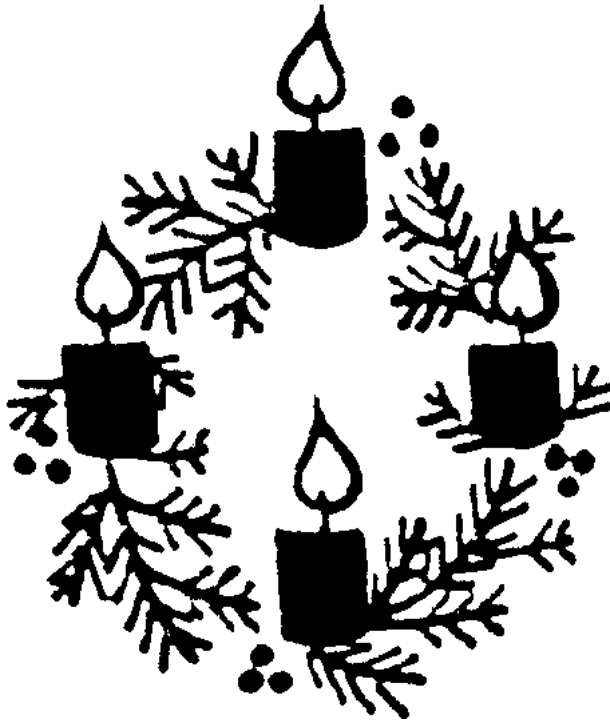


Niantic Community Church

An Open, Affirming, Reconciling congregation
of the United Church of Christ and the United Methodist Church

A Heritage of Faith since 1719 • Each Member a Minister



A Service of Light

December 21, 2011 • 7:00PM

*“Whoever you are; wherever you are on life’s journey:
you are welcome here.”*

WELCOME TO NIANTIC COMMUNITY CHURCH, on the longest night of the year. An especially warm welcome to you who are guests in our church; we pray that you will find a spirit of peace and comfort in tonight's worship.

Advent is a season of anticipation. All around us, culture and commerce hasten to proclaim the miracle of Christmas — but we know that before the miraculous birth, there is a time of emptiness. For many of us, that emptiness includes the loss of a loved one, the loss of hopes or dreams, and other losses that weigh heavily on heart and soul. Tonight's service is especially for people who know emptiness. We listen again for God's word of promise and comfort. At the end of worship, our losses will still be a part of us. But we will remember that we are not left to face them by ourselves. We will remember the promise of fulfillment to come. God has a light for us this night.

(✕) indicates that you may stand

FOR YOUR REFLECTION

"The Uses of Sorrow"

(In my sleep I dreamed this poem)

Someone I loved once gave me
a box full of darkness.

It took me years to understand
that this, too, was a gift.

Mary Oliver

ORDER OF WORSHIP

PRELUDE

WORDS OF WELCOME

UNISON GATHERING PRAYER

**Your compassion for us overflows, O God.
We are facing our longest night.
We come burdened with sorrow, loneliness, and sadness.
We come seeking a place to set them down;
a place where our words will be heard and our feelings honored.
We need a place where we can drop our masks of good cheer
so our tears can flow freely
and our faces can wear the cares of all that we are carrying.
Be among us this night, O God.
Let your compassion heal us in this moment.
Comfort us. Strengthen us. Care for us. Be Christ to us. Amen.**

✦ HYMN #219

*“What Child Is This”
verses 1 & 2*

GREENSLEEVES

UNISON PRAYER OF INVOCATION

God of love and comfort, who promises us an end to all mourning, crying, and pain, be present with us now as we bring our struggles before you. As you became flesh, experiencing all the grief and joy of being human, living and dying with us in this troubled world, send now your Holy Spirit, our Comforter, to hold us in your love. With the lighting of candles, may the light of your presence shine among us and warm the winter of our hearts. O Come, Emmanuel, and fill the whole world with heaven’s peace. Amen.

LIGHTING OF THE ADVENT CANDLES

First Candle — Grief

#211 “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” verse 1

We light the first candle to share our grief over loved ones who have died, over relationships that have ended, over the many kinds of loss we have experienced. Often during these special holiday times, filled with memories, we most deeply feel the absence of those we have loved and lost. May this candle bring to light our grief.

Silent meditation

SCRIPTURE READING: John 11:32-35

Second Candle — Pain

“O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” verse 5

We light the second candle to acknowledge our pain: the pain of addiction; the pain of physical or mental illness; the pain of troubled relationships; the pain of depression. Some of these pains are in our lives; some in the lives of others in our community. In the midst of the joy of the Christmas season, we sometimes feel the need to hide the pain we feel, so that we won't burden others. May this candle bring to light our pain.

