

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

A candle is burning, a flame warm and bright,  
A candle of hope in November's dark night,  
While angels sing blessings from heavens starry sky,  
Our hearts we prepare now for Jesus is nigh.

**Welcome**

Hello, hello, hello, and peace be with you in this exact moment that you are living and breathing. One of my children is currently exploring some of the meditation practices in the Buddhist tradition and in a wonderful conversation with him the other night he extolled the virtues of just simply being aware of his breath in order to stay in the moment. As a mother, I just love it when one of my children takes another step along the way of their spiritual journey. And I feel the same way about all of you who walk the way of intentional love, seeking in your own way to bring your faith alive, allowing it to nurture you, and to nurture others. Breath, Rhuah, the great spirit, all of us, all one.

I am Rev. Dr. Candice Bist and along with my delightful husband Bruce Ley, we serve the Shelburne Primrose Pastoral Charge, which is part of the United Church of Canada. And this Sunday, this week, we begin the season of Advent, a reason of reflection, of contemplation.

Now you know, we are coming into the season of singing. Even those who do not come to churches on any kind of regular basis find themselves drawn back to the light and songs of the season. It is the Advent Hymns, the Christmas Carols, the music that bursts with joyfulness and hope that speak to our internal longing for a more equitable world, for a more peaceful spirit, to be in love, with ourselves, with those closest to us, with the world and the endless possibilities it offers.

Yes, it will be a different Christmas this year. Traveling is limited, so too visiting. And no doubt, like Bruce and I, you are yearning to hold those in your communities of affection, remembering when not so long ago we could hug strangers and friend alike with impunity. We cannot do that for the time being. Nor, it seems, are we able to gather in person and sing together.

But this does not mean that our internal journeys this year will not be rich and life giving. After all, Advent is the season of waiting, a season of reflection, Christmastide is the season of enlightenment, and new birth. And all these we can have and celebrate in quietness, in prayerfulness, in hopefulness for all that is yet to be. And if we do that, when the time comes

when once again, we can move about freely, we will bring a richer presence to all our encounters.

You will have heard it said, that to sing is to pray twice. And as we love to sing in this season, we will let the sacred texts of our seasonal music be our scriptures these next weeks. Yes, I know we love to sing together, and that is not possible in the usual way. But I have posted for you along with this podcast, a little lyric book. So, you can print it or read it on your technical devices and sing along with Bruce and me. Or bring them to a neighbour who has neither printer nor computer, and sing along with them, over the phone, or outside their front door. You can listen to the podcasts with others through the magic of your computers, on cell, on headphones. Be creative. The core of our faith is to draw us into the world of new imaginings, new possibilities.

We dwell in Possibility –  
A fairer House than Prose –  
More numerous of Windows –  
Superior – for Doors –

Of Chambers as the Cedars –  
Impregnable of eye –  
And for an everlasting Roof  
The Gambrels of the Sky –

Of Visitors – the fairest –  
For Occupation – This –  
The spreading wide my narrow Hands  
To gather Paradise –

So welcome to the season of Advent, with its beautiful hymns and endless possibilities..... By the way, that was Sabine, Paul, Susan, Alex and Bruce in our opening little Christmas theme. We are working through the technology of having our choir members join us this week.

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

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!

### **Call to Worship**

I have been inspired by so many wonderful conversations, and meetings, this last week, on zoom, email, what's up, text, and telephone, seeing and hearing how you are all trying in your small way to live out your faith in the ultimate goodness of things. So, I have chosen to work with a kind of spirituality that finds itself deeply entrenched in our day to day living.

Within all faiths, both formal and otherwise, within Christianity in which this podcast is embedded, there is something called the mystic tradition. The mystic tradition sees the sacred in all matters. It sees the sacred in the morning light, in the evening sunset, in the quizzical brow of a child, in the fearfulness reflected in a stranger's eye. It sees the sacred in all forms of art, it sees the sacred in all forms of chaos and disruption. The mystical tradition acknowledges that God, the divine spirit, is in all matters. There is no division between the temporal and the spiritual, except in our own viewing. To claim God in all things, is to seek to see, hear, and acknowledge the collective heartbeat of the universe in every conversation, with nature, with others, within your own soul. Such a magical journey.

