

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

We honour Messiah with Christ candle's flame,
Our Christmas Eve candles grand tidings proclaim,
O come, all you faithful, rejoice in this night,
For God comes among us the Christian's true light.

Welcome

Peace be with you, this most precious of days and evenings, Christmas Eve, December 24th, in the year 2020 a year rich in new experience, certainly with its sorrows and unevenness, but too, like all years, with its blessings.

Christmas Eve in our Christian calendar marks the end of the Advent season, a time of reflection and contemplation, and heralds in the season of Christmastide, twelve days when we celebrate the symbolic birth of Jesus the Christ, around whose way of love, we gather. And we have just passed through the Winter solstice, the longest night in the year where we live, and a very real reminder of the astonishing complexity of this blue orb we are privileged to call home.

I am Rev. Dr. Candice Bist and along with my husband Bruce Ley, we serve Primrose United Church and Trinity United church in southern Ontario and I welcome you into this sabbath space of rest and peace, into a gathering of story and song, well familiar to everyone, within the church formal, and beyond.

As is our tradition on Christmas Eve, we continue reading from the book of Luke, with his mystical telling of a many layered love story. Mary and Joseph, the couple at its center, tell us a larger tale of the love between the divine and the human, a sweeping, eternal romance that continues on to this day, reminding us over and over again, that we are not alone in the universe. We walk hand in hand with some great mystery of love and life that holds us, cares for us, desires our goodness, and the goodness and noble reach of all people without exception. It is the story of a love that cannot be contained by human power or politics. It is a love story that cannot be constrained within any particular doctrine, nor coerced by human bidding, though heaven knows through the ages we continue to try.

So, here is our Sabbath Story, our mystical Lukean telling in scripture and song. It is the story of a couple who slipped through the heavy net of imperial conquest to offer us a view of God as subversive, hidden, surprising, right here in our midst in a way we could not imagine. It is a story of choosing love in the midst of adversity. And that courageous choice, then, and now, always heralds the singing of angels and a joyfulness that echoes through time.

We begin with a poem by Denise Levertov, as our call to worship and prayer of confession combined.

Musical Interlude

On the Mystery of the incarnation, by Denise Levertov

It's when we face for a moment
the worst our kind can do, and shudder to know
the taint in our own selves, that awe
cracks the mind's shell and enters the heart:
not to a flower, not to a dolphin,
to no innocent form
but to this creature vainly sure
it and no other is god-like, God
(out of compassion for our ugly
failure to evolve) entrusts,
as guest, as brother,
the Word.

God of All Places, Music: David M. Young, Lyrics: David Haas, Arranger: Bruce Ley, Artists: Bruce Ley

God of all places: present, unseen.
Voice in our silence, song in our midst.
We are your people, knowing, unsure.
Come, Lord Jesus, come!

God of all dreaming, near and yet far.
Vision unheard of, wake us to rest.
We are your presence, sent forth afraid.
Come, Lord Jesus, come!

God of all people, dust and the clay.
Breath of a new wind, fire in our heart.
Light born of heaven, peace on the earth.
Come, Lord Jesus, come!
Come, Lord Jesus, come!

First Reading Luke 2: 1 – 5

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.

***Breath of Heaven*, Music: Chris Eaton, Lyrics: Amy Grant, Arranger: Bruce Ley, Artists: Bruce Ley, Candice Bist**

I have traveled many moonless nights
Cold and weary with a babe inside
And I wonder what I've done
Holy father you have come
And chosen me now to carry your son

I am waiting in a silent prayer
I am frightened by the load I bear
In a world as cold as stone
Must I walk this path alone?
Be with me now. Be with me now

Breath of heaven
Hold me together
Be forever near me
Breath of heaven
Breath of heaven
Lighten my darkness
Be forever near me
Breath of heaven

Do you wonder as you watch my face
If a wiser one should have had my place
But I offer all I am
For the mercy of your plan
Help me be strong, help me be strong

Breath of heaven

Hold me together
Be forever near me
Breath of heaven
Breath of heaven
Lighten my darkness
Be forever near me
Breath of heaven. (repeat)

Luke 2: 6 – 14

While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those upon whom his favour rests.”

