

Longest Night Prayer Service



Wednesday, December 10, 2025

7:30 p.m.

The Second Week of Advent

St. Stephen's Episcopal Church
Richmond, Virginia

Greetings and welcome to St. Stephen's Episcopal Church. Tonight's prayer service offers a sacred time and place for all to rest in God and to offer the sorrows or grief that keenly touch our heart in the mirthful holiday season. There is no grief or sorrow, no truth of loss or distress that cannot be brought before God's heart of compassion, for by the miracle of the incarnation God stands in absolute solidarity with the fullness of the human experience. "Longest Night" refers to the winter solstice, when we live through the shortest day and longest night of the year. The darkness of night symbolizes the suffering and fear that is part of the human experience. From the winter solstice, daylight gradually lengthens into the verdant renewal of life in springtime and the warmth of summer. So too, we experience times of inner darkness and suffering, and we long for healing and renewal. The Christian life holds the fullness of this reality in the light of the divine hope revealed through Christ Jesus' life, suffering, death, and rising. We are grateful for your presence and prayers this holy night.

The sacred space of this church is open to all for rest, contemplation, and prayer from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m., Monday through Thursday. A contemplative worship service similar in character to this service is offered Sundays at 5:30 p.m.

Prelude *Scenes from Dinétab: Sunset*
Nocturne, Op. 92, No. 1

Connor Chee
Georg Goltermann

Tolling of the Bell *Remain seated through the opening hymn.*

Poem Wild Geese

Mary Oliver

You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves.
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile, the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
The mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
Are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting,
over and over announcing your place in the family of things.

A period of silence is held.

Hymn Bless the Lord, my soul *Sung by all three times, seated.*

Jacques Berthier

Bless the Lord, my soul, and bless God's ho - ly name.

Bless the Lord, my soul, who leads me in - to life.

Gathering Prayers

Please stand, as you are able.

Officiant In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.
All things were made by God, and without God nothing came to be.
What came to be through God was life, and this life was the light of the world.

People **The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.**

Officiant We meet in the name of a loving God,

People **who knows our needs, hears our cries, and heals our wounds.**

Officiant By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us,

People **to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.**

Officiant Come, God-with us;

People **who braves our rejection and hurt;
who holds us in acceptance and love.**

Officiant Come, God-for us;

People **who whispers in our ears,
that each of us are beloved children.**

Officiant O come, God-under us;

People **who cradles us in arms that never grow weary;
whose lap has room for all.**

Officiant O come, God-over us;

People **who watches in the long silence of the night,
that we might rest in peace.**

Officiant Come, O come, God-beside us;

People **who steadies us when we falter,
who lifts us up when we fall.**

Officiant Come, O come, God-behind us;

People who picks up all the faded dreams
we drop along the way and patchworks them into hope.

Officiant O come, O come, Emmanuel;

People **and we will rejoice for ever. Amen.**

Please be seated.

Music for Meditation O come, O come, Emmanuel

arr. Anne Krentz Organ

Reading Isaiah 40: 1-8

Reader A Reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah.

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.

Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her

that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid,

that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

A voice cries out:

In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.

Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together,
For the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?"
 All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field.
 The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it;
 surely the people are grass.
 The grass withers, the flower fades;
 but the word of our God will stand forever.

A period of silence is held.

Music for Meditation *Four Last Songs: II. Tired*

Ralph Vaughan Williams

Invitation

A Litany of Remembrance

Each candle upon the altar represents our prayer and response. They are lit from the flame of the Paschal candle, the ancient symbol of Easter resurrection, hope, and life in Christ.

Leader Let us pray. *All stand, as able.*

The first candle we light is to remember those whom we have loved and lost.

We pause to remember clearly, their faces, their voices, their bodies. We embrace and give thanks for the memories that bind them to us in this season of expectation, when all Creation awaits the Light.

All **We remember them with love. May God's eternal love surround them.**

Sung by all.

