

OPENING PRAYER: O Shepherd of the world's peoples, we are alone in our fields, keeping watch in the night. Heavy clouds cover us; prowling wolves shadow us. Dispatch a shaft of light from heaven to kiss our feet! Send an angelic choir to sing their hymn in our midst! Show us the way to Bethlehem, that we may witness this thing that has happened. And when all is made known, we shall return to our fields, glorifying and praising you for all we have seen and heard. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER: The heavens tell of your glory, O God. All the trees of the wood sing for joy. For unto us a child is born, and into our midst has come a great light. You have come to deal justly with nations; with righteousness you rule your people. We hear of a wonderful Councilor and know that your Spirit is near. The prophet proclaims you Mighty God, while the seas roar and fields exult. Your mercy is everlasting as you care for all your creation. We herald the Prince of peace and await the time when his rule is complete. You are our God and are greatly to be praised. We sing unto you, honouring your name, and tell of your salvation from day to day.

Gifts have been opened and love has been exchanged. Keep us mindful that you are the source of all abundance and worth. Families have gathered and loved ones have returned home. May we always remember that Christ calls us to his banqueting table with himself as the host. The tree has been trimmed and stockings have been hung. Let the garlands and tributes awaken assurances of your grace. Now that anticipation has given way to celebration, may we not lose sight of your continuing call to obedience and devotion.

To those who still seek a sign of your love, may we become that sign as we do justly and love mercy. To those who lack the warmth of home and friends, may we extend hospitality and good cheer. Where the sounds of war drown out Christ's call to peace, may we fulfill the tasks of reconciliation and love. You have established the world and sent the Prince of Peace. We go forth as his servants in praise of your reign!

BLUE CANDLE INTRODUCTION: Now is the time in the service when we take a few moments to remember that this festive season can be difficult for many people. Most often the memories Christmas stirs up remind us of those who we have loved who had meant so much to us, and who are now in the eternal hands of God. At the very center of our being is an awareness of an end to a valued relationship. Our hearts ache, our tears flow. We grieve because of their physical absence, but we also rejoice to have known that love.

We also light this blue candle together as a reminder that we do not stand alone in our grief. All around us this evening are brothers and sisters in Christ who share our pain and long to give comfort. In trying to rebuild our lives after our loss, God has provided us with a rich and diverse community from which we can derive hope, strength and love. Together we shall experience the grace God extends to us, in the full recognition that we are never alone. Let us now light our blue candle to remind us of the warmth and light that our fellowship brings to all of us especially those who walk through the shadow this Christmas. Let us now light our blue candle.

BLUE CANDLE PRAYER: Gracious, Compassionate God, even as we celebrate the joyous news of your Son's birth, we recognize that not every heart is finding rejoicing easy or even possible. For some, the sting of death and loss is so recent that our hope and assurance are threatened. Embrace us this evening, O God. Hold us close.

Dispel the gloomy clouds that have overshadowed us. Grant us a peace that only you can give. And thank you, O God that we do not journey through these dark moments alone. Not only do you walk with us, but we walked together as a community. As one of us grieves, we all grieve. When one rejoices, we all rejoice. May the light of this candle, remind us that your Spirit is the true light of our souls. Amen.

BENEDICTION: Somewhere in the night of our lives, a baby cries, and that cry is our hope. The grace of God has appeared for the salvation of the world. Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace!

Micah 2:2-5a
“What’s it all about?”

One of the most interesting things we can do at this time of year is read through our newspapers or listen carefully to television programs and commercials, to see what people think Christmas is all about. I say this, because every year the descriptions of what Christmas is all about seem to get more and more off track. You hear the missteps on talk shows, in Christmas specials, in office conversations, in political speeches and maybe unfortunately even from church pulpits.

You know what I am talking about. People say things like “Giving is what Christmas is all about.” This is what merchants want us to believe. How about the idea that Christmas is all about helping the less fortunate? Charities really push this idea with all kinds of campaigns like “Toy Mountain” or “Operation Santa Clause”. Some others say that Christmas is all about “being with family”.

All this sound plausible but there is at least one I’ve read about that seems more than a bit off. Jay Leno, on his talk show, once showed an advertisement that appeared in a local newspaper placed by the *Center for Dental Implants*. The ad said and I kid you not, “The gift of chewing is what the holidays are all about.” Well, thank goodness that question about what Christmas is all about is finally solved.

Why on earth would we put up Christmas trees, decorate homes, wrap presents, take a holiday, or travel to see relatives? It seems that all this effort is so we can better chew our food.

This might come as a bit of a surprise, especially to the *Center of Dental Implants*, but the bible has a different idea regarding the meaning of the Christmas season. In particular we want to focus on Micah chapter 5 where the birth of Christ is foretold. Micah wrote, “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come who will be ruler over Israel.”

This is a reference to Christmas. Micah states that Christ will be born in Bethlehem. He goes on to say, “He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth. And he will be their peace.” (V.4-5) These two simple verses tell us what Christmas is all about.

They tell us clearly why Jesus came into the world, and what he expected to accomplish here on earth. Micah says that Jesus came to be shepherd of his flock. He is to take care of us. To lead us. To protect us. To save us. He came to be our shepherd. What then does it mean that Jesus wants to be our shepherd? Well, Micah makes it clear that Jesus wants to give us strength. “He will stand and shepherd in the strength of the Lord.”