Christmas Carol Medley

***It Came Upon a Midnight Clear*, Lyrics: Edmund Hamilton Sears. Music: Richard Storrs Willis, Arranger: Bruce Ley, Artists: Bruce Ley, Lee McKinnon**

It came upon the midnight clear, that glorious song of old,
From angels bending near the earth, to touch their harps of gold:
"Peace on the earth, goodwill to all, from heaven's all-gracious King."
The world in solemn stillness lay, to hear the angels sing.

***Away in a Manger*, Lyrics: Unknown, Music: William James Kirkpatrick, Artists: Bruce Ley, Susan Boon**

Away in a manger no crib for a bed,
the little lord Jesus laid down his sweet head,
the stars in the bright sky looked down where he lay,

the little lord Jesus asleep on the hay.

***The First Noel*, Lyrics: traditional English Carol, Music: Traditional English melody,
Artists: Bruce Ley, Darlene Morrow**

The First Noel, the Angels did say
Was to certain poor shepherds in fields as they lay
In fields where they lay keeping their sheep
On a cold winter's night that was so deep
Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel
Born is the King of Israel!
Noel, Noel
Noel, Noel

***Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*, Lyric: Charles Wesley, Music: Felix Mendelssohn,
Arranger: Bruce Ley, Artists: Bruce Ley, Jeff Cottam**

Hark! the herald angels sing
Glory to the new-born King!
Peace on earth and mercy mild
God and sinners reconciled!
Joyful, all ye nations, rise
Join the triumph of the skies
With the angelic host proclaim
Christ is born in Bethlehem!
Hark! the herald angels sing
Glory to the new-born King!

***O Come All Ye Faithful*, Lyrics: Claude Rozier, Frederick Oakely, translator, Artists:
Bruce Ley, Alex Boon**

O come, all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant,
O come ye, o come ye, to Bethlehem.
Come and behold Him, born the King of Angels!
Refrain: O come, let us adore Him, O come, let us adore Him
O come, let us adore Him, Christ the Lord

Scripture Reading: Luke 2: 15 - 21

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us."

So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. ²¹ On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise the child, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he was conceived.

***O Little Town of Bethlehem*, Lyrics: Phillips Brooks, Music: Lewis Henry Redner, Artists: Bruce Ley, Candice Bist**

O little town of Bethlehem
How still we see thee lie
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
The silent stars go by
Yet in thy dark streets shineth
The everlasting Light
The hopes and fears of all the years
Are met in thee tonight

For Christ is born of Mary
And gathered all above
While mortals sleep, the angels keep
Their watch of wondering love
O morning stars together
Proclaim the holy birth
And praises sing to God the King
And Peace to men on earth.

O holy Child of Bethlehem
Descend to us, we pray
Cast out our sin and enter in
Be born to us today
We hear the Christmas angels
The great glad tidings tell
O come to us, abide with us
Our Lord Emmanuel
O come to us, abide with us
Our Lord Emmanuel

Reflection

The Christmas story, as Luke tells it, is the story of sabbath sensibilities cancelling out an attempt at world domination by the Roman empire, the oppressive forces at the time of Jesus' birth.

Luke begins his story this way, "In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered."

Is this business of the census completely historically accurate? No, not completely. But remember, Luke is not telling a historical tale, he is telling something more important - a theological tale. Luke is unveiling a version of God as coming from a new place, from virgin territory outside the common culture of patriarchal oppression. He has chosen Mary, a single, poor young girl, as his leading lady, an unlikely protagonist. And now, to be sure we understand the context of this upside-down world he presents, Luke puts this imperial order front and center of his love story.

People are to be counted, categorized, and ultimately, taxed. The monies collected would go to the ongoing expansion of the empire, and the people who did not wish this empire, were to be subdued. Mary, in her final stages of pregnancy, was not released from this obligation. You can imagine that soldiers, temple police, protests, push back, and violence were involved. Sound familiar?