Silent meditation

SCRIPTURE READING: Matthew 11:28-29

Third Candle — Fear

“O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” verse 6

We light the **first** candle to name our fears: fears of uncertainty; fears of being alone; fears of those who are unlike us or whom we don't understand; fears of change or stagnation; fears of the end of life as we know it — all the fears that hold us back from living life to the fullest. Just as the shepherds, magi, King Herod, Mary, and Joseph were filled with fear that first Christmas, so we too live in a world and a time that is filled with fear. May this candle bring to light our fears.

Silent meditation

SCRIPTURE READING: Isaiah 41:8-10

Fourth Candle — Struggle

“O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” verse 7

We light the **first** candle to recognize the struggles of our world: the struggles of those who live with the effects of war; the struggles of those who need food and shelter; the struggles of those fighting to survive diseases like AIDS and illnesses like cancer; the struggles of those who long for freedom from oppression; the struggles that are kept silent and out of our awareness. We know that our own struggles are part of a world desperately in need of God's promised realm of peace. May this candle bring to light our struggles.

Silent meditation

SCRIPTURE READING: Revelation 21:1-6a

A TIME FOR COMFORT

Please come forward to light a candle, be anointed, or receive a prayer.

LIGHTING THE CHRIST CANDLE

SCRIPTURE READING: John 1 (*selections*)

LITANY OF AFFIRMATION (*from "First Coming" by Madeleine L'Engle*)

Leader: God did not wait until the world was ready,
until all peoples and nations were at peace.

**People: God came when the Heavens were unsteady
and prisoners cried out for release.**

God did not wait for the perfect time.

God came when the need was deep and great.

God dined with sinners in all their grime, turned water into wine.

God did not wait till hearts were pure.

In joy God came to a tarnished world of sin and doubt.

**To a world like ours, of anguished shame, God came
and God's Light would not go out.**

God came to a world which did not mesh; to heal its tangles, shield its scorn.

In the mystery of the Word made Flesh, the maker of the stars was born.

We cannot wait till the world is sane
to raise our songs with joyful voice,
or to share our grief, to touch our pain:

All: God came with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice!

PASSING THE PEACE

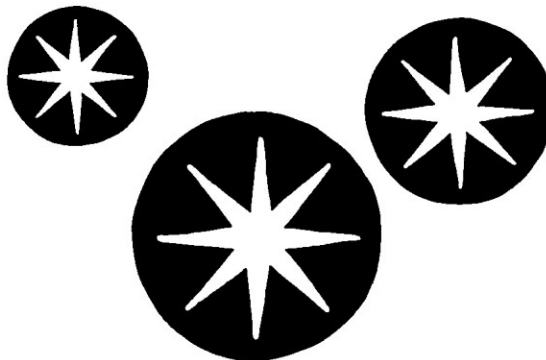
✠ HYMN #230

"O Little Town of Bethlehem"

ST. LOUIS

BENEDICTION

POSTLUDE



Welcome to Niantic Community Church!

*We are a community of Christians:
learning God's ways; sharing God's love;
extending God's peace and healing grace to all.*

A Heritage of Faith since 1719, and an Open, Affirming, Reconciling congregation. Niantic Community Church is affiliated with the United Methodist Church and the United Church of Christ. It is also a welcoming home to people from a great variety of church backgrounds and life experiences.

Your presence here today is a gift to God and to those around you. We hope you will feel God's Spirit here today through our worship and fellowship. If you are a visitor, we invite you to sign our guest register by the rear entrance to the sanctuary. "Welcome" information packets, children's bulletins, and toys are also available.

**Assistive Listening Devices and Large Print Bulletins, Hymnals,
and Bibles are available. Please ask an usher for assistance.**

Tonight's Worship Leaders

Leena Faulkner, Peg Herzberg, *Ushers*
The Rev. Dr. John A. Nelson, *Pastor*

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CHRISTMAS EVE WORSHIP AT NIANTIC COMMUNITY CHURCH SATURDAY, DECEMBER 24TH

5:00PM: Family Christmas Service, with live Nativity

8:00PM: A Festival of Lessons and Carols

11:00PM: Candlelight Communion Service

Niantic Community Church

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Church Office Hours: Monday-Thursday 8:30-5:00 p.m.; Friday 8:30-Noon