

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

A candle is burning a candle of joy,  
A candle to welcome brave Mary's new boy.  
Our hearts fill with wonder, and eyes light and glow  
As joy brightens winter like sunshine on snow.

**Welcome**

May joy be with you, this day, this moment. Yes, joy, a deeper sentiment than happiness, a spiritual grace that resides deep within you. And though you may not be feeling joyful, may feel, in fact, as if joy cannot even be accessed, it has never left you. Because the ability to feel joyfulness, is a spiritual gift given at your birth right alongside the spiritual gift of sorrow. All humans have these gifts, they are bred into our very nature, just as is, belovedness. Joy does not remove sorrow, it takes sorrow's hand, and walks beside it, in companionship.

I am Rev. Candice Bist and along with our very talented musical director, Bruce Ley, I serve the Shelburne Primrose Pastoral Charge in southern Ontario. And this week, we are walking together through the third week of Advent, and its theme of joy.

The word advent comes from the Latin word, *adventus*, meaning, coming, or arrival, and we might also note that the word adventure comes from the same root, *adventurus*, signifying something that is 'about to happen'. In our liturgical calendar Advent is a time of preparation for the season of Christmas, where we welcome and celebrate the birth of Jesus, who, to us, is the Christ. For four weeks we read and reflect upon the various birth stories of Jesus, his baptism, the nativity in Bethlehem, his light coming into the darkness. And we also, reflect upon the state of our own lives, as we prepare to open our hearts more fully to the presence of Christ within it, and that is a great adventure.

Advent is one of the earliest observances in our faith, dating back to the sixth century when fasting was a major part of the season's preparation. Over time, our customs and rituals change, and our current custom is to have an Advent wreath with four candles, representing hope, peace, joy, and love. This week we gather around the candle of joy, and that may seem somewhat bittersweet.

But we are called to worship in the midst of contradiction, in the midst of life and death, joy and sorrow, in the midst of conflicting emotions and conflicting memories. We are called to see life as gift, to see others as miraculous mysteries yet to be known.

We are called to find contentment in the midst of discontent, we are called to find joy, joy, joy in the simple act of living each day.

We worship today, with joy, and the hope that it will spread out into the community and be gifted, along with the other Advent gifts of hope and peace and love.

***All Earth is Waiting, Music: Alberto Taule, Lyrics: Alberto Taule, trans. Gertrude Suppe, Artists: Bruce Ley, Candice Bist***

All earth is waiting to see the Promised One,  
and open furrows await the seed of God.  
All the world, bound and struggling, seeks true liberty;  
it cries out for justice and searches for the truth.

Thus says the prophet to those of Israel:  
'A virgin mother will bear Emmanuel,'  
one whose name is 'God with us' our Saviour shall be;  
with him hope will blossom once more within our hearts.

Mountains and valleys will have to be made plain;  
open new highways, new highways for the Lord.  
He is now coming closer, so come all and see,  
and open the doorways as wide as wide can be.

In lowly stable the Promised One appeared;  
yet feel his presence throughout the earth today,  
for he lives in all people and is with us now;  
again, with his coming he brings us liberty.

### **Call to Worship**

We begin with an offering from the ever-devoted Wendell Berry, farmer, theologian, and poet. A modern-day prophet, walking the mystic's path, he sees the nativity right in the middle of his morning chores at the barn. And he calls us to see the nativity, particularly during the season of Advent, wherever we cast our eyes.

### **Remembering That It Happened Once, Wendell Berry**

Remembering that it happened once,  
We cannot turn away the thought,

As we go out, cold, to our barns  
Toward the long night's end, that we  
Ourselves are living in the world  
It happened in when it first happened,  
That we ourselves, opening a stall  
(A latch thrown open countless times  
Before), might find them breathing there,  
Foreknown: the Child bedded in straw,  
The mother kneeling over Him,  
The husband standing in belief  
He scarcely can believe, in light  
That lights them from no source we see,  
An April morning's light, the air  
Around them joyful as a choir.  
We stand with one hand on the door,  
Looking into another world  
That is this world, the pale daylight  
Coming just as before, our chores  
To do, the cattle all awake,  
Our own white frozen breath hanging  
In front of us; and we are here  
As we have never been before,  
Sighted as not before, our place  
Holy, although we knew it not.