We can be forgiven for not having noticed the themes of homelessness, migration, and authoritarianism in the Christmas story because, well, these images are not found on our Christmas cards or in our holiday movies. It is rarely, if ever, spoken about in polite conversation, nor depicted in art or sculpture or song, with a few notable, more modern, exceptions.

What we are offered regarding the Christmas story, are the more agreeable vignettes of the mother and child, Mary on a donkey with Joseph at her side, the singing angels, the adoring shepherds, the generous wisemen, the sparking sky, the holy night. All lovely, all still important, as long as we remember the context in which the loveliness exists.

Our story is instigated, in Luke's telling remember, and the writer may tell what he wishes, by a registration for all the people of the world. That's a pretty big reach, a grand ambition on the part of the dominate culture. The word 'registration' is used three time inside four verses – repetition of a singular word, the ancient form of using a high lighter. The desire for world domination by one group, over all others, Luke tells us, is where our story begins.

But look what happens. There is no room at the inn.

Jesus is born in a stable – outside the coordinates of imperial surveillance with no witnesses, but for the silent animals.

And when our couple Mary and Joseph slip seamlessly through the roman net cast over the whole world, who do the angels go to for their great announcement? They seek out the shepherds who live in the hills, with no fixed address, the undocumented ones. The shepherds are not registered on google maps, because they move around, they with the animals. They have not gone to the towns to be registered.

The angels float about where they will, talk to who they want. They are not caught in the registration process either.

Mary finds herself, however you see these matters, pregnant with a child - a tricky business for an unmarried girl in her culture. It still is. And she chooses to go forth in love and faith that the God she loves, and the people she loves, will be enough to sustain her.

Joseph, a Jewish man, knew well the teachings of Leviticus that gave him not only the right, but suggested the expectation, to have Mary stoned to death. Joseph interpreted the law through the eyes of compassion, and listening to his heart, and the divine spirit, decides to protect Mary instead. As Jesus will do sometime later, he finds in the law of his faith, the deeper note that tells him all people are beloved, all people are of value.

The inn turns Mary and Joseph away, the stable welcomes them. The shepherds who live among the sheep and wild animals, and are discounted by all so called good society, are courted by no less than the divine messengers. All those who bear witness to this new birth are outside the registration process. The divine will not be subject to any empire, or any human law, for it is its own dominion. God moves and breathes and has its being where it will.

Luke calls us to watch for God in unexpected places, to seek the miraculous in the everyday matters of life.

And to stand in awe and wonder at the magic of it all.

***O Holy Night*, Lyrics: Placide Cappeau, Jon Sullivan Dwight, translator, Music: Adolphe Adam, Artists: Bruce Ley, Paul Boon, SPPC Choir**

O Holy night! The stars are brightly shining
It is the night of our dear Savior's birth

Long lay the world in sin and error pining
'Til He appears and the soul felt its worth
A thrill of hope the weary world rejoices
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn
Fall on your knees; O hear the Angel voices!
O night divine, O night when Christ was born
O night, Divine, O night divine, oh night divine.

Fall on your knees; O hear the Angel voices!
O night divine, O night when Christ was born
O night, Divine, O night divine, oh night divine.

Reflection

In addition to our traditional celebration of the birth of Jesus on December 24th, I would like to draw to your attention three other things that happened on this auspicious date that help us remember that the divine spirit has a mind and will outside that of men and women and is always surprising us when we least expect it.

I mentioned earlier that we have just passed through the winter solstice and offered the thought that we might reflect on the astonishment of the simple existence of our earth in orbit. It is just over fifty years ago, that we first had a glimpse of our earth shining like a blue jewel in a sea of black.

