good news, who announces salvation,**

**who says to Zion, "Your God reigns."**

Listen! **Your sentinels lift up their voices,**

**together they sing for joy;**

for in plain sight they see the return of the LORD to Zion.

Break forth together into singing, you ruins of Jerusalem;

**for the LORD has comforted his people,**

**God has redeemed Jerusalem.**

The LORD has bared his holy arm

before the eyes of all the nations;

**and all the ends of the earth shall see**

**the salvation of our God.**

**SECOND READING: Titus 2:11-14**

*God saves us not because of what we do. Rather, God is a God of mercy and salvation who graciously cleanses us in baptism and renews our lives through the Holy Spirit.*

This is a reading from the letter to Titus, chapter 2.

When the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to God's mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. This Spirit God poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

This is the Word of God, word of life.

**HOLY GOSPEL: Luke 2:1-14**

*God's greatest gift comes as a baby in a manger. Angels announce the "good news of great joy" and proclaim God's blessing of peace.*

This is the Good News of the Nativity of Our Savior Jesus Christ, as the Word was given to Luke, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter.

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. 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 God favors!"

This is the Good News of Christ's Victory.

**MESSAGE: Joy** *silence for reflection follows*

**HYMN of the DAY: "It Came Upon the Midnight Clear"**

- 1 It came upon the midnight clear,  
that glorious song of old,  
from angels bending near the earth  
to touch their harps of gold:  
"Peace on the earth, good will to all,  
from heav'n's all-gracious king."  
The world in solemn stillness lay  
to hear the angels sing.
- 2 Still through the cloven skies they come  
with peaceful wings unfurled,  
and still their heav'nly music floats  
o'er all the weary world.  
Above its sad and lowly plains  
they bend on hov'ring wing,  
and ever o'er its babel sounds  
the blessed angels sing.
- 3 And you, beneath life's crushing load,  
whose forms are bending low,  
who toil along the climbing way  
with painful steps and slow:  
look now, for glad and golden hours  
come swiftly on the wing;  
oh, rest beside the weary road  
and hear the angels sing!
- 4 For lo! The days are hast'ning on,  
by prophets seen of old,  
when with the ever-circling years  
shall come the time foretold,  
when peace shall over all the earth  
its ancient splendors fling,  
and all the world give back the song  
which now the angels sing.

Text: Edmund H. Sears, 1810-1876

**The CHURCH PRAYS**

**PRAYERS of the PEOPLE**

Filled with good news of great joy, let us offer our prayers for the church, the earth, and all people. *A brief silence.*

Angels sing with praise, and shepherds run with haste. As we glorify and praise you in this place, send us into the world, proclaiming the salvation you have revealed this night. God of grace,

**receive our prayer.**

The seas roar, and the trees of the forest sing for joy. As creation resounds with praise, inspire us with awe, reverence, and a renewed care for all that fills the fields, skies, and seas. God of grace,

**receive our prayer.**

The nations declare your glory. Uphold the leaders of the earth with your justice and righteousness. Break the rod of the oppressor in every land, and bring peace where there is conflict and civil wars, above all in Ukraine and Russia, Israel, Gaza, Syria, and Lebanon, Yemen, Sudan and Myanmar.

God of grace, **receive our prayer.**

The holy family finds shelter around the animals' manger. Draw near to persons experiencing homelessness, those who are alone this holiday season, and all for whom this world makes no room. Wrap all your children in bands of love and mercy: John, Greg, Genevieve, Mary Lou, Lori, Kathy, Maren and Joe, Ruth, and our at-home worshippers.

God of grace, **receive our prayer.**

A child is born for us and light shines on the weary. Watch over those who give birth this night and attend to those who are dying. Be present in our joys and in our sorrows, when in this season we remember departed loved ones. God of grace,

**receive our prayer.**

*Here other intercessions may be offered.*

The heavenly host praises you. With thanksgiving for Mary, Joseph, and all your saints, sustain us in the blessed hope revealed this night. Fashion us by their example into a people zealous for good deeds, sharing your love and mercy with all. God of grace,

**receive our prayer.**

We commend these prayers to you, O God, trusting your grace made known to all, through the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ, our Leader and Savior.