Opening Prayer

Gracious God, Giver of all manner of gifts, holder of all our terrors, comforter of all our fears,  
In advent we wait in anticipation of the birthing of newness within us.

Remind us not to rush.

Hold us quiet and steady so that space can open up for new imaginings, new dreams, new  
thought.

Guide us to follow Jesus in the way of love, in all that we do, all that we are, all that we might  
be.

O God, you sent Jesus  
so that we might have life and have it abundantly.

May that abundance come alive as joy.

Help us to know that life is good  
and that you are good, O God.

May the joy of your presence in us  
be our witness to the world

that you are our God.  
Amen.

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

### **First Part of Reflection**

I have always thought of the advent season as a tender time, a sweet time. Advent mirrors the season of Lent, that prepares us for Easter, the other high holiday in our faith. But lent has a heavier, penitent aspect to it. Advent somehow seems gentler in its reflections. Perhaps that is because at the centre of the story is a young couple expecting a child. And that is something that always draws out the best in us. And no matter what the circumstances, we hope that they will have a life for their child that is full of joy and love.

But this year, we all know, that Christmas will not have the usual celebrations that we long associate with the season. And particularly, this week, we may wonder how it is that we can gather around the Advent candle of joy, with so much uncertainty before us.

This last year there have been families in our congregations, our community, and throughout the world who have lost someone they loved. This is always difficult, but with the pandemic restricting travel and visiting, we have lost the ability to gather and comfort one another in the usual way. I have always felt in our local community that though a service of some kind is important, the greater benefit to those grieving is the gathering together afterwards in conversation, hugs, and the sharing of a feast. We have not been able to do this, which has made the sorrows greater, and we who stand at a distance, may wonder what, at this time of year, we may do to offer joy to those who will face this Christmas without a particular loved one in their lives. And we may even wonder how, without big family gatherings around the feast table, we can see joy at all in the season. We know that financial insecurity for some is a very real fear. Our young people who are studying have lost the regular comradery usually shared with their fellow students. As the long dark days continue, there are many upon whom despair, and depression descend. How then, can we embrace joy?

I think we can begin by understanding that sorrow and grief, are but playmates with joy and delight, that one does not have to be banished for the other to flourish. We may weep with our friends, even as we laugh. We may acknowledge their tears and our tears, even as we conjure up memories of joy. Joyfulness is born of a deep gratitude for life, for love. And all those who grieve a loss this year, have been given the gift of love. And this must never be discounted. Love, loss, joy, sorrow, delight, despair, they all live together in community, and cannot be separated one from the other. So, we offer our love, our own joy, our gratitude for the richness of life to

others, without the expectation that their sadness will be released, but that their sadness is valuable and must be honoured in the parade of god's rich giving's. And so too, we must honour within ourselves the feelings of sadness, for they are but a reflection of the love we bear others.

This week and next, in our scripture readings and our reflections, we have young Mary, prophetess and priestess both, to show us how joy may be held in perfect harmony beside distress, loss, fear and uncertainty. Mary is and always was, the original rock star, and we shall hear her song in today's reading of the Magnificat. Mary has much to teach. May we follow her lead in life, and in the great adventure of welcoming her child into our hearts.

***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

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

### **Second Part of the Reflection**

Before we get back to Mary and her wonderful Magnificat, we begin with a little Bible study, so you understand why we would be reading from the book of Mark last week, and the book of Luke this week.

Matthew Boulton in his podcast series, *Understanding Christmas*, which I am posting on our website to run co currently with this podcast, offers up the most wonderful approach to understanding the nature of the Bible. It is a brilliant analogy. He suggests that the Bible should be understood as a library, a place where books have been assembled over a long period of time, incorporating, as libraries do, various authors, with various opinions and interests. The authors live and write in different historical and cultural periods. So, though they may all be writing about one particular subject, there are a variety of ways they approach the knowledge they offer.