And the leading priestess of this tradition, is none other than the incomparable Mary Olive, theologian of the tiny moments. Here our call to worship in her poetry.

### **A Summer Day, by Mary Oliver**

Dear Lord, I have swept, and I have washed but  
still nothing is as shining as it should be  
for you. Under the sink, for example, is an  
uproar of mice — it is the season of their  
many children. What shall I do? And under the eaves  
and through the walls the squirrels  
have gnawed their ragged entrances — but it is the season  
when they need shelter, so what shall I do? And

the raccoon limps into the kitchen and opens the cupboard  
while the dog snores, the cat hugs the pillow;  
what shall I do? Beautiful is the new snow falling  
in the yard and the fox who is staring boldly  
up the path, to the door. And still I believe you will  
come, Lord: you will, when I speak to the fox,  
the sparrow, the lost dog, the shivering sea-goose, know  
that really, I am speaking to you whenever I say,  
as I do all morning and afternoon: Come in, Come in.

Pray with me..... (My Prayer)

Oh, great wonderfulness, whom we search for in the light of the morning and turn to at day's end  
with our dismay mixed with wonder,  
You are so needed now, or perhaps I might better say,  
We are so needing you right now, needing to draw comfort from the vastness of loving presence  
that you are.

Do we stumble? Yes, yes, we do.  
Are we wicked sometimes? Really awful in the small, insidious ways that awfulness sinks  
beneath our skin. Yes, yes, we are.  
Do we forget that you are always there to guide us? Yes, yes, we do, ignoring all the signs  
around us, blind, blind, wild horses with blinders striking out in fear, leaving mayhem and  
destruction in our wake? Yes, we do.

And you, ever merciful, ever loving for this is your very nature.  
There you are, with loving countenance, with endless patience,  
Waiting for us to quiet down, and reconnect with the you that burns within us,  
Sharing our heartbeat, sharing our breath, sharing our life.

It is Advent here where we are. Advent in a time of uncertainty. And we can be fearful of  
uncertainty. This is how we are.

But deep within us, as you know, is a core that is certain, and steady, and strong,  
It is the core that is you, and the core that is in all matter,  
Guide us to it, sprinkle glitter about so we can see it more clearly, tie up the little business of our  
everyday life in tinsel so we can see its treasure.  
Like children, we need treats, encouragements, hints, surprises.

We shall look for them, hunting from dawn till dusk, for your illumination.

And it will be a grand Advent to celebrate with you, ever loving one.  
May it be so.

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

### **Reflection**

I think one of the reasons that we are all drawn to the Christmas story, is because, despite the fact that it is a foundational Christian story, the tale it tells, is universal.

A young girl with a seemingly insurmountable challenge. Someone who stands by her side. Others who turn her away. Still others who welcome her with joy and coo, and moo, over her newborn baby. Still others who see within her story the possibility of marvelous things.

And then in the telling, there are all those beautiful images - whispered dreams, song filled skies, journeys undertaken to faraway places, and light, light always light, unexpected light in the darkness of uncertainty.

As the days grow darker into December, we need some light. And the Advent hymns will provide that for us, drawing us to a place of reflection. In our hymn today, we have clear instruction on how to find – hope, peace, joy and love in our season of uncertainty, and right in the middle of our daily life.

***Hope is a Star, Music: Joan Collier Fogg, Lyrics: Brian Wren, Arranger: Bruce Ley, Artists: Bruce Ley, Candice Bist***

Hope is a star that shines in the night,  
leading us on till the morning is bright.  
When God is a child there's joy in our song.  
The last shall be first and the weak shall be strong,  
and none shall be afraid.

Peace is a ribbon that circles the earth,  
giving a promise of safety and worth.  
When God is a child there's joy in our song.  
The last shall be first and the weak shall be strong,  
and none shall be afraid.

