

First Presbyterian Church of Independence, MO

A Service for the Hanging of the Greens

WELCOME

The worship service today focuses our attention on a world in need through song, prayer and narration, rather than our usual sermon. As we you encounter the needs of God's people throughout the world, you will also hear about how we as members of the Presbyterian Church, USA, are responding to these needs and providing hope for a better tomorrow.

Our knowledge of God and God's purpose for humanity comes from the Bible, particularly what is revealed in the New Testament through the life of Jesus Christ. Our salvation through Jesus is God's generous gift to us and not the result of our own accomplishments.

It is everyone's job – ministers and lay people alike – to share this Good News with the whole world. As Presbyterians we believe we are called to mission through the discipline of partnership. The one table we gather around is God's table and the one mission to which we are called is God's mission.

As we prepare this building for the arrival of our savior, as we make room in your hearts and homes for the Messiah, let us honor through today's service the more than 140 mission coworkers and young adult volunteers of the PC(USA) for their work in preparing the hearts of those not yet familiar with the good news of the gospel.

BELLS OF THE CHURCH OF THE NATIVITY – Bethlehem

A Palestinian college student is one of the last keepers of a fading tradition – ringing the bells of Bethlehem. Twice a week, Khadir Jaraiseh climbs to the roof of the Church of the Nativity, built over the grotto where tradition says Jesus was

born. He pulls the ropes of four bells in a rooftop tower for a total of 33 times to symbolize the number of years Jesus was believed to have lived.

The bells on the robes of Aaron announced his arrival in the Holy of Holies. An angel of the Lord announced to Mary the arrival of the Holy child. Church bells announce a time of prayer or celebration. Heavenly angels announced the birth of a King. The bells of a church steeple ring out and are heard far and wide. The songs of angels are heard by shepherds and kings throughout the land. The ringing of church bells invites sinners and the weary to rest their souls through the gospel.

Let the bells of our hearts be joyful, constant and disciplined in reaching across nations. The voices of angels invite all who are seeking salvation to gather at a manger.

PRESBYTERIAN MISSION WORK IN THE MIDDLE EAST – The Holy Land

The Middle East is a region that has been of prayerful concern for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) for more than a century and a half. Over the years, educators, theological teachers, medical teams, rural health workers, agricultural experts, engineers and other specialists have been sent as missionaries by the Presbyterian Church. In the 1800s Presbyterians are credited with the establishment of distinguished educational and health institutions in the region.

Today our church's mission commitment is carried out through partnership with churches, church institutions, ecumenical bodies, Christian development agencies and health care programs, seeking to make known the love and compassion of Jesus Christ, and with nongovernmental organizations committed to promoting justice, peace, interfaith understanding and cooperation, stewardship of the environment, human and civil rights, religious liberty and the improvement of the quality of life.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Merciful Savior, the longings of our heart are deep and profound, and the season of Advent, like no other, makes us acutely aware of our yearnings. Bring peace and comfort to those whose lives have been turned upside by the loss of loved ones. Reveal to them the hidden blessings of Christmas that catch us by surprise and warm our hearts. O Lord, you have walked among us and know firsthand how difficult it is for God's children of all ages and nationalities throughout the world. Thank you for reaching out to touch us, for loving us in person. We know that you are able to understand and overcome our weakness, and we are so grateful, Jesus. May we spend this season sharing this blessed message of hope with all we meet.

We pray all this in your Holy name, as you 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 debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil, For thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever. Amen.

PRESBYTERIAN MISSION WORK IN AFRICA – Malawi

The Community Health Evangelism network has made a significant impact in Malawi on hunger, food insecurity and healthy homes. Some of the solutions to improving food security in their communities have been using compost, planting crops that don't need fertilizers, creating a village silo to store the harvest, and encouraging people to start small businesses to gain an income rather than selling their harvest for lower prices. Some villages have started village savings and loans to be able to start small businesses. One village will be working with an agricultural extension agent on improving farm yields. While some of these solutions may seem small, the issues of growing food sustainably and effectively are huge in Malawi and addressing this need is urgent as the country faces continual cycles of hunger.

In addition to focusing on community improvements, the agency encourages a healthy home environment. Individuals are taught to implement healthy practices in their own homes, and then teach families around them how to do the same. Examples of a “healthy home” in a rural context include basic hygiene practices like waste management, washing hands, and growing backyard gardens.

A READING OF HOLY SCRIPTURE, from Philippians (2:6-11)

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross!

Therefore, God exalted him to the highness place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Amen.

GOD’S CHRISTMAS TREE – Tradition

The truth of Christ’s birth and the Christmas Season is that God the Son, the second person of the Trinity, became the babe of the cradle, that He might become the man of the cross, that He might die as our sinless substitute, to release us from the penalty of sin, and reconcile us to God that we might receive eternal life and live abundantly through His life, and all of this as a gift by faith in Christ.

Can we legitimately call the cross of Jesus Christ a tree? Can we think of the tree as that which reminds us of God’s Son and the life He gives us? Yes, in fact, scripture actually refers to both Christ Jesus, His person, His work and His death on the cross, by either the word “tree,” or by terms associated with a tree.

PRESBYTERIAN MISSION WORK – Eastern and Southern Europe

Working in the East and South of Europe, Presbyterian Disaster Assistance is on the ground with mission coworkers from the PC(USA) in response to the Syrian Refugee Crisis, which is the single largest humanitarian crisis since the end of World War II. In the following blog post, PDA coordinator the Rev. Dr. Laurie Krause encourages us to take the spirit of Christmas gift-giving and share it where Jesus would have found himself working.

“Be in the company of those with whom (Jesus) has identified himself: the poor and the broken, the humiliated and the marginalized; those who suffer the abuse of others... If we are to be saved, we must go where salvation takes place – in our streets and in our homes where violence rages, in the dark corners of life where despair seems to hold sway, wherever the innocent are abused or the needy neglected, wherever there is misunderstanding or fear or jealousy. We must go wherever Christ empties himself for (us).”

As we think how we might do that, let us consider these questions: Who did Jesus love? What kind of world are we making if we refuse our world neighbors the hospitality that was extended to us? Amid the refugee crises, how can we let justice pour down like a flood and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream? Amid the threat of terrorism, how can we align our hearts with Jesus, who answered the violence of the cross with trust in God and love for humanity?

COMMISSION AND BLESSING

Take time, in the busyness of this season, for quiet reflection, for the light of God’s love is discernible everywhere. Let yourself be surprised by wonder, and set aside time to offer quiet thanks. The good news of Advent is this: Christ is coming. Christ is always coming. Let us welcome Christ into our hearts, be guided by his ministry, and go forth in hope. Amen.