And just as in ordinary literature, you will know that authors borrow from one another. They read an idea they like, and then they expand on it with their additional thought. They quote openly from other authors, are inspired by writers that have come before them. And this is true in the Bible as well. You may think of the authors as being in conversation with one another.

And when we enter the library, take a book down off the shelf and enter a Biblical text, we too enter the on-going conversation.

The Protestant Bible is commonly known to contain 66 books, but that is not completely accurate either. Because each book can have smaller books within it. Take the book of Isaiah, for example. It is written over a 200-year period, and clearly has a number of authors, all in conversation with one another, but offering a different lens into what is going on in Israel at the time they write.

Only three chapters into the book of Genesis, and you will find two, if not three, creation stories, by different authors, within the same larger book we count as one.

You may have been asked at one time or another, if you believe in the Bible. But if you think of the Bible as a library of books, Matthew Boulton astutely points out, one does not say they believe in the library, but that one enters into the library. We enter the library for an experience, for a conversation, to further our understanding, to be in dialogue with many others who, like ourselves, are interested in God, and humanity, and how the two work in concert together.

And that is a wonderful way to understand our Bible – we enter into it with curiosity and a desire to learn. We acknowledge from the outset that each book will have different things to offer. We acknowledge that different people will prefer different books. And that all the authors do not have, nor should they have, the same story to tell. Each story is as unique as its author.

So, now, think on the four gospels. They are four sets of books, with many other books inside them, that are all on the shelf in the Biblical library that is titled: The Life and Ministry of Jesus.

Last week we saw that Mark starts his story of Jesus with John baptizing Jesus in water. Jesus then experiences a rebirth in the spirit, as he understands himself to be beloved by God. This is the re birth that Jesus will teach Nikodemus sometime later when he claims that each person must come to their own ‘born again or twice born’ experience. Jesus bases this on his own spiritual birth story.

At our Sunday afternoon zoom chat last week, Karin said that Luke was by far her favourite gospel, so she will be glad to hear we are leaving the book of Mark for the moment to visit the birth story in the Book of Luke for the next two weeks, and of course, as we always do, on Christmas Eve.

The book of Luke is particularly loved by women, it begins with Mary as the star of the birth story, ends with Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and other women coming to attend Jesus in the tomb, chatting up the angel they meet, and then heading off to tell others of

their experience. There is a lot of commonality between the four gospels, but Luke contains a large section of his writing that is unique to his gospel. This is known to scholars as the L Source. Along with containing the original nativity story, it also includes the well-known tales of the good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son, and Mary and Martha – only found in the book of Luke.

Luke's book is also filled with music and song, the opening of his story contains four canticles, the most well known being The Magnificat, Mary's bold call to revolution.

It is no surprise, that Jesus was drawn to the prophetic call of John the Baptist, and then took upon himself that same mantle, for he was born of a prophet. And that prophet's name was Mary. One of the main characteristics of the Hebrew prophets was that they embodied their teachings, offering to their audiences what is called a sign act. Sign acts are nonverbal actions and objects intentionally employed by the prophets so that message content was communicated through them to the audience" (Friebel, *Dictionary of the Old Testament Prophets*) Jeremiah smashed jars, Ezekiel baked bread over human waste, Isaiah walked around naked and barefoot for three years. (Isaiah 20:20). These are but three examples from many, where the prophets used items, and their person, to teach.

Luke, in his interpretation of the birth of Jesus, gives to Mary the ultimate sign act, the ultimate visual aid, the ultimate show and tell so that we will know that God is with us, and he cares about all those who are forgotten and lowly. He gives us Mary, a prophetess as receiver of God, one who, humble as she is, may offer her soul to magnify the larger divine soul of the universe.

