

19th December – Light in the darkness

Led by Rev Kate Whyman

GATHERING MUSIC ‘Walking by flashlight’, Maria Schneider

<https://youtu.be/7jLKBpjSfn8>

OPENING WORDS

The music we’ve just heard is called ‘Walking by flashlight’ by Maria Schneider, and was suggested by Nick Saunders. It takes its name from a poem by former American poet laureate Ted Kooser. Kooser writes:

‘In the autumn of 1998, during my recovery from surgery and radiation for cancer, I began taking a two-mile walk each morning. I’d been told by my radiation oncologist to stay out of the sun for a year because of skin sensitivity, so I exercised before dawn, hiking the isolated country roads near where I live, sometimes with my wife but most often alone.

‘During the previous summer, depressed by my illness, preoccupied by the routines of my treatment, and feeling miserably sorry for myself, I’d all but given up on reading and writing. Then, as autumn began to fade and winter came on, my health began to improve. One morning in November, following my walk, I surprised myself by trying my hand at a poem. Soon I was writing everyday.’

And here is ‘Walking by flashlight’...

Walking by flashlight
at six in the morning,
my circle of light on the gravel
swinging side by side,
coyote, racoon, field mouse, sparrow,
each watching from darkness
this man with the moon on a leash.

And so, the theme of today’s service is ‘finding light in the darkness’.

WELCOME AND CHALICE LIGHTING

Welcome. Welcome to you all, whether you are here in person or online or reading. Whether you are feeling 'in the light' or 'in the darkness', or anywhere in between this morning, you are welcome here.

Let us bring our own little light into the proceedings as we light our chalice candle, which is the symbol of our free religious faith. *If you're at home I invite you to light a candle with me.*

May we acknowledge the darkness and embrace its riches and its challenges as well as its mystery. And may we wait patiently for that light to emerge that shines most brightly in life's bleakest corners.

PRAYER, by Marta Flanagan

Holy One, known by many names -- Creator, Sustainer, Redeemer -- you make your presence known to us in the sunshine of winter, in the dance of the flame, and in the lingering embrace of a trusted one.

Fill us this day with your warmth, your power, your strength. Help us to see our lives with a freshness born of the spirit.

Lift up the blessings: the loved ones, the ones we treasure for simply being themselves, -- the ones we laugh with, the ones who teach us to trust ourselves.

Hold close the ones who are ill this day, those who feel the discouragement of the body. Stand by those who know their time is limited. Fill them and us with courage, with peace.

Gracious One, release us from our burdens. We bring the memories of the past, times when we fell short, times when we were hurt. We have fear: worries of what will be and how we will make do. We get carried away with small concerns: the daily issues that press upon us. Help us to let go. Free us from inner bonds.

We look at ourselves: the advantages we have been given, the opportunities we have seized. Fill us, O God, with a sense of gratitude for the gifts that are ours: knowledge, skills, and hard won insights. Nudge us to give back, to reach out -- sharing our talents, our riches, and ourselves with those who are discouraged, disheartened, or simply unaware; with the young, the dispossessed, the elderly.

Gracious Spirit, grab our attention, seize us with the brightness of the day, with the miracles of life itself, that we might be filled with new passion, new resolve, heeding your quiet call to take the next step, whatever that might be.

Amen.

27 (P) Dark of winter, soft and still

Dark of winter, soft and still,
your quiet calm surrounds me.
Let my thoughts go where they will,
ease my mind profoundly.
And then my soul will sing a song,
a blessed song of love eternal.
Gentle darkness, soft and still,
bring your quiet to me.

Darkness, soothe my weary eyes,
that I may see more clearly.
When my heart with sorrow cries,
comfort and caress me.
And then my soul may hear a voice,
a still, small voice of love eternal.
Darkness, when my fears arise,
let your peace flow through me.
Music and words © Shelley Jackson Denham

STORY 'The Cave' from *One Hundred Wisdom Stories from Around the World*, compiled by Margaret Silf

Once there was a dark cave, deep down in the ground, underneath the earth and hidden away from view. Because it was so deep in the earth, the light had never been there. The cave had never seen light. The word "light" meant nothing to the cave, who couldn't imagine what 'light' might be.