What is Christmas all about? It is about the fact that we don’t have to live our lives in our own strength. We don’t have to handle life’s ups and down on our own. We have help. We can turn to God in Christ for strength and guess what; he will give it to us. No matter what happens to us, we can depend on Christ to get us through.

Our lives do not have to be characterized by failure, or bitterness, or missed opportunities. Christ will give us the strength to face whatever comes our way. That is what Christmas is all about. **We are not alone!**

We are not victims of the circumstances life throws at us. We have a shepherd, and we can live in his strength. In fact, living in our own strength always leads to disaster. Isaiah wrote, “But see here, you who live in your own light and warm yourselves from your own fires and not from God’s; you will live among sorrows.” (Isaiah 50:11)

Christ has also come to give us security; something we could all use right about now in this very insecure world. Neither safety nor security exists, even though we desperately spend our lives seeking it. We look to governments, or our employer, or our investments, or our relationships- and none of them provide us with the security we need. The things we turn to most often simply don’t have the ability to offer true security.

In a single moment, our world can come crashing down. One simple word can change our lives forever- words like “divorce”...or “cancer”...or “downsizing”. We hear any of those words or any of the others like them, and we do not feel safe anymore. The fact is, none of us has any idea what will happen tomorrow, or even before we go to bed tonight. There is only one place we can truly find security. Micah said, “And they (his flock) will live securely, for then his greatness will reach the ends of the earth.

Jesus offers us the security of knowing that he is in control, and he has the power and ability to take care of us. That is what a shepherd does, and that is what Jesus wants to do for us. Ezekiel wrote on behalf of God these words, “I myself will tend my sheep and have them lain down, declares the Sovereign Lord. I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injuries and strengthen the weak...” (Ezek. 34:15-16)

What is he saying? God is saying “I will take care of you. You are safe with me. I will tend you. If you are lost, I will find you. If you stray, I will bring you back. If you are injured I will strengthen you. I am your shepherd. I will take care of you.” God promised in Hebrews 13:5 “Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you.” You want security? Jesus offers it to you.

That’s why he came into this world...that’s what Christmas is all about. He offers you a security this world can never offer you. A security not based on things or circumstances, but on a relationship with God in Christ. And his greatness, Micah says, reaches to the ends of the earth. He is saying, “There is no place we can go, or nothing that can happen, that extends beyond the power of God.”

Besides strength and security, Christ also brings to us serenity. There is a very funny episode of the television series *Seinfeld*, about George Costanza’s dad. Frank Costanza is told by his doctor that he is in grave danger of a coronary because of his high blood pressure. The doctor tells Frank that every time he feels irritated and his blood pressure rising, he is to use the “Serenity Now” technique.

In a moment of agitation, Frank is to simply say to himself, “serenity now” and this should lower his blood pressure. The only problem is that Frank doesn’t just say “serenity now”, he screams it at the top of his lungs and of course it doesn’t work.

No matter how often or how loud he screams “serenity now”, he is never able to achieve serenity. *Serenity Now* doesn’t work. In the same episode, George’s friend Lloyd, who used to be in a mental institution, tells him, “Serenity now doesn’t work. That’s what put me in an institution. It’s serenity now, insanity later.”

It does seem a bit insane to think we can achieve some peace in our lives simply by shouting out “serenity now”, but some of our other methods are just as foolish. Some people try to find peace of mind by over indulging in alcohol or food, or work or jumping from relationship to relationship, and it simply doesn’t work. We do not live in a peaceful world and we can destroy our souls by constantly wondering, “If only”.

Micah said about Jesus, “And he will be their peace.” His birth was announced by the angels, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men...” (Luke 2:14) Even as Jesus was approaching death, his message to his disciples was, “Peace I leave with you: my peace I give to you...Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.” (John 14:27) Jesus came to bring us peace.

Even when we cannot experience peace in our outer world we can always experience peace in our inner world. Jesus came to take away all the things that destroy our peace. He wants to carry your burdens; he wants to lift your anxieties, and he wants to take away your sins. Those things that tend to make life miserable are the very things that Jesus came to take care of. That’s what he wants to do.

He wants to be your shepherd. He wants to give you peace. It is a humbling thing to admit we cannot take care of ourselves, but that is exactly what we must do. In the bible we are compared to sheep and it is not exactly a flattering comparison. Sheep are not industrious. They have no initiative. They do not look after their own, after all no one has ever heard of a guard sheep.

Ask any shepherd and you will also learn that sheep are not too bright; you never see a sheep doing tricks at a circus. But sheep do one thing very well, they follow a shepherd. They are very good at following. They are good at trusting. And that is what God wants from us; he wants us to follow Jesus and to trust him. Jesus was sent into the world to shepherd all who would follow him.

He will take care of you. You can cast your cares and concerns, all your worries and anxieties, all your sin and unbelief on him, and he will take them all away. Jesus came to give us strength, security and serenity. Jesus came to seek and save the lost, so that all who follow may experience life in all its fullness. That’s what Christmas is about.