**Amen**

### **PRAYER for MISSION**

We pray. *A brief silence.* God of heaven and earth, from the beginning, you have called forth life, in which you take delight. The trees, the fields, and the seas sing for joy. Bless now the gifts we've shared, received from your bounty, that we may join the chorus of creation to tell of your salvation from day to day. **Amen**

## **LORD'S PRAYER**

As we await his birth among us, we pray as Jesus taught us.

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name,  
thy kingdom come, thy will be done,  
on earth as it is in heaven.**

**Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us  
our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us;  
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.**

**For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory,  
forever and ever. Amen**

## **BLESSING**

The God of love, Father, † Son, and Holy Spirit,  
lavish you with grace, shine light on your path,  
and increase your joy, today and always. **Amen**

## **CAROL "Good Christian Friends, Rejoice"**

- 1 Good Christian friends, rejoice  
with heart and soul and voice;  
give ye heed to what we say:  
Jesus Christ is born today;  
ox and ass before him bow,  
and he is in the manger now.  
Christ is born today!  
Christ is born today!
- 2 Good Christian friends, rejoice  
with heart and soul and voice;  
now ye hear of endless bliss:  
Jesus Christ was born for this!  
He has opened heaven's door,  
and we are blest forevermore.  
Christ was born for this!  
Christ was born for this!
- 3 Good Christian friends, rejoice  
with heart and soul and voice;  
now ye need not fear the grave;  
Jesus Christ was born to save!  
Calls you one and calls you all  
to gain the everlasting hall.  
Christ was born to save!  
Christ was born to save!

**PEACE**

The peace of Christ is always with you. **And also with you.**

We go with Christ's peace to love and serve all!

**We will Learn God's Truth. We will Share Spirit's Healing.**

**We will Follow Jesus' Way. Amen**

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*Tonight's Altar Flowers are Given to the Glory of God*

In Loving Memory of Marie Sueck for her December 24<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Given by Terri and Rich Murphy.

*Rose Vase*

In Loving Memory of Hazel Matz's December 24<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Given by her son-in-law, Jerry Dohmeier.

*Rose Vase*

In Loving Memory of Madeline Thrift's December 24<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Given with love from her husband, Francis.

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*Tonight's Worship Folders are Given to the Glory of God*

In Honor of our Savior's birthday.

We wish everyone a happy and blessed Christmas.

Given by the Mills family.

## **Announcements**

**Christmas Closings:** The church office and SPES will be closed December 23<sup>rd</sup> – January 3<sup>rd</sup>, reopening on Monday, January 6<sup>th</sup>. We wish you all a blessed and safe Christmas and New Year!

**Christmas Messages:** The Christmas messages from ELCA Bishop Elizabeth Eaton and DE/MD Synod Bishop Bill Gohl are attached.

**Combined Worship:** On Sunday, December 29<sup>th</sup>, we will be celebrating the new-born King together at 9:30 am. There will not be a pre-recorded service posted for 12/29. Regular worship times (8:45 & 10:15 am.) resume on Sunday, January 5<sup>th</sup>.

**2025 Offering Envelopes are available.**





*Now in that same 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.*

—Luke 2:8-9

## *True and lasting joy*

Night. A liminal time. A time when God sends messages and messengers to mortals. A time when nocturnal predators are active. A time when, while the world is asleep, greater vigilance is required of those who keep watch.

And here are these shepherds. Except for Mary and Joseph, they were the first to learn of Jesus' birth. Shepherds figure prominently in Scripture as metaphors for faithful leaders, good kings, compassionate and brave. David was a shepherd boy called into God's service. Jesus declared himself to be the Good Shepherd. But in actuality, shepherding was hard and dangerous work, and shepherds were not considered to be among the elite in society. Shepherds were an out-of-bounds people, living outside of the city, and a little suspect. Why would the news of the birth of the king be announced to them?

What about Bethlehem? The prophet Micah called Bethlehem "one of the little clans of Judah" (Micah 5:2). Even today, Bethlehem would not be counted among the world's great cities. In 1950, Christians made up 86% of the population. Now they are under 10%. Its economy is based on tourism, which has been decimated by the current conflict. Bethlehem is in the occupied West Bank, in a war zone.

