

Panther Valley Ecumenical Church



Blue Christmas Open House

6:00pm – 8:00pm

*As you enter the sanctuary,
take time to center yourself in this space,
pay attention to the emotions that you are feeling,
and surround yourself in God's presence.*

***Tonight we gather, mindful of the losses
that have multiplied throughout the year.***

As we look back at it all at once,
we are in danger of being overwhelmed by its tragedies—
sickness, violence, fire, hurricane, earthquake, and more.

Our aim tonight is to acknowledge this,
to mourn this,
and to know that in all of this,
there is the possibility of more light.
If we are to be overwhelmed,
let it be that we are overwhelmed with the assurance
that we are not alone.

We are able to do this because after the longest night,
the days will lengthen as we wait
for the springtime of new life.

Our ancient ancestors saw this night
as the appropriate time to honor their lost loved ones.
It was this sacred time that symbolized most powerfully
that the path to everlasting life is filled
with the light of a new and growing dawn.

Psalm 36:9 says,
“Within You is the spring of life; in your light, we see light.”

When we feel as if our light is dimmed,
we can rely on the Holy Light
to continue to shine until we ourselves shine bright once more.

We are not alone.

*You are welcome to stay and pray as long as you like.
We will end our time of prayer at 8pm.*

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GATHERING PRAYER

We gather this evening as darkness comes to rest in God.
We gather to shed tears if they come, to hold hands if they are available, and to
join our voices with one another and our forebears in the faith who still cry out,
“How long?”

And so we pray:
*Come, Holy Spirit.
Comfort us and all who mourn this night.
Give us strength to grieve as we must.
Help us receive your healing in the midst of our pain,
and find new order after the chaos of loss;
through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.*

*WORDS OF ASSURANCE (Psalm 46:1–5, 10)
God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult.*

*There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.
God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved;
God will help it when the morning dawns.*

Be still and know that I am God.

We invite you to slowly pray the following,
pausing for a breath between each line.

***Be still and know that I am God.
Be still and know that I am
Be still and know that
Be still and know
Be still
Be***

We invite you to pray any or all of the Litany of Losses.

Loss of Life

We mourn this night the loss of life.

We mourn the loss of those close to us and those whose names we do not know.

We mourn those who perished while working
to save other lives.

We mourn those who died from the pandemic, disease, gunshots,
fires, hurricanes, tornados, and earthquakes.

And we mourn the loss, in many cases,
of our ability to be with them as they passed,
and
our loss of gathering together for comfort
in the ways we needed so much.

We mourn this loss of life.

We honor and remember these beloved ones.

We pray for comfort and peace.
Amen.

Loss of Livelihood

We mourn this night the loss of livelihoods.

For so many, the pandemic has taken the security of food, shelter, care for families, and medical care.

We mourn the loss of businesses that could not withstand the circumstances.

These were not just businesses, but dreams born of passion and hard work.

We mourn those who find themselves needing to rely on others for help when what they really want to do is to be able to help others.

We mourn this loss of livelihood.

We honor and remember the dreams now deferred.

We pray for sustenance and resilience.
Amen.

Loss of Love

We mourn this night the loss of love.

Our society's dilemma, centuries in the making,
has created such hatred, suffering, oppression, and ill-will.

We mourn the loss of those whose lives were lost
to brutality and violence.

We mourn the loss of our ability to love one another
despite our differences,
as beings who deserve to be seen
for their inherent beauty and worth.

We mourn that black and brown peoples have perished
and suffered at the greatest proportion
in the pandemic of coronavirus.

We mourn the pandemic of racism
that still plagues the fabric of our communities.

We mourn this loss of love.

We honor and remember
the work of prophets who proclaim justice.

We pray for compassion and change.
Amen.

Loss of Liveliness

We mourn this night the loss of liveliness.

For so many, this year has robbed us
of our energy, our enthusiasm, and our sense of well-being.

We mourn teachers and leaders and caregivers and workers
who are struggling to help those in their care,
themselves exhausted
and needing the sustenance they give to others.

We mourn the loss of of all who are suffering
with anxiety and depression,
who are finding it difficult to live each day with fullness
or to find hope for tomorrow.

We mourn those we have lost to suicide.

We mourn those who find themselves
addicted to substances
in order to ease the pain that feels unbearable.

We mourn those who are experiencing their place of shelter
as an abusive place from which they struggle to escape.

We mourn this loss of liveliness.

We honor and remember
that each person is precious and whole.

We pray for recovery and renewed vigor.
Amen.

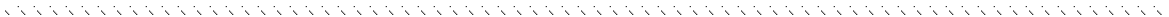
More Light

We believe in the Light that has come and is coming.

