Since November 30th was the first Sunday of Advent, instead of a regular sermon, the following “Hanging of the Greens” service was used:

**Hanging of the Christmas Greens**  
Monte Nabors and Kelly Yates  
with additions by Dennis Bratcher

### Opening Prayer

Our Father, we long for the simple beauty of Christmas – for all the old familiar melodies, words, and symbols that remind us of that great miracle when He who had made all things came one night as a babe, to lie in the crook of a woman’s arm. But in that longing, let us even more yearn for your renewed presence among us even as we celebrate and expect the Coming of your Son.

Before such mystery we kneel, as we follow the shepherds and Wise Men to bring you the gift of our love – a love we confess has not always been as warm or sincere or real as it should have been. Now, as we enter into this Advent Season, we pray that love would find its Beloved, and from you receive the grace to make it pure again, warm and real.

We bring you our gratitude for every token of Your love, for all the ways You have heaped blessings upon us during the years that have gone. And we do pray, Lord Jesus, that as we begin this four-week journey of expectation and hope, we may do it in a manner well pleasing to you. May all we do and say, every tribute of our hearts, bring honor to your name, that we, Your people, may remember Your birth and feel Your presence among us even yet.

May the loving kindness of this Advent Season and the true Spirit of Christmas not only creep into our hearts this season, but there abide, so that not even the return to earthly cares and responsibilities, not all the festivities of our own devising may cause it to creep away weeping. May the joy and spirit of Christmas remain with us now and forever. In the name of Jesus, who came to save His people from their sins, even in that lovely name we pray. **Amen.**

*[Adapted from a prayer for Christmas by Peter Marshall]*

### The Meaning of the Service

As we begin the Christian Year, we also celebrate the Holy Season known as Advent. It is a time when we prepare ourselves for the coming of our Messiah. Advent means "Coming." We celebrate these days of Advent in expectation and preparation for Christ's arrival.
Through the centuries, Christians have observed a time of waiting and expectation before celebrating the birth of the Savior at Christmas. The Advent season is a time for reflection and preparation, but its mood is joyful. Advent has been enriched by Christian tradition to reflect its distinctive Christian meaning. It proclaims the revelation of God's love as expressed in Christ's birth in a humble stable, His sacrificial death on the cross, and His victorious resurrection! It points to the hope of Christ's coming again as the King of kings and Lord of Lords. Advent makes innkeepers out of all of us, asking each of us to make room for the arrival of Christ The King. Let us, today, prepare Him room in our hearts, our lives, and our homes!

**Choir Anthem:  "Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus"

**Lessons of Christmas**
Let us listen to the lessons of the years and the centuries, not just to impressions of the moment. The images of the present in the biblical story are often discouraging - war, hate, famine, epidemics, a Caesar on his throne, a Paul in prison, Christians being persecuted. But now, after the centuries, the Caesar is gone; Paul is a symbol of Faith; and Jesus, the Truth and the Light, is reaching out to every nation! Let us, through the great traditions of our Faith, join with the shepherds of Bethlehem, the wise men from the east, and the seekers throughout the ages, to welcome the One who came at Christmas. Let us at Christmastide bring our gifts to Him, and may the message of our songs be "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, Peace and goodwill to peoples everywhere".

**The Call to Celebration (Responsive Reading)** based on John 1:5 and Eph. 3:21
Leader: Christ has come! Christ was dead! Christ has risen! Christ will come again!
**People:** This is the faith of the Church of Jesus Christ!
Leader: When we look at the world around us, we see the darkness of war, captivity, greed, and broken relationships.
**People:** We long for Christ to come again and bring light to our world.
Leader: The Word of the Gospel is that Jesus Christ lives among us, bringing truth and light as a present reality.
**People:** We worship as those who have a glimpse of that reality, and we long for its fullness. We are those who labor to make Christ’s light more visible on earth.
**All:** Let us praise God, that the light of Christ shines on in the darkness, which has never overcome it. To God be the glory in Jesus Christ and in the church forever and ever. Amen.
The Advent Candles
Advent is a time of expectation, and this is symbolized, not only by the four-week period of preparation, but also by the lighting of an Advent Candle on each Sunday of the season. The flame of each new candle reminds us, the worshipers, that something is happening, and something more is still to come.

