



Longest Night/Blue Christmas  
December 20, 2023

## **Longest Night: Blue Christmas Evening Prayer**

*While Advent is a season of hope and Christmas is a season of joy, not everyone feels hopeful or like celebrating. Grief, illness, aging, depression, loneliness, unemployment, and loss are magnified. Even those who are not struggling with losses may feel the stress of preparations and expectations around Christmas time. We come together seeking healing and room to share grief, sadness, loneliness, or confusion when these emotions often feel out of place during the holidays.*

*In the Northern Hemisphere, December brings the winter solstice and the longest nights of the year. Tradition says that nature and all her creatures stop and hold their breath to see if the sun will turn back from its wanderings, if the days will lengthen and the earth will once again feel the sun's warmth. In these darkest days of the year, we come with our honest yearnings seeking the return of light and hope.*

### **CALL TO WORSHIP**

Tonight  
the earth tilts and tips,  
its axis pulling this half of the world  
away from the sun.

**This is the longest night.**

The shadows lengthen.  
The darkness lingers.  
Those we love  
don't always notice,  
but it's true:  
**this is the longest night.**

Tonight,  
we bring to God  
what weighs on us  
in the small hours.  
**This is the longest night.**

This gathering darkness  
is not a threat  
but a shelter,  
a time to name what is true:  
Sometimes joy doesn't come easily.  
**Yet God still meets us.**

Sometimes merriness is not within reach.  
**Yet God still meets us.**  
Sometimes despair doesn't depart at dawn.  
**Yet God still meets us.**  
Come, bring your whole selves to God.  
**God's arms are open wide.**



1 Each win - ter as the year grows old - er, we each grow old - er,  
 2 When race and class cry out for trea - son, when si - rens call for  
 3 Yet I be - lieve be - yond be - liev - ing that life can spring from  
 4 So e - ven as the sun is turn - ing to jour - ney to the  
 5 O Child of ec - sta - sy and sor - rows, O Prince of peace and



too. The chill sets in a lit - tle cold - er; the  
 war, they o - ver - shout the voice of rea - son and  
 death, that growth can flow - er from our griev - ing, that  
 north, the liv - ing flame, in se - cret burn - ing, can  
 pain, bright - en to - day's world by to - mor - row's, re -



ver - i - ties we knew seem shak - en and un - true.  
 scream till we ig - nore all we held dear be - fore.  
 we can catch our breath and turn trans - fixed by faith.  
 kin - dle on the earth and bring God's love to birth.  
 new our lives a - gain; Lord Je - sus, come and reign!

Text: William Gay, b. 1920, alt.  
 Music: CAROL OF HOPE, Annabeth Gay, b. 1925  
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## LIGHTING THE FIRST CANDLE

The shadows lengthen.

**The evening is here.**

This is the darkest night of the year.

**Let our faith flicker against our incomprehension.**

*The first candle is lit.*

## THANKSGIVING FOR BAPTISM

The apostle Paul wrote to the church in Rome:  
“Do you not know that all of us  
who have been baptized into Christ Jesus  
were baptized into his death?”

Do you not know—  
that death is part of the life  
we receive at this font?  
That one thing has to end  
so that something else can begin?

**Yes, we do know:  
Death is tied to life.  
Sadness rubs shoulders with joy.  
Gift is tangled with loss.**

“If we have died with Christ,  
we believe that we will also live with him,”  
Paul told the church in Rome.  
This font delivers us into an in-between time:  
**a time when our sin is drowned,  
yet still makes ripples;  
a time when new life is ours,  
but has not yet arrived.**

But as the angels said to the shepherds:  
“do not be afraid.”  
The waters of this small font  
are big enough to hold  
the ocean of God’s promise.  
They are deep enough  
to contain the complexity  
of our life with Christ.  
They are wide enough  
to wash over  
everything you are:  
sinner and saint,  
dreamer and mourner,  
entirely human  
and in the image of God.

The moment of our baptism  
holds the eternity of God's grace.  
**Amen.**

## **LIGHTING THE SECOND CANDLE**

Small stars glow above.  
**We ponder the signs here today.**  
We await news of the Savior born far away.  
**Stars whisper old light  
on a night of new love.**

*The second candle is lit.*

## **PSALM 4**

<sup>1</sup>Answer me when I call, O God of my right!  
You gave me room when I was in distress.  
Be gracious to me, and hear my prayer.  
<sup>2</sup>How long, you people, shall my honor suffer shame?  
How long will you love vain words, and seek after lies?  
<sup>3</sup>But know that the LORD has set apart the faithful for himself;  
the LORD hears when I call to him.  
<sup>4</sup>When you are disturbed, do not sin;  
ponder it on your beds, and be silent.  
<sup>5</sup>Offer right sacrifices,  
and put your trust in the LORD.  
<sup>6</sup>There are many who say, "O that we might see some good!  
Let the light of your face shine on us, O LORD!"  
<sup>7</sup>You have put gladness in my heart  
more than when their grain and wine abound.  
<sup>8</sup>I will both lie down and sleep in peace;  
for you alone, O LORD, make me lie down in safety.

