

12th December 2021 CANDLELIT CAROL SERVICE

led by Rev Kate Whyman

PRELUDE – O Holy Night, Katie Melua

<https://youtu.be/-cbbilidFE>

WELCOME/CHALICE LIGHTING

Welcome to our Christmas Carol Service on this 3rd Sunday of Advent. Welcome to those of you here in the church. It's lovely to see your faces – or at least the twinkling of your eyes – and welcome to those of you here on Zoom. It's been lovely to see you arriving too. Welcome also to our pianist, Sian, who is going to be playing for us. We look forward to sharing some festive magic, singing and celebration together.

I'd like to open with words, by Howard Thurman

I will light candles this Christmas
Candles of joy, despite all sadness,
Candles of hope where despair keeps watch.
Candles of courage where fear is ever present,
Candles of peace for tempest-tossed days,
Candles of grace to ease heavy burdens.
Candles of love to inspire all my living,
Candles that will burn all the year long.

We are going to be lighting candles. And I begin by lighting our chalice candle...
May this flame be a symbol of the spirit of Christmas, the light that dwells within each and every one of us, even in the darkest of days. May it shine ever more brightly and warmly at this festive and holy time.

And now I ask our candle lighters in the room to begin the lighting in the church, including the 3 advent candles, and I invite those of you at home to light a candle too if you have one.

PRAYER by Christine Robinson

In this sacred space, in the light of these candles, let us join our hearts and minds together in the spirit of meditation and prayer.

May we breathe deeply of peace in this quiet place, relax into its warmth, know we are safe here, and let us open our hearts to the story.

Like the wandering couple, may we find that our greatest trials issue forth from our greatest joys.

Like the harried innkeeper, may we find ways to be of help to others.

Like the lumbering beasts, may we be silent witnesses to the unfathomable glory of life.

Like the shepherds on the hill, may we know that we need never be afraid.

Like the journeying wise, may we always have the courage to follow our stars.

Like the angels, may we cry peace to a troubled world.

Holy one, to these prayers for our own transformation we add our prayers for all those who suffer and grieve today. May they find comfort.

And for all those involved in war; may they be safe.

And may this season of peace and goodwill nudge our world towards its ideals, for then will Christmas truly dawn.

Amen.

1st CAROL – 85 O little town of Bethlehem

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 street shineth

The everlasting light;

The hopes and fears of all the years

Are met in thee tonight.

O morning stars, together

Proclaim the holy birth,
And praises sing to God the King,
And peace throughout the earth:
For Christ is born of Mary –
And gathered all above,
While mortals sleep, the angels keep
Their watch of wondering love.

How silently, how silently,
The wondrous gift is given!
So God imparts to human hearts
The peace and joy of heaven.
No ear may hear his coming;
But in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive him, still
The dear Christ enters in.

1st READINGS:

Luke 2:1-7 (NRSV)

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. 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.

The Inkeeper, by Anne Dilenschneider

The innkeeper isn't part of most Nativity sets. No one sings carols about innkeepers. There don't seem to be any paintings that include them. But we can imagine the scene:

Bethlehem is crowded with people coming home for the census. It's late at night when the innkeeper responds to a knock on the door and finds a young couple standing there. The woman is very pregnant. She and her spouse look exhausted. They've walked a hundred miles over rough, rocky terrain to get here from Nazareth.

The innkeeper is confronted with a dilemma. The inn is full; there just isn't any more room. At the same time, the innkeeper knows that offering hospitality is part of being God's people, because they had been sojourners and strangers in Egypt. That's why the innkeeper has always made sure there's an empty chair for an unexpected guest at the annual seder meal celebrating Passover.

What to do?

As a child, the innkeeper had learned the story of Abraham and Sarah welcoming three strangers into their home. After they made the strangers a lavish feast, the couple discovered their guests were messengers ("angels") sent to bring great news: as laughable as it seemed, the elderly Sarah was going to have a baby. So, the innkeeper knows the tradition of entertaining strangers; the innkeeper knows strangers are messengers ("angels") from God.

Tonight there is a bedraggled and weary couple on this very doorstep.

What to do?

The innkeeper pulls the door to a bit, hastily assessing the situation. Is there any space, anywhere? The beds are all taken. There are even people sleeping on the floor. What to do? Is there any possible solution?

In a moment of inspiration, the innkeeper remembers the stable out behind the inn. It's not much, but it's some protection from the wind. No matter how bitter the weather may become, the heat from the animals will keep these guests warm.

The innkeeper flings open the door and welcomes the couple with a broad smile.
There's not much, but there's a possibility. A stable. Will it suffice?
It does. And the innkeeper saves the day.

CAROL: On this circling planet. Written by Ralph Brown, who at 99 is our oldest member, who is at home listening on Zoom and I believe singing along to this with his daughters. Tune 'In the bleak midwinter'

On this circling planet, tiny speck in space
Dwell the teeming myriads, of the human race;
Each one needing food and warmth, shelter, raiment, rest;
Each new crying infant, seeks its mother's breast.