The candles are arranged in a circle to remind us of the continuous power of God, which knows neither beginning nor ending. There is also symbolism in the colors of the candles. The blue or purple candles symbolize the coming of Christ from the royal line of David. He is coming as the King of Kings as well as the Prince of Peace. If a pink candle is used, it is to be lighted on the third Sunday of the Advent season. This candle represents joy. The large white candle in the center is known as the Christ candle, and points to Jesus as the Christ, the Light of the world.

A progression is noted in the lighting of the candles of the Advent wreath each Sunday. Each candle symbolizes various aspects of our waiting experience. The culmination of the season comes as we light the Christ Candle on Christmas Eve. We join in rejoicing that the promise of long ago has been fulfilled.

Lighting of the Advent Candles  Scripture - Isaiah 60:1-3
Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

Hymn: “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” vs. 1 #211

Children’s Time

The Nativity
One of the most heart-warming expressions of Christmas is the Nativity. The Nativity speaks of the mystery of God's wisdom. Why God chose to send his son into our world as a baby of humble birth, born in common surroundings, we do not know. What we do know is that God reached out to all people including the poor and wealthy, the simple and the wise, the powerless and the powerful. All who found him knelt in humility before him. Knowing God is possible because he came to us, at our level. Whenever we see a Nativity we find ourselves with Mary and Joseph; with the Shepherds, and with the Wise Men; bowing before the manger, overwhelmed by God's expression of love in coming to us.

Hymn: "Away in a Manger"  # 217
The Sanctuary Evergreens
The most striking and the most universal feature of Christmas is the use of evergreens in churches and homes. Among ancient Romans evergreens were an emblem of peace, joy, and victory. The early Christians placed them in their windows to indicate that Christ had entered the home. Holly and ivy, along with pine, and fir are called evergreens because they never change color. They are ever-green, ever-alive, even in the midst of winter. They symbolize the unchanging nature of our God, and they remind us of the everlasting life that is ours through Christ Jesus.

Under Christian thought and sentiment, holly became widely used in church celebrations. Holly was considered as the burning bush, or a symbol of Mary whose being glows with the Holy Spirit. The red berries represented the blood drops from the cruel thorns in the crown of Jesus.

In Isaiah 60:13 we find these words: "The Glory of Lebanon shall come unto you, the fir tree, the pine tree and the box together, to beautify the place of your sanctuary." Our forefathers called the procuring of these evergreens, "Bringing home Christmas!"

Hymn: "Go, Tell It On The Mountain"  #251

The Christmas Tree
Today, the Christmas tree is the center of our festivities. Glittering with lights and ornaments, it is a part of the beauty and meaning of Christmas. There are several legends and stories about the Christmas tree.

The first use of the Christmas tree was in the medieval German Paradise Plays, held outdoors and portraying the creation of humankind. The Tree of Life was a fir tree decorated with apples. Later other ornaments were hung upon them, such as paper flowers and gilded nuts. In England branches or whole trees were forced into bloom indoors for Christmas. From these beginnings the use of a tree at Christmas was established. Martin Luther was perhaps the first to use a lighted tree.

The story is told that on one Christmas Eve Martin Luther wandered outdoors and became enraptured with the beauty of the starry sky. Its brilliance and loveliness led him to reflect on the glory of the first Christmas Eve as seen in Bethlehem's radiant skies. Wishing to share with his wife and children the enchantment he had felt, he cut from the forest an evergreen, glistening with snow, and took it home. He placed upon it candles to represent the glorious heavens he had seen. The use of a candle-lighted tree spread to all Europe, then America came to regard it as the central ornament of Christmas.
The Bells of Christmas
Christmas joy naturally overflows into music. About the fourth century A.D. bells first pealed forth in glad song at Christmas. Of all our Christmas symbols, the bells have experienced the fewest changes. Church bells, which have gladdened the hearts of people throughout the ages, are said to have been originated by Bishop Paulinus of Nola in Campania, Italy, who died in 431 A.D. From these two names has come the Latin word for bell. Medieval peoples had a tender feeling for bells. They were dedicated with prayers and regarded as almost living beings. Historical bells that have rung out the glad news at Christmas are the Emperor Bell in Moscow, the Great Bell of China at Peking, Big Ben of London, and the Liberty Bell of Philadelphia. However, it is church bells in every community around the world, that have found their way into each of our hearts.