Joy is a song that welcomes the dawn,  
telling the world that the Saviour is born.  
When God is a child there's joy in our song.  
The last shall be first and the weak shall be strong,  
and none shall be afraid.

Love is a flame that burns in our heart.  
Jesus has come and will never depart.  
When God is a child there's joy in our song.  
The last shall be first and the weak shall be strong,  
and none shall be afraid.

### **Reflection**

Hope is a star  
Peace is a ribbon  
Joy is a song  
Love is a flame.

It sounds almost Disney Like, yet this very modern sounding lyric is steeped in scripture. And it tells us exactly how, in our day to day living to achieve those wonderful gifts explored over the four weeks of advent.

Let's start with hope – which is not some flimsy little paper boat of wishes out on the big sea, but a substantial, concrete matter in our scriptural texts. The Apostle Paul writes confidently, “Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised it, is faithful.” And the prophet Jeremiah, who generally a bit of a humbug, claims that “god knows the plans he has for us, plans for our welfare and not for harm, to give us a future with hope.” And Faith, you will remember, is hope in things unseen.

And the stars? They were established by divine order and overseen by the heavens. The Psalmist writes, “Consider the heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon, the stars, which you have ordained.” In the metaphorical story telling throughout the scriptures, the stars herald great events, represent the twelve tribes of Israel, are interchangeable with angels, and those who practice wisdom. Jesus is referred to as the morning stars.

So, hope is a substantial matter here on earth, that gets its strength from that which God has ordained, which is to say, that which is righteous, good, elevated, noble, wise. I saw so much hope this last week. My friend Jennifer told me her wonderful daughter Kathleen had given up her week of holidays to take part in a protest about something she did not feel was in line with

the way things should be. Kathleen is a resident doctor, so her time off is valuable. I don't want to hear complaints from people who tell me young people don't come to church. Look around. Read the headlines. Take a gander around your community. They are DOING church. They did not leave our Sunday schools and learn nothing. They left our Sunday schools and went out into the world to live out their faith day by day. We currently have young people in our own congregations who are serving as front line workers in the pandemic, working for the Red Cross, helping to settle refugees, are active in environmental issues, and campaigning for racial and gender equality. So many of our young people are bacons of hope, turning their gaze to what might yet be. Our job, if we wish to herald hope in this world, is to appreciate and support them.

Peace is a ribbon that trails from one end of the biblical story to the other, always associated with those who are seeking understanding, wisdom, connection with others. And peace is entwined with hope, Paul offers this blessing to the Romans, May the God of hope fill you with joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.”

But this particular image of peace as a ribbon brings to my mind those artistic pictures you see of the earth surrounded by children holding hands. That is how peace is obtained, by one hand reaching out to another, connecting. Our pastoral charge this week is initiating another memorandum of understanding with the Muslim of Dufferin Association, to help them offer refugees homes in our neighbourhood. Peace happens when we hold our hands out to one another in the offer of help, in a desire to understand our shared humanity.

Joy is a song, of course it is, because a song goes out into the world to travel wherever it is to go, like the wind, like a blessing. Joy is not something kept in a tidy box. Joy, in the scriptures and in life, is something alive, something with movement, hope in movement, really. Bruce and I were overjoyed this week as Bruce worked through the details of trying to get the choir to sing together through the magic of technology. We were like children with Christmas presents, when the little tracks showed up on our inbox. And the wonderful, outside, masked chatter outside Primrose's Christmas Market was filled with joy, a song of community in the sunshine of a Saturday afternoon. Joy is a song, and I can't help but think that the song on the steps of the church, sang its way through the hills of Mono.

And the lyricist leaves us with that image of the divine flame of god within us, as love. Love within us reflecting back to the world, the divine virtues of grace and compassion.