Millions now are hungry, hounded, wretched, poor.
Spirits crushed by sorrow, bodies thin and sore;
Each new day brings added care, each new child fresh pains,
Often hope has vanished, only grief remains.

We who live in comfort, shelter, clothed and fed
Yet find small contentment, still by greed we're led,
Every new possession grasped, make us covert more,
Recklessly we squander, nature's dwindling store.

At this Christmas season, may we hear again
The old angelic anthem, 'Peace, goodwill to men';
Bidding us to turn our thoughts, from selfishness and greed
And mitigate earth's sorrow, and succour those in need.

Thus the ancient story, telling Jesus' birth
Stirs the soul's deep longings, peace and hope and mirth.
Love, though scourged and crucified, battered, bleeding, torn,
Is born again in beauty, every Christmas morn.

2nd READINGS:

Luke 2: 8-20

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 whom he favours!”

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.

Kate Brady McKenna, minister at Bury Unitarians

They say a story can carry a truth far greater than the literal truth.

We Unitarians know the value of stories. We know they carry truth. We know they carry more truth than just the plain truth ever can.

Maybe we can't believe a virgin gave birth to the son of God: but we can believe that all births are miracles, worthy of celebration and wonder.

Maybe we can't believe angels brought revelations: but we can believe truth can be revealed through the actions and words of those who dare to speak it and to act it.

Maybe we can't believe the angels sang to shepherds: but we can believe that those revelations about life can come to and through even those we think are the most humble.

Maybe we can't believe the wise men travelled to see the newborn baby king: but we can believe that we should never be too lofty or think ourselves too clever or too rich to see the wonder and majesty in tiny things.

Maybe we can't believe that Jesus brought back the light by redeeming our sins: but we can believe in a leader and teacher and prophet who brought, and brings, illumination to the lives of those who wish to listen.

We can believe in the light. Always, we can believe in the light.

Maybe we can't believe the Christmas story: but we can believe *in* it as a story which points to a truth greater than we can possibly imagine.

And so we are here. Unitarians, at Christmas.

Celebrating.

And long may we do so.

CAROL: Silent Night - sheet

Silent night, holy night!

All is calm, all is bright.

Round yon Virgin, Mother and Child.

Holy infant so tender and mild,

Sleep in heavenly peace,

Sleep in heavenly peace

Silent night, holy night!

Shepherds quake at the sight.
Glories stream from heaven afar
Heavenly hosts sing Alleluia,
Christ the Savior is born!
Christ the Savior is born

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

SILENCE – 2 mins for our own thoughts and reflections, prayer or meditation

INTERLUDE – Sian on piano

SEASONAL THOUGHTS

When I think of the nativity scene, I think, of course, of a newborn baby in a manger and a family in a stable, on hay, with donkeys and oxen and sheep around them. And it always feels blessed. Poor, yes; simple yes; outcast even, yes. But always completely blessed. It's easy to romanticise, of course. It wouldn't be great having to give birth in barn, really. I know that. But this is story. And it's written this way for a reason. And I think we're meant to notice that though the family is homeless, and though they have nothing except what they're carrying, they do in fact have enough. They are in fact being looked after, they are safe, they are sheltered. They are blessed.

This huge story in the Christian calendar remains so deeply symbolic, even for those who don't believe it. It is so very powerful, I think, because it depicts an image of God in the world as the tiniest, most defenceless, most vulnerable soul and yet one that is nevertheless fully alive and utterly radiant with love and hope and promise. The

scene glows, doesn't it, with light and spirit, and that's even before the Wise Men arrive with their gifts. The family already has enough, more than enough, without those extravagant presents. They already have everything. They have each other, they have peace, they have a roof over their heads, they have God.

Our Christmases were necessarily quiet last year, and maybe they will be again, who knows. Of course no one wants to have a lonely and joyless time at Christmas, separated from those they love. And the unreasonable expectation we collectively load onto this season, and onto the day itself in particular, can make that separation feel worse than ever.

But what lifts a potentially gloomy Christmas is not more food than you can eat, or a succession of wild parties – let's not even go there. It's not a stack of expensive presents, even if all these might be enjoyable and diverting in the short term. What lifts Christmas is what, in the end, lifts any other day – it's the warmth of the holy within us, it's the gratitude we feel for what we have, it's the connection we sense whether that's with family or friends around the fire, or on a bracing winter walk in nature, or by tuning in to others' voices from around the world on the radio, or feeding the birds in the garden, or calling on a neighbour, or volunteering for a charity, or whatever it might be – and whatever you might do - that reminds you that you are part and parcel of this weird and wonderful universe. And that however little each of us may have, we can always give of ourselves.