To these terrified shepherds, literally sitting in the dark outside of Bethlehem, an obscure town in an occupied province of the Roman Empire, God chose to reveal the birth of the Messiah. What on earth was God thinking? Why not in Jerusalem? Why not in Herod's palace? Why not in Rome, where the emperor claimed to be *soter*, "savior"?

How does the angels' announcement of the birth of the Messiah sound to people living in obscure places, far from the centers of power, in indescribably difficult circumstances today? To those living in Gaza and Ukraine, in Sudan, in the homes of immigrants in this country who fear deportation? To starving children here and across the globe? How dare we wish them "Merry Christmas"?

"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'" (Luke 2:10-11). Joy. Not happiness that is transient and human-made, but joy, given by God, that is deep and strong and unshakable.

Joy is a sign of the reign of God. The root word for "joy" in Greek is the same as that for "grace." "Gift" also comes from the same root, as does "thanks." All of this points to the nature of true joy. It is gift. It is grace. It is thanksgiving. Our word "eucharist," a name for Holy Communion, ties this all together in the sacrament where Jesus' body is broken for us and Jesus' blood is poured out for us. In the eucharist, Christ invades us with God's joy. We are intimately connected to the source of joy and grace in this gift.

Perhaps that is why, in the middle of the night, to terrified shepherds outside of a small town, God chose to send the angels to announce the birth of Jesus. No distraction. No interference. Just the simple, deep, profound gift of true and lasting joy. A joy that comes from God, from the essence of God, depending only on God, that no earthly power can take away.

*Elizabeth A. Eaton*

The Rev. Elizabeth A. Eaton  
Presiding Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America



## BISHOP GOHL'S 2024 CHRISTMAS MESSAGE

*It all arose out of a conversation, conversation within God, in fact the conversation was God. So, God started the discussion, and everything came out of this, and nothing happened without consultation. This was the life, life that was the light of all, shining in the darkness, a darkness which neither understood nor quenched its creativity. John, a man sent by God, came to remind people about the nature of the light so that they would observe. He was not the subject under discussion, but the bearer of an invitation to join in. The subject of the conversation, the original light, came into the world, the world that had arisen out of his willingness to converse. He fleshed out the words but the world did not understand. He came to those who knew the language, but they did not respond. Those who did became a new creation (his children), they read the signs and responded. These children were born out of sharing in the creative activity of God. They heard the conversation still going on, here, now, and took part, discovering a new way of being people. To be invited to share in a conversation about the nature of life, was for them, a glorious opportunity not to be missed.*

Erasmus (1466-1536) a reformer within the Roman Catholic Church, was an editor of the Latin Vulgate Bible; his translation of the Gospel of John, translates the word *logos* not as “word” but “conversation.” *In the beginning was the Word* is rendered *it all arose out of a conversation*. While I am not convinced of the literalness of Erasmus’ translation, these last months, I have been fascinated by it.

*It all arose out of a conversation, a conversation within God, in fact the conversation was God.* Godly conversation is a practice that I wonder if we might reconsider and return to during these holy days and the new year ahead.

Godly conversation refers to a commitment to speak in ways that reflects the character of God. Godly conversation is conducted with kindness, respect, truthfulness, and the intention to build others up, avoiding negativity, anger, and harmful gossip, while actively listening and seeking to understand the other person's perspective; essentially, using your words to honor God in your interactions with others.

In the aftermath of a year where we have not been our best selves, when we have given in to *ad hominem* attacks on the other, in a time when racist tropes have been normalized, among a people who have settled for “truthiness” over real truth, when we invest everyone’s opinions with the power of gospel truth – whether its based in reality or not; Godly conversation would be a return to centering ourselves in Christ, the truth that makes us free.

There are some things we surely can’t “agree to disagree” about – our baptismal covenant spells that out clearly: living among God's faithful people; hearing the word of God and share in the Lord's Supper; proclaiming the good news of God in Christ through word and deed; serving all people following the example of Jesus; and striving for justice and peace in all the earth. Still, when we recognize the indelible image of God in one another, Erasmus’ rendering of John’s Christmas Gospel fairly leaps off of the page: *These children were born out of sharing in the creative activity of God. They heard the conversation still going on, here, now, and took part, discovering a new way of being people.*

The Christmas gospel calls us to Godly conversation, modeling our abiding hope in Christ, discovering a new way of being God’s people for the living of these days, *a glorious opportunity not to be missed.*