Here is Mary's bold proclamation. It contains echoes of the prophet Isaiah, the visionary Hannah and her song of gratitude to god for her son found in the book of 1 Samuel, to Jael and Judith, women liberators of Israel, written about in the book of Judges. The writer of Luke created the Magnificat, vivid with images and words from a long line of Hebrew prophets, visionaries and liberators and he places it in the voice of his young, pregnant heroine, Mary. I think it is fair to say, that Luke saw in women, the same thing that Jesus saw – courage, strength and creative possibility.

### **Luke 1:46b-55**

"My soul magnifies the Lord,

and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;



for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;

he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,

according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

### **Third Part of Reflection**

The writer of Luke put these words in Mary's mouth. But he also gives a back story to this bold proclamation that is worth noting. For Mary did not start out with this strength, she started out frightened and alarmed, and uncertain of her future.

Mary's Magnificat of joyful exuberance does not emerge from nothing. It emerges from a very specific order of events. And they offer us a trail of breadcrumbs through the forest for all of us who feel at times frightened and uncertain.

Previous to the scripture I just read, Mary has spoken to an angel – we will be reading about that encounter next week – and the angel has given her some pretty startling news. The arrival of angles always has an element of terror within it. Here is Mary, single, poor, of no account in the way of worldly measuring, and now, she must bear a child, all with the simple instruction that she is not to be afraid. Goodness, now, wouldn't you be terrified? I would be.

But what does Mary do? In haste, the scriptures read, she goes to the hill country to visit with her cousin Elizabeth. The hill country is rocky, it is where the poor folk live, away from the cities, away from the rich farmland. And here, Mary, has the company of another pregnant woman where she is valued and feels safe, with her fear, her uncertainty, her confusion.

And then Mary draws on her faith, the stories that she knows of wise, strong women. She brings to mind the long history of the prophetic voice calling in the wilderness that our God is stronger than fear, a certain force of good in the midst of uncertainty.

From her cousin Elizabeth, from her cultural history, from the knowledge that she bears of her faith, she draws strength and is reminded who she is: a child of God, beloved by the universe. And why then, should she not be chosen? Were not the heroes and heroines of her faith so often the overlooked? King David was a lowly shepherd boy, the youngest in his family. Rehab, a Cannonite and prostitute, became an ancestress of kings, prophets, and Jesus himself. For God can use all people, in all circumstances. He can offer the joy of an adventure in the midst of the terror of the unknown, in the midst of sorrow, in the midst of uncertainty.

Understanding this, Mary is able to rejoice, to be grateful, to understand that though she may not know the way, God does.

God lifts us up when we mourn, gathers us in a warm embrace when we are frightened, shows us the way, when we cannot find it. When you are lost, think on Mary's courage, her wisdom, her journey. And let her lead the way.

***Musical Response: Let it Be, Paul McCartney/John Lennon, Arranger: Bruce Ley, Artists: Candice Bist, Bruce Ley***

When I find myself in times of trouble,  
Mother Mary comes to me  
Speaking words of wisdom, let it be  
And in my hour of darkness  
she is standing right in front of me  
Speaking words of wisdom, let it be

Let it be, let it be, let it be, let it be  
Whisper words of wisdom, let it be

And when the broken-hearted people  
living in the world agree  
There will be an answer, let it be  
For though they may be parted,  
there is still a chance that we will see  
There will be an answer, let it be

Let it be, let it be, let it be, let it be  
There will be an answer, let it be

Let it be, let it be, let it be, let it be  
Whisper words of wisdom, let it be

And when the night is cloudy  
There is still a light that shines on me  
Shinin' until tomorrow, let it be  
I wake up to the sound of music,  
Mother Mary comes to me  
Speaking words of wisdom, let it be  
Let it be, let it be, let it be, let it be  
Whisper words of wisdom, let it be  
Let it be, let it be, let it be, let it be  
Whisper words of wisdom, let it be

### **Closing Reflection/Commission/Prayer**

You will find posted on our website an Advent reflection from Rev. Richard Bott, the moderator for the United Church of Canada along with several reflective articles on Christmas this year from the ever-wonderful UCC magazine Broadview. Rev. Bott provides an interesting theological approach to Christmas this year – he suggests we see it as a fallow time. In the Hebraic tradition, every seventh year a shmita, or sabbatical year. Land was to be left fallow, whatever grows naturally was free, and at year's end, all personal debts are to be forgiven.