Intro to “I Heard The Bells”
The poem, “Christmas Bells” was written by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow on Christmas Day, 1864. At that time Longfellow was still mourning the death of his wife, who had died a few years earlier as a result of burns sustained in their home. The nation was in the middle of the Civil War, and Longfellow’s son had been badly wounded while fighting in the war. In the poem, Longfellow laments upon hearing the bells pealing their carols, that their message of “peace on earth good will to men” seemed to be mocked by the hatred and the war surrounding them. In the end, however, the bells peal out the hope that God is with us, and peace on earth is possible.

With some of the stanzas that referred specifically to the Civil War omitted, the poem was later set to music by Johnny Marks and we know it as “I Head the Bells on Christmas Day.” The song reminds us that in spite of the hate and conflict we often witness, the hope of Christmas is that God is with us, that “The wrong shall fail, the right prevail, with peace on earth, goodwill to men.”

Solo: "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day"
Christmas Caroling
The actual origin of caroling as a part of the Christmas celebration is really unknown. Several countries have claimed to be the birthplace of the custom. From the first, music of some kind was a part of the church festivals in honor of the birth of Jesus. We know that caroling existed in Germany in the 15th century because Martin Luther wrote that when Christmas was celebrated, he went with others from house to house and village to village singing popular Christmas carols. We could safely assume that caroling was first done by the Choir of Angels who sang, "Glory to God in the Highest and on earth peace and good will to all people."

HYMN: "Angels We Have Heard on High" vs. 1

The Gifts of Christmas
From the beginning of Christmas celebrations, gift giving has been a part of the season. The Wise Men gave out of their treasures, and the Shepherds gave of themselves. Both express the Gift of God in giving Christ as the Savior of the World.

Unique in our history of generous givers is the story of Saint Nicholas, Bishop of Myra in Lycia in the fourth century A.D. He is reputed to have been wealthy, his emblem being three purses and three golden balls. This was the symbol of rich Italian families of his time. It survives today in the signs of some of our pawnshops. The good Bishop gave his money away secretly to those whom he found in need. He was deeply interested in young people, giving his wealth especially to maidens whose lack of a dowry was affecting their matrimonial future, and to needy boys.

Gifts coming from unknown sources were commonly attributed to him and parents customarily gave him credit for their gifts to their children. The discovery of his generosity is said to have been made by the father of three dowry-less daughters. The eldest two each received from the chimney on successive nights a substantial gift of gold with her name on it. The father resolved to watch and see who their generous benefactor could be. His vigil revealed the good Saint Nicholas as the donor of the gifts. His name survives today as the human embodiment of unselfish giving.

Hanging up our stockings in pleasant anticipation of Santa's gifts may have originated from the fact that the maidens of this Bishopric of Myra, needing and expecting a dowry from the good Saint Nicholas, suspended a stocking to catch the money purse the generous Bishop was sure to drop down the chimney.

Offering:
Offering Response: “In The Bleak Midwinter” vs. 4 #221
Prayer of Dedication
Generous God, as we take part in the giving of this season, may we be ever mindful of all the gifts we have received from you. Give us grateful and generous hearts, that we might be pleasing Lord, to you. Amen.

The Christ of Christmas
The greatest Gift of Christmas is the Gift of God in Christ Jesus. All that we do at this Holy Season points to that expression of Holy Love. Christ came as a babe in Bethlehem, God's gift at Christmas. As Christians we seek to pass on our heritage to our children and to those who, by faith in Christ, become part of the Family of God. It is through the work of the Holy Spirit in your life and mine that the Gift goes on.

Prayer
O God, you have caused this world to shine with the illumination of the true Light. You have given us your only-begotten Son to take our nature upon Him to reveal to us your glory and grace. As you have given this gift in love, may we receive it with joy. Grant that we, being regenerate and made your children by adoption and grace may daily be renewed by your Holy Spirit. Grant us, we pray, that as we have known the mystery of that Light upon earth, so may we also reflect that light to a darkened world; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen

Hymn: “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing” #240

The Blessing
Now may the God who has called us to live in hope and expectation, go with you as you journey in Faith toward that new future created by God’s love that has dwelt, and continues to dwell among us and in us. Go, in His grace and in His peace.