Then one day the sun sent an invitation to the cave inviting it to come up and visit. When the cave came up to visit the sun it was amazed and delighted because the cave had never seen light before, and it was dazzled by the wonder of the experience. Feeling so grateful to the sun for inviting it to visit, the cave wanted to return the kindness, so it invited the sun to come down and visit it sometime, because the sun had never seen darkness.

So the day came, and the sun came down and was courteously shown into the cave.

As the sun entered the cave it looked around with great interest, wondering what 'darkness' would be like. Then it became puzzled and asked the cave, "So, where is the darkness?"

READING Winter Meditation, by Tess Baumberger

Something has changed in me this winter.
In the past I've focused on how long winter is,
how miserable I find it, and how it seems so [endless].
This winter, I find myself thinking instead
That every day, every hour, every minute
Brings us just that much closer to spring.
We all experience wintry times,
When things seem harsh and frozen,
Or muffled by layered shrouds of snow.
It is helpful to remember that each day that dawns bleakly,
Each night that wraps its cold cloak around our hearts,
Brings us closer to that time of warm and vibrant sun.
It is perhaps helpful to consider that turning toward spring is an active thing,
The earth which seems so stable in fact flies quickly through space,
On its path that tilts us ever towards the Source.
So, too, each memory we lay to rest,
Each truth in ourselves that we encounter and accept,
Each wrong act that we forgive, ushers us on towards our renewal.

SILENCE beginning with some words from 'A course in miracles'

Let us be still an instant and forget all things we ever learned, all thoughts we had and every preconception that we hold of what things mean and what their purpose is. Let us remember not our own ideas of what the world is for – we do not know. Let every image held of everyone be loosened from our minds and swept away.

INTERLUDE- Signing video of Silent Night

Produced by our group learning British sign language, they will sign to 'Silent night'.

ADDRESS

This year the Winter Solstice takes place on Tuesday 21st, will celebrate the turning of the earth once more towards the sun in the northern hemisphere. As it always does.

Unitarian Universalist Barbara Wells ten Hove, wrote her own reflection on the solstice, in response to a scientific description:

‘The dark time has come. The earth, in her great dance around the sun, has come inevitably to the solstice, the time of extremes, of distance, of darkness and light. In our hemisphere, we experience this time as one of cold darkness, of shortening days and lengthening nights. The earth is tipping, from our perspective, further and further away from the sun. We wait, but the moment when the darkness is greatest is not entirely predictable. The spinning dance of the earth continues, but for one brief instant, when the axis of the Earth's rotation crosses the line through the center of our orbit around the sun, the tipping stops, and for a moment, we seem to stand suspended in space, pulsing with potential movement and ongoing life. Then, like a child's top that almost fell over, we are saved by the spin and lifted up again towards the light.’

‘Like a child's top that almost fell over, we are saved by the spin and lifted up again towards the light’. It is an arresting image, and idea, that we are perpetually caught and lifted again towards the light.

This annual miracle of the solar system, that catches us and turns us back towards the light, is of course reflected in the Christmas story itself.

Catholic writer Anthony de Mello writes that...

‘In the Gospel of John we read:

The word became flesh; he came to dwell among us...through him all things came to be; no single thing was created without him. All that came to be was alive with his life, and that life was the light of all people. The light shines on in the dark, and the darkness has never quenched it.

But de Mello also adds: ‘Look steadily at the darkness. It won't be long before you see the light. Gaze at things. It won't be long before you see the Word.’