## **PRAYER**

Creator of the stars of night,  
you have established your faithfulness in heaven itself.  
You are still as the North Star  
and steadfast as the dawn.  
Reveal yourself where we least expect you:  
in the longest night,  
in the most difficult times,  
in the sheer silence  
when words fail us.  
Faithful One,  
abide with us every moment.  
**Amen.**

## **LIGHTING THE THIRD CANDLE**

Candlelight leaps upward.  
**We raise our hearts to God.**  
The Spirit's wings are open broad.  
**Hover over chaos;**  
**speak your holy Word.**

*The third candle is lit.*

## ELW #699 *In Deepest Night*



1 In deep - est night, in dark - est days, when harps are  
2 When friend was lost, when love de - ceived, dear Je - sus  
3 When through the wa - ters winds our path, a - round us



hung, no songs we raise, when si - lence must  
wept, God was be - reaved; so with us in  
pain, a - round us death: deep calls to deep,



suf - fice as praise, yet sound - ing in us qui - et - ly  
our grief God grieves, and round a - bout us mourn - ful - ly  
a sav - ing breath, and found be - side us faith - ful - ly



there is the song of God.  
there are the tears of God.  
there is the love of God.

Text: Susan Palo Cherwien, b. 1953

Music: DEEP BLUE, Thomas Pavlechko, b. 1962

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## READINGS

*Our readings highlight the ways in which God appears when and where God is not generally expected: in darkness, silence, suffering, grief.*

## **GENESIS 32:22-32**

<sup>22</sup>The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. <sup>23</sup>He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. <sup>24</sup>Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. <sup>25</sup>When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. <sup>26</sup>Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." <sup>27</sup>So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." <sup>28</sup>Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." <sup>29</sup>Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. <sup>30</sup>So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." <sup>31</sup>The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip. <sup>32</sup>Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the thigh muscle that is on the hip socket, because he struck Jacob on the hip socket at the thigh muscle.

## **ACTS 16:20-34**

<sup>20</sup>When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, "These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews <sup>21</sup>and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe." <sup>22</sup>The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. <sup>23</sup>After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. <sup>24</sup>Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

<sup>25</sup>About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. <sup>26</sup>Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened. <sup>27</sup>When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped. <sup>28</sup>But Paul shouted in a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." <sup>29</sup>The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. <sup>30</sup>Then he brought them outside and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" <sup>31</sup>They answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." <sup>32</sup>They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. <sup>33</sup>At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. <sup>34</sup>He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.

## LUKE 2:25-35

<sup>25</sup>Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. <sup>26</sup>It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. <sup>27</sup>Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, <sup>28</sup>Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

<sup>29</sup>"Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,  
according to your word;

<sup>30</sup>for my eyes have seen your salvation,

<sup>31</sup>which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,

<sup>32</sup>a light for revelation to the Gentiles  
and for glory to your people Israel."

<sup>33</sup>And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. <sup>34</sup>Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed <sup>35</sup>so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed — and a sword will pierce your own soul too."

## RESPONSE

*We take a time for reflection on God's word in song, prayer, and silence.*

*You are invited to come to the altar rail for prayer—come to the places at the end of the rail if you would like others to join you in silent prayer, or to the places in the middle of the rail to pray alone.*

*Often, it is hard to find words for our deepest prayer. In the silence, you might use a traditional "breath prayer," inhaling and exhaling as you pray:*

*Inhale: "Jesus Christ, Son of God,"*

*Exhale: "have mercy on me, a sinner."*

*or*

*Inhale: "The Spirit intercedes for us,"*

*Exhale: "with sighs too deep for words."*



## LIGHTING THE FOURTH CANDLE

In quiet dimness,

**Heartbeats keep time.**

In deepening vigil, we wait for a sign.

**Jesus, end our waiting.**

**Come into our midst.**

*The fourth candle is lit.*

## AFFIRMATION OF TRUST

*We speak together this affirmation of trust, reflecting on our ancient Christian creeds.*

We entrust ourselves to God our Maker,

who loves all of creation,

who crafts the stars of night

and clothes the lilies of the field,

who sets the tilt of the earth

to give days long and short,

yet who rests beyond time

in the presence of every moment.

We entrust ourselves to Jesus Christ,

God's own Child,

who was in the beginning with God

and in whom all things hold together,

who stepped out of eternity and into flesh,

who delighted in the dim closeness of the womb

to be born of the girl named Mary,

who was praised by shepherds at midnight

and sought by stargazing Wise Ones,

whose death on the cross eclipsed joy,

and who rose again three days later

in the darkness before the dawn;

who will come again.