December 24 is the anniversary of the famous “Earthrise” photograph, taken by the astronauts on the Apollo 8 mission in 1968, the first to reach and orbit the moon, the first men to see earth as a whole planet in its entirety. With all the detail that went into the planning of this elaborate adventure, no one gave much thought to the significance of taking a photograph from this vantage point, and the effect it would have on the worldview of humanity. It was a humbling, astonishing sight, leaving the astronauts stunned into silence. They decided to read from the book of Genesis. taking turns as they read the first ten verses In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth..... As the spacecraft orbited around to the dark side of the moon and out of radio contact, they ended the Christmas Eve broadcast this way: “We close with good night, good luck, a Merry Christmas, and God bless you all — all of you on the good Earth.” Reflecting back many years later, Commander Frank Borman mused, “What they should have sent was poets because I don’t think we captured in its entirety the grandeur of what we had seen.”

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=syQi7Q-ITCE&feature=emb_imp_woyt

The next morning, on the front pages of newspapers around the world, was poet Archibald MacLeish’s reflection on the photograph. I concluded, “To see the earth as it truly is, small and blue and beautiful in that eternal silence where it floats, is to see ourselves as riders on the earth

together, brothers on that bright loveliness in the eternal cold — brothers who know now they are truly brothers.”

So much energy to travel to the moon to see it up close – a monochromatic, lumpy, stony place, and then, the grand surprise, of seeing anew the earth as it had never even been imagined, a glorious, blue sphere sparkling with light and life, in the mist of great ocean of black silence. Divine understandings are always a surprise. The angels that sang at Jesus’ birth, are still at work in the world, singing through photographs and poets and astronauts alike.

December 24 is also the anniversary of “Silent Night” first being performed at the Church of St. Nicholas in Oberndorf, Austria, in 1818. The young priest in preparing his Christmas Eve mass discovered that the organ was not working. But he had written a poem a few years earlier, and his choir director quickly wrote out a simple tune on his guitar. The two men just wanted some music for their congregation’s Christmas Eve service. Silent Night has been translated and sung in over 300 languages throughout the world, the quintessential Christmas carol included in all Christmas Eve Gatherings. Do you think that young priest and that choir director, fretting over a broken organ, could have imagined such a thing? As the prophet Isaiah writes, for my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

And December 24 is also the anniversary of the “Christmas Eve Truce,” which took place in 1914 along the Western front during World War I. German and British troops had been locked in brutal trench warfare, but on Christmas Eve, sounds of “Stille Nacht” were heard rising from the German side, and some Brits sang back “The First Noel.” Both sides tentatively raised candles and lanterns above the parapets, and the truce began. The soldiers met between the trenches in “no man’s land,” shaking hands, exchanging small gifts (tobacco, alcohol, chocolate), and even playing impromptu games of soccer. In the early morning of December 26, the men returned to their trenches, picked up their weapons — and hostilities resumed. But to this day, the tales of the truce are still told, story after story from up and down the Western front.

<https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2020/12/15/theologians-almanac-for-week-of-december-20-2020>

Imagine, if you will, how those voices singing in different languages would have floated across no man’s land, littered with dead bodies and the hopelessness of war. Imagine, too how it must have been to pick up once again, the instruments of war the next morning. Peace and war, love and hate, are not as far apart as we might think. We can imagine a different world. It is standing right in front of us. God keeps showing it to us. And though we glimpse it, know it, have touched and felt it, still, we so often turn away.

But maybe not this time.

***Silent Night*, Lyrics: Joseph Mohr, John Freeman Young (translator), Music: Frank Xavier Gruber, Artists: Bruce Ley, Sabine Rohner-Tensee, SPPC Choir**

Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht,
Alles schläft; einsam wacht
Nur das traute hochheilige Paar.
Holder Knabe im lockigen Haar,
Schlaf in himmlischer Ruh!
Schlaf in himmlischer Ruh!

Silent night, holy night!
Shepherds quake at the sight!
Glories stream from heaven afar;
Heavenly hosts sing Al-le-lu-ia!
Christ the Savior is born!
Christ the Savior is born!
Christ the Savior is born!

