

***A Candle is Burning*, Music: Sandra Dean, Lyrics: James R. Murray, one verse instrumental, Second Verse Sung**

A candle is burning, a candle of peace,  
A candle to signal that conflict must cease,  
For Jesus is coming to show us the way,  
A message of peace humbly laid in the hay.

**Welcome**

Peace be with you, in this moment, and in every moment, you are able to bring yourself to a place of mindfulness, to the presence of the beloved heartbeat of the universe, and to your own internal quiet. It is always there waiting for you.

I am Rev. Candice Bist and along with my husband, Bruce Ley, we serve the Shelburne Primrose Pastoral Charge in Southern Ontario, where, like the rest of the world we are living through the Covid 19 pandemic.

It is the second week of the Advent season in the year 2020, a year fraught with uncertainty, and that uncertainty is far from over. But as we spoke about last week, uncertainty is a constant in life, for in truth we can never know what any day will bring. Perhaps a new love. Perhaps death. Perhaps new understanding. Perhaps conflict where one least expects it. Perhaps unmerited, and generous grace, which by its very nature is unexpected. Perhaps compassion extended towards us. Perhaps a new discover of how to extend it to someone else.

Uncertainty is certain. But what is equally certain, is the supremacy of life that always brings about new birth, even in death. What is certain is the power of love to overcome all obstacles, and the time of Advent, is a time to reflect on that love, beating as it does throughout all time and space, a mystery desirous of peace on earth and goodwill to all people.

The advent season began last week in hope, and it continues this week in peace. Peace, you may wonder? Peace in the midst of all the conflict? All the uncertainty? Yes, absolutely. Peace in the here and now. Peace we may claim as our own and give as a gift to others.

And we have to lead us, the gospel of Mark, written as it was in a time of war, the first of the stories about a person called Jesus and the beginning of a strange new thing called, Christianity. Mark along with the hymns and carols of this season, are our teachers today. And also Matthew Myer Boulton, whose thought I draw from, and whose podcast I am also offering on our website this week for listening.

Mathew Boulton makes the bold claim that the Bible, being the most widely read and purchased book of all time is valuable precisely because of the many conflicts and contradictions within it, its beauty and wisdom, its violence and its mysteries. The Bible has been used for great good and great evil. Either way, it is the most influential document in human history. But he would claim also, and I agree with this, that along with the Bible being greatly influential, it is also, greatly misunderstood, and thus, misused.

The Christmas story, likewise, has influenced many, it has influenced all of us. And it too has been misunderstood. Conversation is a great antidote to misunderstanding, so in our Sabbath time, we continue our on-going conversation with music, scriptures, traditions and the birth story of Jesus. And as we do, I am hoping that you will see that despite all that is around us to the contrary, there is hope and peace and joy and love in abundance.

***Come Thou Long Expected Jesus, Music: Psalmodia Sacra, Words, Charles Wesley, Arranger: Bruce Ley, Artists: Bruce Ley, Candice Bist***

Come, thou long expected Jesus  
to set thy people free  
From our fears and sins release us  
Let us find our rest in thee

Israel's strength and consolation  
Hope of all the earth thou art  
Dear desire of every nation  
Joy of every longing heart

Born thy people to deliver  
Born a child and yet a king  
Born to reign in us forever  
Now thy gracious kingdom bring

By thine own eternal spirit  
Rule in all our hearts alone  
By thine own sufficient merit  
Raise us to thy glorious throne

### **Call to Worship**

There is no escaping John the Baptist in the season of Advent. As the herald of Jesus, John stands on the far side of the Jordan river, getting ready to pass the baton on, before he sinks back

to his humble place, while Jesus blazes forth. Our call to worship proclaims John's purpose, and echo's the earlier prophets of Israel, all of whom call for people to re purpose their lives.

***There's a Voice in the Wilderness, Words: James Lewis Nilligan***

There's a voice in the wilderness crying,  
a call from the ways untrod:  
prepare in the desert a highway,  
a highway for our God!  
The valleys shall be exalted,  
the lofty hills brought low;  
make straight all the crooked places  
where the Lord our God may go!

O Zion, that bringest good tidings,  
go up to the heights and sing!  
Proclaim to a desolate people  
the coming of their King.  
Like the flowers of the field they perish,  
like grass our works decay,  
the power and pomp of nations  
shall pass like a dream away,

but the word of our God is steadfast;  
the arm of the Lord is strong;  
God stands in the midst of nations,  
and soon will right the wrong.  
God shall feed the flock like a shepherd,  
the lambs will gently hold,  
to pastures of peace will lead them,  
and bring them safe to the fold.

**Prayer**

We gather each in our own little bubble, far away, yet joined together in a virtual community of affection for this season, this sabbath time. We gather to offer our joys and our sorrows, reveling in your proximity, though confessing we know little of your will and way.

We acknowledge our blemishes, and yet we give thanks that you look not on our appearance but in our inmost heart.

In this season, the darkness comes early and the light rises reluctantly. There is a certain trembling in our bones, in our families, in our nation and our world. We do not ask that you remove our misgivings—but that you provide an inner point of stillness that sustains and invigorates.