This light casts its glow on
all the surrounding prayers we have prayed.

This light resides within us,
perhaps dim for a time,
but always lit—an ember of the Holy inside us.

This light reminds us that we are not alone.



A RITUAL OF LETTING GO

“Cast your every care, cast them into the water, and let Jesus carry them away.”

In the front of the church you will find a bowl of water and some paper and pens.

Take a moment to reflect over this past year.

Write on the piece of paper what you need to let go of.

Name the ways you have fallen short
of your intentions, hopes, and dreams during this past year.

Bring your paper to the bowl of water and give them to God.

Imagine your disappointment, hurt, and heartbreak leave you.

Let your disappointments and sorrows dissipate.

LIGHTING OF INDIVIDUAL CANDLES

Each of us comes bearing our own hurts, sorrows, broken places. We invite each of you to offer your personal wound to the God who loves each of us deeply and wants to carry our pain. God waits patiently, gently calling out: "Give me your pain, come to me... all who labor and are heavy laden, I will refresh you!"

You are invited to come forward and light a candle. As you light the candle, remember that it is God who lights a candle in our darkness and holds us close until we are able to shine.

These lights in their brightness are only symbols, but as they burn and finally go out, we remember that suffering passes, though memory remains forever.



I Will Light Candles This Christmas

I will light candles this Christmas.

Candles of joy, despite all sadness,
Candles of hope where despair keeps watch,
Candles of courage for fears ever present,
Candles of peace for tempest-tossed days.
Candles of grace to ease heavy burdens,
Candles of love to inspire all my living,
Candles that will burn all the year long.

Written by Howard Thurman
From

The Mood of Christmas and Other Celebrations Richmond: Friends United Press, 1985

A LITURGY OF REMEMBRANCE

We remember those persons whom we have loved and lost. We pause to remember their name, their voice, their face, the memory that binds them to us in this season. We hold them before God, giving thanks for their lives in ours.

Please take a moment to remember those who have died. We invite you to name them, aloud or in the silence of your hearts....

Lord, each of us takes our loved one by the hand and leads them to you, the God of love, Here we present them to you. Accept our love and thanksgiving as we entrust them to your loving care. We want our loved ones to be free at home with you. We ask that you save a place for us beside them. We ask that you fill us with motivation and energy in the days ahead when we feel like giving up; remind us often of our true homeland when we are caught up in the desolation of the journey. Help us to find joy in the people, events and the beauty of nature which surrounds us.

Thank you for the gift each of these people has been in our lives. We want to believe that we will celebrate the treasure of love with them again when we are all in your presence forever. May this truth sustain us in the days to come. Take our sad and aching hearts and comfort us. Comfort us, for we only feel hollowness and emptiness. God of sorrowing, draw near! Amen.

We remember the pain of loss; the loss of relationships, the loss of jobs with the security they bring, the loss of health in ourselves or in family members, the loss of joy and peace in our lives from the stresses which surround us, the loss and loneliness we experience when our loved ones do not share our faith. As we gather up the pain of the past we offer it to you, O God, asking that into our open hands you will place the gift of peace.

Please take a moment to remember the losses. We invite you to name them in the silence of your hearts or write them on the paper provided at the front side of the church and drop them into the bowl of water....

God of mystery, we turn our hearts to you. We come before you in need of peace, grateful for the mystery of life and ever keenly aware of your promises of guidance

and protection. We want to place our trust in you, but our hearts grow fearful and anxious. We forget so easily that you will be with us in all that we experience. Teach us to be patient with the transformation of our lives and to be open to the changes which we are now going through. Amen.

We remember those who experience a loss of direction in their lives.

God of the Exodus, you led Moses and your people through the wilderness to a new land. Hear our prayer. We want so much to have a sense of direction, to know where we are and where we ought to be headed. But the darkness and the questions stay. You ask us to be full of faith, to believe deep within that you are our signpost, that you are our wisdom and our guide, and to trust in your presence. Your words to us are clear: "Do not fear, I go before you."

God of our depths, we cry out to you to be our guide. Help us to have a strong sense of inner direction and grant that we may have the reassurance of knowing that we are on the right path. Take our lives and use them according to your will. Take all that is lost in us and bring it home with you. Amen.

We remember the hope that the Christmas story offers to us. We remember that God, who shares our life, promises us a place and time of no more pain and suffering.

O God whose spirit is known by those whose hearts are thankful, and who makes cheerfulness a companion of strength, lift up our hearts, we pray to a joyous confidence in your care. Guide us when we cannot see the way. Teach us to know that a shadow is only a shadow, because the light of eternal goodness shines behind the object of our fears. Where there is love in life, teach us to find it; help us to trust it and enable us to grow in the power of love. So may our lives bring comfort and encouragement to others. We ask it, in the name of Jesus Christ whose life is our light. Amen.