This last week, one of our long time, and much-loved Trinity members died. Wilena Alice Dorsey Flear, named some 94 years ago after both her grandmothers. There was a small family service on Saturday, following the current directives during the pandemic. We were blessed by the warm sunshine of the morning at the graveside, though the usual hugs, and cups of tea with egg salad sandwiches was so missed.

When I hear Wilena's name, I feel happy. I feel lovely. I smile. She brought a presence into the room that encouraged life, so that when I hear her name, Wilena, a name I never knew, I feel, somehow, joyful, loved, valued. How is that do you suppose? How is it that a person can leave a trace of their spirit upon you that is so encouraging? When Michelle, Wilena's granddaughter, gave her heart felt eulogy, she too reflected on the grace filled, loving presence of her grandmother that stays with her still.

A few weeks ago, a well-loved member of the Mulmur community, Jim Pearson, died. He has designed many beautiful houses in the area, two on my little dead-end road. Jim had a great love of beauty, a rich spiritual life, and an inquisitive mind. He would come to my house with his big questions. Too big for me to answer. But small enough for wonderful conversations.

In the Hebrew tradition, which is the birthplace of Christianity, it is said that God lives between two people speaking of the divine. When I sat with Wilena, she would pat the spot on the chair where she wanted me to sit, her sweet smile was so genuine. When I sat with Jim, his eyes would twinkle with delight when he thought I had offered him a particular insightful jewel. Most surely that is where the divine lives, in such gentle exchanges.

Love is the gift we may give all people. It is the gift that we are all needing, to feel loved, to feel that we are interesting enough for wandering conversations.

Love is as a divine flame within us, reflecting back in some small way, the furnace of divine love that burns always, never flickering, never failing. It is only for us to turn ourselves toward it, to connect with its warmth, and let that warmth welcome others.

Hope is a star, peace is a ribbon, joy is a song, and love is a flame flickering within.

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### **Closing Remarks and Prayers**

So, as we enter the season of Advent and Christmastide, I am also entering the last five weeks of my five-year ministry here at the Shelburne Primrose Pastoral Charge. As you may know, there is a search committee hard at work seeking out new spiritual leadership for you, someone who can take the wonderful work that the visioning groups have done these last years, and fan it into a reality.

I know that with our churches physically closed and no minister in place for when I leave, you may be feeling anxious, and perhaps even fearful. But I want to assure you that your pastoral charge council has approved an imaginative plan to keep things in order in the new year. We will have all the details of it worked out for next week, and you can read about it then. I think it an exciting plan, and one that will allow the visioning groups to carry on while we all continue our collective spiritual journey.

In the meantime, your search committee continues its important work. And in conversation this last week with them, we reminded ourselves that that as Christians, uncertainty is the place in which our faith was born. We live in an uncertain world. But the God we adore, the divine spirit that leads is always present, and always certain, always wanting to explore new ways to live and serve. And if there is one phrase that echoes throughout our scriptures it is this: Do not be afraid. In the weeks ahead we shall hear the angels say this to Mary and Joseph, to sing it to the shepherds and to herald it to the whole world. We are the keepers of our faith. And we will not be afraid.

Empty space is just a place for possibility to be born. That is our Christmas Story.

So, we shall listen for the hope, and joy and peace and love that is all around us, and spread those precious commodities, for it is the season of sharing.

God is in all things, all exchanges, all places, all people. Each of us is a divine light in this world.

Shine.

***You Can Change the World*, Music: Candice Bist, Lyrics: Candice Bist, Artists: Bruce Ley, Candice Bist**

You can change the world,  
One tear drop at a time,  
One heart, mended,  
One hand held,  
One dream come alive,

Answering unasked prayers,  
Reaching out with hope,  
Just stretch out an open hand,  
Give with a grateful heart,  
And you'll see, the miracle  
The miracle will start

**Instrumental**

You can change the world,  
One tear drop at a time,  
One heart, mended,  
One hand held,  
One dream come alive,

Answering unasked prayers,  
Reaching out with hope,  
Just stretch out an open hand,  
Give with a grateful heart,  
And you'll see, the miracle  
The miracle will start.