This for me gets to the heart of the paradox of light and darkness. We are inclined to speak in terms of the light as good and the darkness as bad. And yet this is to oversimplify. Darkness, after all, is only the absence of light, as the cave in our story discovered. It can be banished by the sun, and even by the smallest flickering flame, as anyone struggling to find their way in a power cut knows – strike a match, light a candle, and suddenly you can see. The darkness is mysterious, and it has its own intrinsic value. It is a place of waiting. It is the home of our unconscious, of our fears, of our shadows, all of which are rich with forgotten knowledge, all waiting to be revealed, longing to be seen and understood. And is it ever *completely* dark?

Sometimes the best way to see in the dark is not to turn on the light, but is simply to peer into it – to gaze into it – for long enough to give the eyes time to adjust to the very low levels of light that are actually already there. Gradually shapes emerge, memories surface, understanding dawns. This time of year is an opportunity to do just that. To give time and space to what lies unseen and unheard in the shadows and to make our peace with it. The light will follow as surely as day follows night, as surely as the tipping earth turns once more.

This is the time of year, if we are willing, for embracing the dark and trusting that the light never entirely disappears. Knowing that the darkness contains the seeds of the spring that will always return, perhaps we can allow ourselves time to pause, to take stock, to face our fears, and to allow the miracle of the indwelling spirit to heal us, to guide us, to show us the way. And it will, if we let it.

I'm reminded of a long night, many years ago, camping in a wild and empty Scottish glen in winter, clouds covering whatever moon or starlight might otherwise have been available, and waiting for the dawn. It was cold, and it was wet. But the dawn came, as it always does, and as light began to filter through the mists, my surroundings – the sweeping curves and rough crags of the hills, the bending branches of isolated trees, began to appear like a old black and white photo developing around me.

This season is one of faith and of hope. It is our time to acknowledge where we are, in this moment of our lives, to accept the truth, and to wait patiently for the returning light – real and mythical – to lift us once more.

In amongst whatever celebrations you may be having, in between opening presents and eating turkey or nut roast, sharing conversation or going for walks, find time too to simply sit with the dark and allow the light and the truth to reveal itself, as only it knows how. It is there. Waiting for its chance to shine. Again.

91(G) Midnight clear

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

Still through the cloven skies they come,
With peaceful wings unfurled;
And still their heavenly music floats
O'er all the weary world.
Above its sad and lowly plains
They bend on hovering wing,
And every o'er its babel sounds
The blessed angels sing.

Yet with the woes of sin and strife
The world has suffered long:
Beneath the angel-strain have rolled
Two thousand years of wrong;
And those who are at war hear not
The love-song which they bring:
O hush the noise, all ye of strife,
And hear the angels sing!

And ye, beneath life's crushing load,
Whose forms are bending low,
Who toil along the climbing way
With painful steps and slow:
Look now! For glad and golden hours
Come swiftly on the wing;
O rest beside the weary road,
And hear the angels sing!

For lo! The days are hastening on,
By prophet-bards foretold,
When, with the ver-circling years,
Comes round the age of gold;
When peace shall over all the earth

Its ancient splendours fling,
And the whole world send back the song
Which now the angels sing.

CLOSING WORDS: Christmas Credo – Cliff Reed

I believe that there is light in darkness.
I believe that there is truth in myth.
I believe that there is divinity in every birth.
I believe that we must heed the angels' song.
I believe that we must welcome the Christ-child,
for he is every child, the world's future.
I believe we must admit that Herod is real,
that his soldiers are real, that the closed hearts
of Bethlehem are real – real in our world and
real in us. I believe we must remember this
at Christmas yet not lose hope.
I believe that we must seek the heart of Christmas –
Its joyous love, its star-lit mystery, its peaceful pleasures.
Find these and we find its power.
I believe this power can redeem us –
open the heart's doors to divine innocence.
I believe that Herod can be defeated,
that Scrooge can be healed,
that our humanity can enflesh the loving, living God.
I believe that this is the meaning of Christmas.

Extinguish chalice

Continuing the theme of the power of Christmas to redeem the world...

CLOSING MUSIC 'Winter song', Lindisfarne

<https://youtu.be/yf6WZG0HhBU>