O come, o come Emmanuel

Veni Emmanuel

O come, thou Branch of Jesse's tree, free them from
 Satan's tyranny that trust thy mighty power to
 save, and give them victory o'er the grave. Re-joice! Re-joice!
 Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!

Leader The second candle we light is to remember the pain of our losses: of relationships, trust, employment, health, faith, joy. We acknowledge and embrace the pain of the past, O God, and we offer it to you, asking that into our wounded hearts and open hands you will place the gift of your peace, the shalom of Christ, that peace that the world cannot give.

All **We remember that through you, O God, all things are possible.
 Refresh, restore, renew us, O God, and lead us into your future.**

Sung by all.

O come, thou Day-spring from _____ on high, and cheer us
by thy draw - ing nigh; dis-purse the gloom-y clouds _____ of
night, and death's dark shad-ow put _____ to flight. Re - joice! Re - joice!
Em - man - u - el shall come to thee, O Is - ra - ell

Leader The third candle we light is to remember ourselves in this holy season. We pause and remember the past weeks, months, and for some of us years, that have been heavy with our burdens. We accept and lay before you, O God, the sharpness of memory, the sadness and grief, the hurt and fear, the anger and pain. We accept and lay before you the ways we feel we have fallen short, and the times we have spent blaming ourselves, and you, for all that we have suffered. We accept and lay before you the time we have walked alone, in darkness; and in knowledge of our own mortality.

All **We remember that though we have journeyed far,
and that while lost we may have turned away from the light,
the light itself has not failed.
We remember that though winter be upon us,
though the night be dark,
with the turning of the world,
the dawn will come and make all things new.**

Sung by all.

O come, thou Key of Da - vid, come, and o - pen
wide our heaven - ly home; make safe the way that leads _____ on
high, and close the path to mis - er - y. Re - joice! Re - joice!
Em - man - u - el shall come to thee, O Is - ra - ell

Leader The fourth candle we light is to remember faith, the gift of light and hope that God offers to us in the wisdom stories of old, of Hanukkah and of Christmas, which both also began in abandonment, insecurity, and humbleness, in a time of war and in a poor stable. We remember that the loving God who kept the light shining in the temple and who came to share this life with us promises us comfort and peace.

All **We remember the One
who shares our burdens,
who shows us the way to the Light,
and who journeys with us into all our tomorrows. Amen.**

Lighting Candles for ourselves, others, and the world

All are invited to light votive candles at the front of the church as signs of your prayers, hopes, and intentions. Lighting candles is as potent a symbol of offering one's prayers to God as candlelight is to us of Christ's abiding presence, love, and compassion.

Come forward in the center aisle; receive the candle lighter from the person ahead of you, light your votive candle(s), then turn to pass the candle lighter to the person following you. Return to your seat via the nearest side chapel aisle.

Music for candle lighting Madison

Ola Gjeilo

When candle lighting has concluded, the musical offering begins. Please remain seated.

Musical Offering Dante's Prayer

Loreena McKennitt

Litany of Healing *All stand, as able.*

Leader With heart and soul open to you, O Lord, we pray,

Leader God the Father, your will for all people is health and salvation.

All **We praise you and thank you, O Lord.**

Leader God the Son, you came that we might have life, and might have it more abundantly.

All **We praise you and thank you, O Lord.**

Leader God the Holy Spirit, you make our bodies the temple of your presence.

All **We praise you and thank you, O Lord.**

Leader Holy Trinity, one God, in you we live and move and have our being.

All **We praise you and thank you, O Lord.**

Leader Lord, grant your healing grace to all who are sick, injured, or disabled.

All **Hear us, O Lord of life.**

Leader Grant to all who seek your guidance, and to all who are lonely, anxious, or despondent, a knowledge of your will and an awareness of your abiding love.

All **Hear us, O Lord of life.**

Leader Touch our wounds with the balm of your mercy, that bearing your forgiveness and acceptance, we may be your instruments of peace to one another and to the world.