Grant the calm that outlasts storms; the quiet that overrules the noise, the composure necessary to endure all manner of contention.

Wean us on the Word that sustains; hold us gently amid the rough and tumble circumstances of our lives; lead us into the conspiracy against all villainy and in our longing for and leaning toward the day when justice and peace will kiss.

May these anguished days unfold in praise for the making of all things new. Amen.

***To A Maid Whose Name was Mary, instrumental, Music: Rusty Edwards, Arrangement: Bruce Ley***

### **First Part of the Reflection**

When we think about the Christmas story, we conjure up singing angels, bejewelled wise men, and a baby being held by his mother Mary while the barn yard animals stand around in adoration. Lurking somewhere in our minds might also be the villainous King Herod, that ferocious man who had John the baptism beheaded, and then without missing a beat, ordered all the babies under the age of two to be slaughtered in an attempt to kill Jesus. He did not succeed – kudos to the angel crew for that clever maneuver.

But this story is not in the Gospel of Mark. Mark's birth story of Jesus begins with Jesus hanging around with his cousin John down by the river Jordan with all the other malcontents. In our current language it was a gathering of those who were spiritual, but not religious. The temple had ceased to offer people the sustenance they needed. People were looking for an experience of God. And what they had been given instead was a list of dos and don'ts, financial requirements, and rules, rules, and more rules. Where, they wondered was the power and mystery of God? And what had happened to the community that was supposed to care for one another in a tender way? They could not find it at the temple nor with the priests who had been appointed to model the compassion that was at the heart of the Torah.

And here is wild John asking these Jews to be baptized, which in and of itself was unusual. There was baptism in the Hebrew tradition, but not generally for those who were already Jews. It was for outsiders, those converting to the faith. But John, steeped in the prophetic tradition, teaches by symbolic gestures. He calls the people to come back to God, to review their faith, to renew

their faith, to recommit to their faith, and the symbol of this, he tells them, will be a baptism of water. And this ritual, will hopefully help draw them back to the rich, compassionate intent to care for themselves and others that was etched into the Decalogue. Only after they have taken part in a recommitment to their faith, will the gift of a spiritual rebirth be given. And that is God's territory, not John's.

So, Mark sees the birth of Jesus as a baptismal moment. Jesus is baptized with water by John, and then he is baptized in the spirit by God. Jesus has an experience of knowing himself to be beloved. And this is his birth story, for from that moment on, Jesus' ministry begins, his life as the Christ is initiated.

But hold too beside this thought, the circumstance in which Mark writes his story. Marc is a war correspondent, writing in and around the time of the Jewish revolt against the Roman Imperial occupation that resulted in the desecration and destruction of the temple. The temple was, to the Jewish people, the very heart of God. To lose the temple was to lose everything. Mark stands in the midst of this desolation stares down the terror of unknown for himself, and all that he and the Hebrew people hold sacred and he declares that he has a gospel to tell. And it is a gospel of true peace.

The word gospel does not just apply to our beloved scriptures in the Christian context. It was a word used by the Romans to announce any great happening, but particularly a victory, a conquest. Shortly before the time of Jesus, an official imperial inscription hailed Caesar Augustus as "Son of God" and declared his birthday as "a beginning of good news [*evangelion* or 'gospel'] for the world." Mark, with his subversive story telling skills, takes those two terms that the romans have used, incorporates them into his story and boldly claims that Jesus is the bringer of Peace, not Caesar, not the Empire. It is the battle between Pax Romano and Pax Dei, Roman peace verses God's peace.

Mark standing in the midst of the battlefield, where conflict rages all around him, scribbling down everything he can think to tell us that is important, announces that the good news is that God's Peace will win. Always.

Marc Begins his birth story the same way the biblical text begins way back in Genesis. Because to Mark a new world order is being formed.

### **Mark 1:1-11**

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will

prepare your way;

the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'"

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.

He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals.

I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.

And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him.

And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved;<sup>[1]</sup> with you I am well pleased."

***O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*, Music: 15<sup>th</sup> century plainsong melody, Lyrics: John Mason Neal et al, Arranger: Bruce Ley, Artists: Bruce Ley, SPPC Choir**

O come, O come, Emmanuel,  
And ransom captive Israel,  
That mourns in lonely exile here  
Until the Son of God appear.  
Rejoice! Rejoice!  
Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.

O come, O Wisdom from on high,  
Who orders all things mightily;  
To us the path of knowledge show,  
And teach us in her ways to go.

Rejoice! Rejoice!  
Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.

O come, Thou Day-spring, from on high  
And cheer us by your drawing nigh.  
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night,  
And death's dark shadows put to flight.

Rejoice! Rejoice!  
Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.

O come, Desire of nations, bind  
All peoples in one heart and mind  
O bid our sad divisions cease,  
And be for us the Prince of Peace.  
Rejoice! Rejoice!  
Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.  
Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.