Adapted from a litany written by Heather Hill, <https://youngclergywomen.org/blue-christmas-service-when-christmas-hurts/>

Litany based upon Psalm 13

How long, O Lord; will You ignore me forever? How long will You hide Your face from me? How long will I have cares on my mind, grief in my heart all day? How long will my enemy have the upper hand? *Deliver me, O God.*

Look at me, answer me, O Lord, my God! Restore the luster to my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death; lest my enemy say, "I have overcome them," my foes exult when I totter. *Deliver me, O God.*

But I trust in Your faithfulness, my heart will exult in Your deliverance. I will sing to the Lord, who has been good to me. *Deliver me, O God.*

POEM

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* from her collection *Thirst* (published by Beacon Press, 2006)

BLESSING

'Blessing for the Longest Night'

All throughout these months
as the shadows
have lengthened,
this blessing has been
gathering itself,
making ready,
preparing for
this night.

It has practiced
walking in the dark,
traveling with
its eyes closed,
feeling its way
by memory
by touch
by the pull of the moon
even as it wanes.

So believe me
when I tell you
this blessing will
reach you
even if you
have not light enough
to read it;
it will find you
even though you cannot
see it coming.

You will know
the moment of its
arriving
by your release
of the breath

you have held
so long;
a loosening
of the clenching
in your hands,
of the clutch
around your heart;
a thinning
of the darkness
that had drawn itself
around you.
This blessing
does not mean
to take the night away
but it knows
its hidden roads,
knows the resting spots
along the path,
knows what it means
to travel
in the company
of a friend.
So when
this blessing comes,
take its hand.
Get up.
Set out on the road
you cannot see.
This is the night
when you can trust
that any direction
you go,
you will be walking
toward the dawn.

~ written by Jan Richardson

PRAYER

God's Timing

O God of all seasons and senses,
grant us the sense of your timing
to submit gracefully and rejoice quietly in the turn of the seasons.
In this season of short days and long nights,
of grey and white and cold,
teach us the lessons of endings;
children growing, friends leaving, loved ones dying,
grieving over,
grudges over,
blaming over,
excuses over.

O God, grant us a sense of your timing.
In this season of short days and long nights,
of grey and white and cold,
teach us the lessons of beginnings;
that such waitings and endings may be the starting place,
a planting of seeds which bring to birth what is ready to be born—
something right and just and different,
a new song, a deeper relationship, a fuller love—
in the fullness of your time.

O God, grant us the sense of your timing.

~ written by Ted Loder, God's Timing from Guerillas of Grace

SCRIPTURE

Isaiah 40:1, 25-31

Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.
To whom then will you compare me,
or who is my equal? says the Holy One.
Lift up your eyes on high and see:
Who created these?
He who brings out their host and numbers them,
calling them all by name;
because he is great in strength,
mighty in power,
not one is missing.
Why do you say, O Jacob,
and speak, O Israel,
“My way is hidden from the LORD,
and my right is disregarded by my God”?
Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable.
He gives power to the faint,
and strengthens the powerless.
Even youths will faint and be weary,
and the young will fall exhausted;
but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.

Psalms 139:1-17

O LORD, you have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.

You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.
Even before a word is on my tongue,
O LORD, you know it completely.
You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is so high that I cannot attain it.
Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.
If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night,"
even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.
For it was you who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works;
that I know very well.
My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.
In your book were written
all the days that were formed for me,
when none of them as yet existed.
How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!

Psalm 121

I lift up my eyes to the hills—
from where will my help come?
My help comes from the LORD,
who made heaven and earth.
He will not let your foot be moved;
he who keeps you will not slumber.
He who keeps Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.
The LORD is your keeper;
the LORD is your shade at your right hand.
The sun shall not strike you by day,
nor the moon by night.
The LORD will keep you from all evil;
he will keep your life.
The LORD will keep
your going out and your coming in
from this time on and forevermore.

Matthew 11:28-30

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

John 1:1-14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

Thank you for joining us this evening.

Pastor Ninabeth is available for short term counseling.

If you find yourself thinking about suicide please reach out!



Specialists are available for confidential telephone counseling and support 24 hours a day, 7 days per week.

You are **not** alone. Suicide is preventable. There is hope.

Crisis Textline

Text **NJ** to **741741** for free, 24/7 crisis support

Call: 855-654-6735

This booklet has been compiled by the Rev. Ninabeth Metcalf for use by PVEC.
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