In Exodus 23:10-11, shmita precedes the injunction for individuals to rest on the seventh day. “Six years you shall sow your land and gather in its produce, but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave, the beasts of the field may eat. In like manner you shall do with your vineyard and your olive grove.”

Some of you who garden, may have adapted this ritual of sometimes seeding your gardens in cover crops and leaving them to rest for the season. It is a way of honouring time, making space for reflection, allowing the atmosphere of the Sabbath to penetrate a whole season.

We have within our own Christian calendar, two built in seasons of reflection, Advent and Lent. And Christmas time is to be a time of celebration. But there are different ways to celebrate, are there not? And perhaps this year, in this fallow year, we might consider the quiet celebration of gratitude, of affection, of memory. We may celebrate with deep prayer. We may celebrate with quiet letter writing. We may celebrate with slow meals not of extravagant fancy food, but with the deep appreciation of the harvest, and all those who make it possible. Consider that this Christmas, with its slower pace, we are being drawn us back to the original intent of Christmas, which was to find within ourselves a heart reborn in gratitude, grace, and compassion.

Bruce and I are preparing a Christmas Eve service along with the choir. It will not, of course, be the service we have all come to love, everyone crowded together lighting candles and singing.

But no less care will go into its creation, and but we are hoping that you will communicate to your families the importance of sitting quietly and listening to the reading through of the Christmas story on Christmas Eve, along with the beautiful music of the season, and perhaps a Christ candle lite in your own home.

When you are making your plans for the season, make this listening part of your plan.

Continue to be kind and tender with one another, and with me, as you have been. It pleases God and expands the community of affection to include all people.

This last week my friend July sent a reminder that there's poem by the English poet, William Blake, *The Auguries of Innocence*, in which he writes:

“Man was made for Joy & Woe  
And when this we rightly know  
Thro the World we safely go  
Joy & Woe are woven fine  
A Clothing for the soul divine  
Under every grief & pine  
Runs a joy with silken twine.”

Let's close with this little Advent prayer,

O God, our deliverer,  
You cast down the might,  
And lift up those of no account,  
Like Elizabeth and Mary,  
Who embraced one another  
With songs of liberation.  
May we, pregnant with your spirit,  
Affirm one another in hope for this world,  
In the name of Jesus.  
Amen.

***Joyful, Joyful, We Adore You*, Music: Ludwig van Beethoven, Lyrics: Henry van Dyke,  
Arranger: Bruce Ley, Artist: Bruce Ley**

Joyful, joyful we adore you,  
God of glory, Lord of love  
Hearts unfold like flowers before you,

Opening to the sun above  
Melt the clouds of sin and sadness,  
Drive the dark of doubt away,  
Giver of immortal gladness,  
Fill us with the light of day.

All you work with joy surround you,  
Earth and heaven reflect your rays,  
Stars and angels sing around you,  
Center of unbroken praise.  
Field and forest, vale and mountain,  
Flowery meadow, flashing sea,  
Chanting bird and flowing fountain,  
Call us to rejoice in Thee.

You are giving and forgiving,  
Ever blessing, ever blest,  
Wellspring of the joy of living,  
Ocean depth of happy rest!  
Source of grace and fount of blessing,  
Let your light upon us shine,  
Teach us how to love each other,  
Lift us to the joy divine.

Mortals, join the mighty chorus,  
Which the morning stars began;  
God's own love is reigning o'er us,  
Joining people hand in hand.  
Ever singing, march we onward,  
Victors in the midst of strife,  
Joyful music leads us Sunward  
In the triumph song of life.

With grateful thanks to Matthew Myer Boulton at the SALT Project for both his blog and his podcast. They can be found here: <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2017/12/11/magnificat-lectionary-commentary-for-advent-week-three>

<https://www.saltproject.org/podcast-strange-new-world/2020/12/8/understanding-christmas-part-three>