### **Closing Thoughts**

You know when I think of the writer of the Gospel of Mark in a modern context, I imagine a young cameraman in the midst of the Black Lives Matter protests or standing outside the busy hospital entrances reporting on the latest pandemic crisis, or following the Greenpeace activists, trying to record in the middle of the apparent chaos, that something wonderful happening. And yes, sensing that in the midst of all the uncertainty, today, God is on the move. God is allowing the tearing up and the tearing down, so that some new world may emerge. And until it does, we will never be able to imagine it. Because it is beyond our human imagining. And as our modern-day Mark films his gospel, creates his YouTube video, he tries to capture the true spirit of the movement around him. And despite all the disruptions and violence, he claims that what is happening is Good.

Just like the writer of the gospel of Mark, and just like our imagined modern-day Mark, we stand in the midst of uncertainty, both in the world, and in our faith story, and our personal church story. And we wonder how it will all turn out.

Let's follow Mark's lead, and train our eyes to the horizon, where the beauty of God's vision is clear. Peace for all people. If we will but look up from the fear, we will see it shimmering in the distance, and also, hear it beating within our own hearts.

According to the gospel of Mark, Jesus ministry began when he understood that he was a beloved son of God. This last week, in our Practising compassion gathering, we learned that the first insight in being able to cultivate compassion for others is to understand that all people are beloved by the universe. Belovedness is the true nature of humanity.

Hold this thought, for this is your spiritual practice this week: All people, without exception, are beloved by the universe, beloved by God.

December 6<sup>th</sup> is the Feast day of St Nicholas, a fourth century bishop from Myra, now Turkey, who was known for his generosity. Our modern Santa Claus is a mythical descendent of St. Nicholas. Throughout the world, there is a tradition where children leave their shoes outside their homes so that St. Nicholas will fill them with chocolates, sweets and coins. Think on those children. They are beloved by God.

December 6<sup>th</sup> is the birthday of American poet Joyce Kilmer, known for poetry that celebrated the beauty of the natural world and his religious faith. He wrote this well-known poem, Trees. "I think that I shall never see a poem lovely as a tree.... and ends, "Poems are made by fools like me, but only God can make a tree." Kilmer was a man of great moral character. He was beloved by God. He was also a soldier in the first world war, serving with distinction, until he was killed by a sniper's bullet. The sniper was beloved by God also.

Here in Canada, December 6<sup>th</sup> has a dark shadow upon it, because it is the day that we remember what has become known as the Montreal Massacre, a mass shooting in which 14 women were killed by a young man who then turned the gun upon himself. This day is now a National day of Remembrance and Action on violence against Women. Each one of those women who died on December 6<sup>th</sup>, 1989 was beloved by God. But so too was the young man, Mark, who perpetrated the violence.

Mark's mother, Monique was a nurse, she still is. And on that awful day she was working, caring for people. She returned home to hear about the shooting on television, and then headed off to a prayer meeting, which she did every Wednesday evening. And at that meeting, having no idea that her son had anything to do with what she had seen on television, felt called upon to pray for the mother of the shooter, which she would discover the next day, was herself. Monique's daughter Nadia would die of an overdose seven years after her brother, haunted by how she had treated her shy younger brother as a child. Marc, Nadia, Monique, all beloved children of God and all to be the recipients of our compassion because there is no distinction concerning the nature of belovedness.

Do you see how we do not know the fulness of things?



This Sunday, this December 6<sup>th</sup>, cast the warmth of compassion wide, and let all shelter within it – the children and their desire for treats, the soldier, the poet, the sniper, the victims of violence, the mother, the child, the sister, the brother, all of us, beloved children of God.

When we come to understand this, then there is heaven on earth. Then there is peace and goodwill towards all. Then the Prince of Peace has come, for we will have ushered him in, heralded his entrance with our own compassionate hearts.

If you wish to learn more about just how to practice compassion, join us Thursday at 7:30 for our Zoom gathering. And also, please note that there is a zoom gathering on Sunday afternoons at 4:30 to chat about the podcast, or any of the accompanying materials associated with it. All the co-ordinates are on our website.

Be blessed this week. And know yourself to be beloved.

***Peace Train, Music/Lyrics: Yusuf/Cat Stevens, Arranger: Bruce Ley, Artist: Bruce Ley***

Well, I've been happy lately  
Thinking about the good things to come  
And I believe it could be  
Something good has begun  
Oh, I've been smiling lately  
Dreaming about the world as one  
And I believe it could be  
Someday it's going to come

Cause I'm on the edge of darkness  
There ride the Peace Train  
Oh, Peace Train take this land,  
Bring us home again

Now I've been smiling lately,  
Thinking' about the good things to come  
And I believe it could be,  
Something good has begun.

Peace train getting louder,  
Come on now Peace Train  
Yes, Peace Train holy roller  
Jump on the Peace Train

Now come and join the living,  
It's not so far from you  
And it's getting nearer,  
Soon it will all be true  
Now I've been crying lately,  
Thinkin' about the world as it is  
Why must we go on hating,  
Why can't we live in bliss

'Cause out on the edge of darkness,  
There rides a Peace Train  
Oh Peace Train take this land,  
Bring us home again.

Peace Train sounding louder  
Glide on the Peace Train  
Flat top and holy roller  
Jump on the peace train,  
Jump on the peace train,  
Jump on the peace train.