We entrust ourselves to the Holy Spirit,

our Advocate,

who twines through every season

and ties together sunset and new dawn,

who comforts us in the night

and calls us through dream and vision,

who brings oil for the sputtering lamp

and eloquence to the sputtering heart,

whose breath brings new life,

and whose body is this Body.

**Amen.**

## **PRAYERS**

*Our prayers leave silence for you to offer your own petitions in response to the prompts.*

Trustworthy God, God who knows us, we pray to you.

We pray over our yesterday.

*We pray for every burden we have carried from yesterday into today.*

We pray over the day that has been.

*We pray in thanksgiving for what we have experienced, in sadness for what we have lost, or in acknowledgement of our finitude for that which we could not complete.*

This longest night, we pray over the season and this turning world.

*We pray for circumstances awaiting daylight and hope: for those struggling through the holidays, for places of environmental suffering, for situations of crisis and despair.*

We pray for our tomorrows, as many as we may receive.

*We pray for what we hope for tomorrow.*

We pray for all things out of season:

This grief that we carry that separates us from those who feel merry;

The impatience that drives us forward in a season of waiting;  
or the centering peace we draw from you in this frantic world;

And the great day of your joy, which will come when it comes—never too soon, never when we expect, not in the way we have planned.

We offer these prayers in the name of Jesus Christ, the One for whom we wait, who taught us to pray . . .

## **LORD'S PRAYER**

**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.**

## **LIGHTING THE FIFTH CANDLE**

Some sigh with impatience.  
**Others pray in relative peace.**  
God, you illuminate gently;  
**you light our way  
with a quiet transcendence.**

*The fifth candle is lit.*

1 A - bide with me, fast falls the e - ven - tide.  
 2 Swift to its close ebbs out life's lit - tle day;  
 3 I need thy pres - ence ev - 'ry pass - ing hour;  
 4 I fear no foe, with thee at hand to bless;  
 5 Hold thou thy cross be - fore my clos - ing eyes,

The dark - ness deep - ens; Lord, with me a - bide.  
 earth's joys grow dim, its glo - ries pass a - way;  
 what but thy grace can foil the tempt - er's pow'r?  
 ills have no weight, and tears no bit - ter - ness.  
 shine through the gloom, and point me to the skies;

When oth - er help - ers fail and com - forts flee,  
 change and de - cay in all a - round I see;  
 Who like thy - self my guide and stay can be?  
 Where is death's sting? Where, grave, thy vic - to - ry?  
 heav'n's morn - ing breaks, and earth's vain shad - ows flee;

help of the help - less, oh, a - bide with me.  
 O thou who chang - est not, a - bide with me.  
 Through cloud and sun - shine, oh, a - bide with me.  
 I tri - umph still, if thou a - bide with me!  
 in life, in death, O Lord, a - bide with me.

## **LIGHTING THE SIXTH CANDLE**

A circle of flame grows;

**so do our prayers.**

We do not rush the dawn, nor do we despair.

**We rest in God's warm presence**

**as we prepare for our repose.**

*The sixth candle is lit.*

## **BENEDICTION**

As you leave this time of worship  
and step into the remaining hours of this night,  
take with you the peace of Jesus Christ,  
who existed from the first instant of eternity,  
and waited nine months in Mary's womb;  
who counted off the first moments of creation,  
and spent three days among the dead;  
who lived thirty-some years in a timebound body,  
and says, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

Go with the blessing of the triune God,

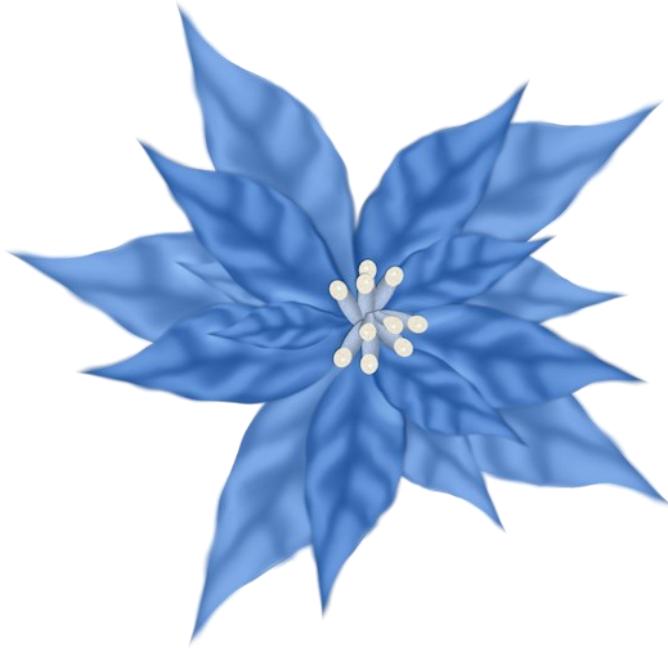
Creator of all time,

Savior + of our days,

Mender of every moment.

**Amen.**

*The service ends in silence.*



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