

December 21, 2023

7:00 p.m.

First Presbyterian Church
of Athens

In response to God's grace, the mission of First Presbyterian Church is to create a community where people seek the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, rejoice in worship, and go forth sharing the love of Christ with Athens and the world!

December 21, 2023
7:00 p.m.
Service of the Longest Night

GATHERING

Welcome to all who are worshipping with us. As we enter a holy space this evening, ***please silence your cell phone****.*

Prelude *Suo Gân* James Biery

Welcome

Call to Worship

Tonight we gather here in this place of refuge,
for we are lost, we are lonely, we are afraid.
Tonight we gather daring to wonder if God has indeed come in Jesus,
discerning the rejection we have known, intimate with our failed relationships, holding our heartache in hands of tenderness.
Tonight we gather with neighbors and strangers, a family made one by our brokenness,
coming with our hearts full of hope and our pockets filled with doubts.
Tonight we gather just as we are,
for God has promised to meet us here and to welcome us for who we are.

Lighting of the Advent Wreath

We light our first candle, a single light that the deepest darkness cannot conquer – small and insignificant, yet a sign of hope.
Let it speak to us of the tiny flame of hope buried within us, the stubborn little light that refuses to be extinguished by all that life has thrown at it.
We light our second candle, a companion to the first – equally small, equally insignificant, but witnessing to hope that another light brings.
Let it speak to us of the light from companionship of our families, our friends and of strangers, of kindnesses found in unexpected places that restore our hope in human nature.
We light our third candle, recalling nights of watching and waiting, anxious nights without sleep, when dawn seemed to ebb further from the horizon and hope seemed forlorn.
Let it speak to us of the sureness of morning, of the passing of darkness of suffering, and the promise of an eternal sunrise dawning for those we have loved and lost. Let it speak of the light dawning too for us – though we may yet be in that darkest hour before the dawn.

***Hymn 9** *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel* VENI EMMANUEL

***Call to Confession**

***Prayer of Confession**

Generous and gracious God, we look to you for compassion. Sin's shadows and death's darkness are around us. We know the pain of loss, the confusion of uncertainty, and the fear of the future. Overwhelmed by our burdens we easily forget that you never leave us alone and that your steadfast love for us never falters. By coming together we find assurance and comfort that we do not suffer this longest night alone. Forgive us when we have neglected to reach out to those whose night is also long. Grant that we may be your healing presence in their lives by bringing them your compassion and comfort that will assure them that they do not grieve alone.

*Those who are able may stand.

***Silent Confession**

Lord, have mercy. **Amen.**

***Assurance of Pardon**

***Congregational Response** Hymn 44, Stanza 3

How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given!
So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven.
No ear may hear his coming, but in this world of sin,
where meek souls will receive him, still the dear Christ enters in.

PROCLAIMING

First Reading from Psalm 22

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, so far from the words of my groaning?
O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but I find no rest.
In you, our ancestors trusted. They trusted and you delivered them.
It was you who took me from the womb, you who kept me safe upon my mother's breast; since my mother bore me, you have been my God.
Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help.
God does not despise the affliction of the afflicted; God does not hide from me. When I cry to God, God hears me. Thanks be to God!

Second Reading Matthew 1:18–25

This is the Word of God for the people of God. **Thanks be to God.**

Meditation

RESPONDING

***Solo** *I Wonder As I Wander* John Jacob Niles

Remembering Our Loved Ones

All are invited to take the flame from the candle - which cannot be extinguished by death - and light a votive for the person/persons they mourn.

Music of Remembrance

Unison Prayer

On this long dark night we await the coming of Christ. We long for the light of his presence, with us and in us. When our souls are deeply troubled and our hearts break with the weight of sorrow, season our grief with love and buoy our sorrow by hope. In our times of God-forsakenness and estrangement, focus our gaze on the innocent One. In his suffering and vulnerability, show us that your power is made perfect in weakness. May our suffering empty us of pride and lead us to true joy. Enfold us in your infinite grace that we may find our security in you. Amen.

SENDING

***Hymn 4** *Creator of the Stars of Night* CONDITOR ALME SIDERUM

***Benediction**

***Postlude** *O Come, O Come Emmanuel* Robert J. Powell

Prayer is available with an Elder at the communion table after the service.

Texts and music for hymns and sung responses reprinted under OneLicense.net #A-714861

A special word of welcome to our guests: thank you for joining us for worship. Please fill out the fellowship pad so that we may be in touch. We are delighted you are here and look forward to seeing you again.

NOTES ON THE SERVICE:

WORSHIP LEADERS

Dr. Ryan Baer, *Senior Pastor*
The Rev. Leigh Bonner, *Interim Associate Pastor*
Dr. John Coble, *Director of Music and Organist*
Mr. John Tsao, *Soloist*

CONGREGATIONAL CARE

Prayer requests can be submitted to the church office, 706-543-4338, by the Prayer Request link on our church website (firstpresathens.org) or on the prayer cards in the Fellowship Pads.

TO AID IN WORSHIP

If you need to leave the sanctuary during the service, a live video feed is available in the Atrium.

Available in the Narthex or from an usher:

- **Personal hearing receivers** usable anywhere in the sanctuary
- **Large-print** hymnals, Bibles, bulletins, and hymnsheets
- **Sermons** from the previous six weeks

A very special invitation to join us on Christmas Eve:

Sunday, December 24

Morning of Wonder, 10:00 a.m. Worship Service

Candlelight Services, 6:00 & 8:00 p.m. (prelude will begin 30 minutes before)

We will receive an offering to support Athens Nurses Clinic.

Please note that all children are invited to take part in worship on Christmas Eve. We will not have additional childcare during the Christmas Eve services. Childcare (Nursery Play) for our littles ones will resume on Sunday, January 7.

Advent + Christmas @ FPC

Please visit our website, firstpresathens.org, for a list of Advent and Christmas services and activities as we prepare for the coming of our Savior.