Silent night, holy night
Son of God, oh, love's pure light
Radiant beams from Thy holy face
With the dawn of redeeming grace
Jesus, Lord at Thy birth
Jesus, Lord at Thy birth
Jesus, Lord at Thy birth

Closing Remarks

One of my children told me that when things are getting to him, when he really can't make sense of anything, he brings to mind the wild crazy idea that he is standing on a ball tumbling through a black nothingness at a great speed, on a fantastical ball holding together trees and water and mountains and all of life with no apparent sense or reason as to why and how it all exists, except it does. I call that a divine revelation. Because my young son is correct, there is no rhyme nor reason to the astonishing graces that we are gifted every single breath of our life in every single day.

Don't waste a single minute more on being distressed with anything or anybody. Choose to love, and leave everything else to minds more elevated, divine or otherwise. Choose to love over and

over and over again until your last breath in this world and the breath beyond. It is the only reasonable, sensible thing to do in the madness and beauty of the world in which we live.

Human power tries to control.

Always has, always will.

But it doesn't work where love is concerned.

Because as Luke and Dostoyevsky and Mary Oliver and every other deep thinker and writer and artist will tell you, Love is the single most powerful force in the universe, there is nothing else like it.

Go ahead, pick that light saber up and flash it around.

You are going to have soooooo much fun and think of the joy and grace that will ensue.

I want to close with my deep gratitude to all the care group leaders in both churches who have been such a great help to me this last year, and also to Ann McAlpine and Gail Brown, our two fearless leaders without whom I am completely a sea. And to Mr. Bruce Ley, for the endless hours he puts into the music every week, and to the Shelburne Primrose Pastoral Charge Choir members who were willing to test out some new technology while we tried to figure out how to record off site to keep everyone safe and well. My deep appreciation to all.

As some of you may know, our daughter Madelaine and her beloved Connor who are currently living in The Netherlands were married last Saturday in a zoom ceremony that gathered together people from three different continents, and I lost track how many countries. A zoom wedding. Never imagined such a thing. But you know what? All the most important things that mattered at weddings were still the same. There was an overflowing of love and joy and delight, there were tears, there was laughter. We are living through times that call us all to remember just what is important, and to leave behind what is not.

What is important is love. Plain and simple. If we focus on that, we will know well enough how to handle everything else.

I close with the wonderful wedding blessing from Celtic Christian writer, John O'Donohue that was read on Saturday. I have adapted it for all of you. It is my Christmas blessing.

Be well, look after yourselves, extend grace to everyone and everything around you. Watch over those who are especially tender this year from the recent loss of a family member. It is at this time of year we are most keenly aware of those who are absent from the table. Be kind. Be generous.

And choose love. It's always the more interesting choice.

Here is your Christmas Blessing

As spring unfolds the dream of the earth,
May you bring each other's hearts to birth.

As the ocean finds calm in view of land,
May you love the gaze of each other's mind.

As the wind arises free and wild,
May nothing negative control your lives.

As kindly as moonlight might search the dark,
So gentle may you be when light grows scarce.

As surprised as the silence that music opens,
May your words for each other be touched with reverence.

As warmly as the air draws in the light,
May you welcome each other's every gift.

As elegant as dream absorbing the night,
May sleep find you clear of anger and hurt.

As twilight harvests all the day's color,
May love bring you home to each other.

John O'Donohue, To Bless the Space Between Us, page 136, Doubleday, 2008, First Edition, USA

***In the Bleak Midwinter*, Lyrics: Christian Georgine Rossetti, Music: Gustav Theodor Holst, Arranger: Bruce Ley, Artists: Bruce Ley, Candice Bist**

In the bleak midwinter
Frosty wind made moan,
Earth stood hard as iron,
Water like a stone;
Snow had fallen,
Snow on snow, snow on snow,

In the bleak midwinter,
Long ago.

Our God, heaven cannot hold him,
Nor earth sustain;
Heaven and earth shall flee away
When he comes to reign;
In the bleak midwinter
A stable place sufficed
The Lord God almighty,
Jesus Christ.

Angels and archangels
May have gathered there,
Cherubim and seraphim
Thronged in the air;
But his mother only,
In her maiden bliss,
Worshipped the Beloved
With a mother's kiss.

What can I give him,
Poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd
I would bring a lamb,
If I were a wise man
I would do my part,
Yet what I can I give Him —
Give my heart.