The nativity scene might remind you of your family, and the love of your children and grandchildren, great grandchildren. Or maybe it reminds you of your friends and the warmth of their loyalty and compassion. And I wonder if it might even remind you of yourself – of your own heart and the beautiful bright spirit that lives and breathes and glows within you.

Whatever Christmas looks like for you this year, I invite you to think of the nativity story – this unlikely and miraculous story which we are still telling – as though it were your deepest self. To imagine the newborn baby as your own beating heart. The halo of light as your spirit glowing. As the entire scene as depicting your vulnerability, and yet also your extraordinary resilience in challenging times. May it remind you at this

dark and uncertain time, of your enduring precious and intimate connection with the divine, with the animals, with the sky and the stars above you, with strangers – the lowly and the kingly. And most of all may it be a symbol to you of your own limitless potential to love, and to give, and to nurture life.

In other words, to be the very breath and hands of God in the world.

Amen

CAROL 90 Hark the herald angels sing!

Hark! The herald angels sing
Glory to the new-born King!
Peace on earth and mercy mild
Cometh with the holy child,
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!

Hail, the holy Prince of Peace!
Hail the Sun of Righteousness!
Light and life to all he brings,
Comes with healing in his wings.
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see!
Hail the indwelling Deity!
Born to raise upon the earth
All who yearn for love's rebirth.
Hark! The herald angels sing
Glory to the new-born King!

3rd READINGS

Christmas Lights, by Margaret Silf - Myron

The whole country was in deep gloom.

Nearly half the people in one small town had no work. There was a mood of sadness and hopelessness everywhere. Christmas was approaching, but there was very little money to buy gifts or festive food. And then came the final straw. When the townsfolk started to assemble the traditional Christmas lights to decorate the streets, they found the lights were no longer working.

At first everyone turned to the mayor. "Our Christmas lights aren't working. What are you going to do about it?"

And the mayor summoned the town council to a meeting. "The Christmas lights have failed. What can we do about it?" he asked.

"There's no money available to buy new lights," they told him. "We are barely surviving. There is nothing left over for luxuries like that."

And the mayor told the people the bad news, and at first the people were angry. They wanted to complain to the mayor and protest to the town council. But eventually they too could see that there was simply no money, and that was the end of the matter.

And then the Christmas miracle began.

A few of the townsfolk got together.

"I am an electrician," said one. "Maybe I can fix the lights."

"And I have an axe and a saw," said another. "I could fetch a big fir tree from the forest to place in the town square."

"And I have a long ladder," said another. "I can help put the lights on the tree."

"I'm no good with technical things," said another. "But I can bake. I will make mince pies for everyone."

"Oh," another spoke up. "In that case, I can make hot chocolate for all the children on Christmas Eve."

"And I will make mulled wine for the grown-ups," offered the innkeeper.

And so it happened that the town celebrated Christmas that year in such a special way that no one who was there would ever, ever forget it.

'BC:AD', by U A Fanthorpe

This was the moment when Before
Turned into After, and the future's
Uninvented timekeepers presented arms.

This was the moment when nothing
Happened. Only dull peace
Sprawled boringly over the earth.

This was the moment when even energetic Romans
Could find nothing better to do
Than counting heads in remote provinces.

And this was the moment
When a few farm workers and three
Members of an obscure Persian sect
Walked haphazard by starlight straight
Into the kingdom of heaven.

CAROL – 95 O Come all ye faithful

O come, all ye faithful,
Joyful and triumphant,
O come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem:
Come and behold him
Born this happy morning:
O come, let us adore him,
O come, let us adore him,
O come, let us adore him,
Christ, the Lord.

See how the shepherds,
Summoned to his cradle,
Leaving their flocks draw nigh with lowly fear;
We too will thither
Bend our joyful footsteps:
O come, let us adore him,
O come, let us adore him,
O come, let us adore him,
Christ, the Lord.

Lo, star-led chieftains,
Wise men, Christ adoring,
Offer him incense, gold and myrrh;
We to the Christ-child
Bring our hearts' oblations;
O come, let us adore him,
O come, let us adore him,
O come, let us adore him,
Christ, the Lord.

Sing, choirs of angels,
Sing in exultation,

Sing, all ye citizens of heaven above;
Glory to God
In the highest;
O come, let us adore him,
O come, let us adore him,
O come, let us adore him,
Christ, the Lord.

BLESSING by Maureen Killoran

Tonight in this community,
we have shared stories, sung carols,
opened our hearts to the beauty of music.
Tonight we have turned to one another,
lighting each other's candles in the dark.
Tonight we have dared to hear a message of hope
spoken once again against the challenge of the world.
It is time now to depart,
to go forward, to our lives and to the world.
May joy be your companion,
whether you are with others or alone.
May love be your strength,
and may the gift of community dwell in your heart,
for here, in this place, you will be welcome always,
whenever you choose, whenever you need.

POSTLUDE – IN DULCE JUBILO

<https://youtu.be/Vcvz7ufIMIU>