All **Hear us, O Lord of life.**

Leader Bless physicians, nurses, and all others who minister to the suffering, granting them wisdom and skill, compassion and patience.

All **Hear us, O Lord of life.**

Leader Grant to the dying peace and a holy death, and uphold by the grace and consolation of your Holy Spirit those who are bereaved and all who mourn.

All **Hear us, O Lord of life.**

Leader Restore to wholeness whatever is broken by human sin, in our lives, in our nation, and in the world.

All **Hear us, O Lord of life.**

Leader You are the Lord who does wonders;

All **you have declared your power among the peoples.**

Leader With you, O Lord, is the well of life;

All **and in your light we see light.**

Leader Heal us, O Lord, and we shall be healed;

All **Save me, and I shall be saved; for you are my praise.**

A period of silence is kept.

The Blessing “Blessing for the Brokenhearted”, from *The Cure for Sorrow*

Jan Richardson

There is no remedy for love but to love more.

—Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862)

Let us agree
for now
that we will not say
the breaking
makes us stronger
or that it is better
to have this pain
than to have done
without this love.
Let us promise
we will not
tell ourselves
time will heal
the wound,
when every day
our waking
opens it anew.
Perhaps for now
it can be enough
to simply marvel
at the mystery
of how a heart
so broken
can go on beating,
as if it were made
for precisely this—
as if it knows
the only cure for love
is more of it,

as if it sees
the heart's sole remedy
for breaking
is to love still,
as if it trusts
that its own
persistent pulse
is the rhythm
of a blessing
we cannot
begin to fathom
but will save us
nonetheless.

1. In the bleak mid - win - ter, frost - y wind made moan,
 2. An - gels and arch - an - gels may have gath - ered there,
 3. What can I give him, poor as I am?

earth stood hard as i - ron, wa - ter like a stone;
 cher - u - bim and ser - a - phim throng - ed the air;
 If I were a shep - herd, I would bring a lamb;

snow had fall - en, snow on snow, snow on snow,
 but his mo - ther on - ly, in her maid - en bliss,
 if I were a wise man, I would do my part; yet

in the bleak mid - win - ter, long a - go.
 wor - shipped the be - lov - ed with a kiss.
 what I can I give him: give my heart.

Dismissal*Officiant*

Go out into the world in peace; be of good courage; hold fast to that which is good; return no one evil for evil; strengthen the fainthearted; support the weak; honor all persons; love and serve God, rejoicing in the Spirit.

*People***Amen.****Music for Meditation** Come, thou-long expected Jesus

arr. Anne Krentz Organ

*Please sit for the Music for Meditation.***Postlude** Winter Light

Ola Gjeilo

During the postlude, you are welcome to remain to rest or pray, or to depart in silence.

The church is open for prayer, rest, or meditation between 7 a.m. and 6 p.m., Monday through Thursday. A priest always is available for emergency pastoral situations at 804.288.2867, or call during weekday hours to schedule a pastoral conversation.

Participants**Officiant:** The Rev. John Jenkins; **Assisting Priest:** The Rev. Cate Anthony; **Readers:** Guy Frank, Gayle Royals;**Set-up Team:** Tyler Curtis, Joan Putney; **Musicians:** Quinn Bitsas, *cantor*; Peter Greydanus, *cello*; Diana Chou, *piano*

Prayers and blessings adapted from the following sources: The Northumbria Community, *Celtic Daily Prayer: Prayers and Readings from the Northumbria Community*, Harper Collins, 2002; *Intercessions for the Christian People*, The Liturgical Press, ©1990; *A New Zealand Prayer Book*, Harper Collins, 1997; Philip Newell, *Celtic Benediction: Morning and Night Prayer*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000; Iona Community, *Iona Community Worship Book*. Glasgow: Wild Goose, 1991; Wild Goose Worship Group, *A Wee Worship Book*, Glasgow: Wild Goose, 1999. | *The Rite Stuff*, ©1998, by Church Publishing Incorporated, all rights reserved, used by permission. All copyrighted music by permission, under OneLicense #A710911.