

20th December 2020 – ‘Seasonal celebration’

led by Rev Kate Whyman, reader Myron, pianist Gay Jones

GATHERING MUSIC

WELCOME AND CHALICE LIGHTING

Welcome to our seasonal service this morning. And as special welcome to Gay who is playing for us today – it’s such a treat to have actual live music in these challenging times.

I want to start by acknowledging that for some of you your Christmas plans will have been thrown up in the air by yesterday’s announcements. And to recognise the disappointment that you may be feeling right now. Then again some of you may be feeling relief!

So today, as we approach the shortest day and the longest night of the year, and perhaps the quietest and maybe the most subdued Christmas for a long time, I invite you to embrace the mystery of the darkness and the unknowing which is at the heart of our spiritual lives, and then to seek out the jewels that can only shine out so brightly because of it.

I’ll start, as we always do, with the magic of lighting our chalice flame this morning, which is the symbol of our free religious faith. *If you have a candle you might like to light yours with me now.*

Universal mystery, guide us gently into the forgotten corners of our hearts and teach us how to embrace the night, for it is by entering the darkness that we finally see the stars.

PRAYER Cliff Reed

We light our light
to bring alight
the longest, darkest night
of all the year.

We light our light
to lift with light

the thickest, deepest gloom
from all who fear.

We light our light
to greet with light
the brightest, holiest star
as Christ draws near.

HYMN: 97 (green) The Universal Incarnation

Around the crib all peoples throng
In honour of the Christ-child's birth,
And raise again the ancient song:
'Goodwill to all, and peace on earth.'

But not alone on Christmas morn
Was God made one with humankind:
Each time a girl or boy is born,
Incarnate deity we find.

This Christmastide let us rejoice
And celebrate our human worth,
Proclaiming with united voice
The miracle of every birth.

Round every crib all people throng
To honour God in each new birth,
And raise again the ancient song:
'Goodwill to all, and peace on earth.'

STORY: Luke 2 (New International Version)

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register.

So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

READING: Steve Garnaas-Holmes, Methodist minister

"The story of the Nativity of Christ is not just a lovely, starlit moment of precious magic and calm adoration. It's the story of God's subversion of the world, through no power at all except love. Read the stories (one in Matthew, one in Luke) without romanticizing and you

see a story of God's vulnerable presence amidst poverty, oppression and danger. The manger is not a cute image. It's about a family that is homeless, at risk, and coping. The magi work knowingly around political and military repression. The family escapes death squads and becomes refugees. And where is God in all this? In a baby. This is the story of God's incursion into our power structures, to transform them from the inside out with nothing but radical presence and compassion. God does not act as a king or a warrior, but comes as a vulnerable, powerless child, who makes rough shepherds tender, who draws kings to worship on their knees, who threatens Herod and reorganizes society. God does not impose laws for us to follow: God gives us love to fall into.”

REFLECTION: Candle lighting

I invite you to light a candle and consider what Christmas means to you.

MUSICAL INTERLUDE

COMMENTARY

What does the Christmas story mean to you? Does it have religious resonance for you, or not? It may be that you find the word ‘God’ uncomfortable. Or you find the divinity of Jesus unbelievable, in which case I hope you enjoyed the carol earlier. Perhaps the idea of God ‘entering the world’ – as though God were somehow not already in the world – doesn’t sit well with you. Or maybe it’s angels, or the virgin birth, that are the last straw?

I sympathise with your struggle.

And yet... I say, this morning, let us lay that struggle down, along with all our other interminable Christmas and Covid-related problems. Let’s put all arguments for and against to one side for a moment. Let us allow ourselves a rest from confusion, uncertainty and decision-making, and take a deep breath. Let us be willing to sit in a state of simply unknowing. Which may come as quite a relief. I recommend it. Unknowing is so much gentler than uncertainty. Where uncertainty implies an anxiety for answers, unknowing suggests peace and surrender to the mystery. In unknowing, there is no ‘right answer’ we have to find, or problem we need to fix, there is only our trust that a way forward will emerge, in its own time, out of our stillness. Aah.

It is natural, of course, to want answers but sometimes none are available. After all, even religions can only ever point *towards* truth, they can't explain or define it for us, which is why they make so much use of allegory, story, poetry, myth, mandala, koan riddle and so on. Each of these, in its own way, is an attempt to draw us out of the baffling complexities of our ordinary days, and lead us out beyond the limits of our usual experience, to some place where our rational minds finally give up the fight. A place where all we can do, in the end, is concede that we don't know, that we can't work it all out, that we're not in control. In such moments at last we may stop struggling and instead consent: consent to the mystery that is beyond our understanding.

In my experience, this is the best way to approach the Christmas story, too. When we let our theological arguments fall away and surrender to its magic; when we come to the tale much like the vulnerable, powerless child at its heart. It is then that the story may miraculously begin to transform us, in just the way Garnass-Holmes says God transforms the world: 'from the inside out, with nothing but radical presence and compassion'.

What does he mean? What IS radical presence and compassion? Well for me it means attention to whatever is here now, however uncomfortable that may be. So if this moment contains loneliness, then we pay attention to loneliness and look it in the eye, and if it contains sadness, then we pay attention to that sadness, fully and wholeheartedly. We don't have to like what's in the moment. But if we attend to it with love and understanding – with compassion – then strangely the hidden jewels within it begin to shine and possibility of transformation miraculously opens up for us.

The Gospels consistently show the adult Jesus present and compassionate to all suffering: to oppression, to discrimination, to all kinds of pain and injustice. And those he touched being healed. These stories are presented to us as 'miracles' that seem far-fetched – they are far-fetched if taken literally. But I like to think they are 'examples' of what can happen when someone who has grown used to being ignored or shunned, disapproved of, or marginalized, finally feels seen and understood. We each have the capacity, the potential, to offer just such radical presence and compassion to ourselves and to others. And the results can be miraculous.

For it is not argument or theory, ideology or dogma, that transform and heal the world. Neither is it kings or warriors who do this essential work – the only work that truly matters.

Rather it is those who are willing to be fully present, to see what is and to understand. This is the truth – the good news, if you like – that is so powerfully revealed in the form of a tiny, naked baby, born in poverty in a manger, who nevertheless ‘makes rough shepherds tender, draws kings to worship on their knees, threatens Herod and reorganizes society’ simply by virtue of his compassionate presence.

This is a story that asks us ‘to fall in to love’, with the moment, with what is, with ourselves, just as we are, with each other, just as we are, with life, exactly as it is – lockdowns, aloneness and all. Because it is through this radical presence and compassion that we will reveal the light in these dark times, and - finally - hear the angels sing. May it be so.

Let's hear the angels sing right now!

HYMN: 91 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, good will 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 ever 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!

All 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 ever-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 Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

'May we embrace the mystery that surrounds us.

May we sink deep into the truth of our unity even amidst life's discord.

May we keep our hearts open to those moments of more than mortal splendor, when there is indeed a touch of glory in just being alive.'

Whatever happens, dear friends, the world keeps on turning. So Happy Yuletide and Merry Christmas. Enjoy each day as best you can, and remember to watch out for each and every star that shines and twinkles for you in the darkness. Take care and stay safe. Until we meet again.

CLOSING MUSIC