

11th December 2022 CAROL SERVICE
led by Rev Kate Whyman, pianist Gay Jones

WELCOME/CHALICE LIGHTING

Welcome to our Christmas Carol Service on this 3rd Sunday of Advent. Welcome to those of you here in the church, to all friends and visitors. And welcome also to those of you joining us on Zoom, some of you I believe snowed in where you live. 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 now I ask our candle lighters in the room to begin the lighting in the church and I invite those of you at home to light a candle too if you have one.

While 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 us, even in the darkest of days. May it shine ever more brightly and warmly at this festive and holy time.

PAUSE WHILE CANDELS ARE LIT

PRAYER by Christine Robinson

In this sacred space, 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.

Our first carol is an advent carol. If you're using hymn books it's number 82. Otherwise you'll find the words on our screen. Hymn 82 'People look east'.

1st CAROL – 82 People look east

People, look east! The time is near
of the crowning of the year.

Make your house fair as you are able,
trim the hearth, and set the table.

People, look east, and sing today:
Love, the guest, is on the way.

Furrows, be glad! Though earth is bare,
one more seed is planted there:
give up your strength the seed to nourish,
that, in course, the flower may flourish.

People, look east, and sing today:
Love, the rose, is on the way.

Stars, keep the watch! When night is dim,
one more light the bowl shall brim,
shining beyond the frosty weather,
bright as sun and moon together.

People, look east, and sing today:
Love, the star, is on the way.

French carol, words Eleanor Farjeon, from Oxford Book of Carols

1st READINGS

Luke 2:1-7 (NRSV) - CHRISTINE

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.

A humanist advent poem, by Rob MacPherson - MARIANNE

How we have hurried toward this time of waiting,
Head-long to this fully fallow stretch of days!
We pick the calendar's windows' dating,
Keeping vigil at the stubble-field's lowering haze.

Gone the days of full-bellied harvest,
Gone as surely as the sun goes west.

How we gorged on the fruit of the vine.
How we wrung the windfall from the tree
And wolfed the blood-warm lamb, cut fine,
And sopped the juice with loaves we gathered, free.

Now the sun slung low across this field of time
Sheds milky light on furrows, tumbled clods.
Even steeple bells seem muffled when they chime,
Above a land laid waste, abandoned by the ancient gods.

This is "the sign you shall be given": longing, dearth.
Below the spent, expectant, sulking earth,
The hidden powers shift and knit and surge;
Burgeoning life awaits in womb, as soil and soul converge.

2nd 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.

2nd READINGS

Christel will continue the Gospel story from Luke, and then John will give us the donkey's view of the proceedings.

Luke 2: 8-20 - CHRISTEL

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.

WHAT THE DONKEY SAW by U A Fanthorpe - JOHN

No room in the inn, of course,
And not that much in the stable,
What with the shepherds, Magi, Mary,
Joseph, the heavenly host -
Not to mention the baby
Using our manger as a cot.
You couldn't have squeezed another cherub in
For love nor money.
Still, in spite of the overcrowding,

I did my best to make them feel wanted.
I could see the baby and I
Would be going places together.

3rd CAROL: 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, 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 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!

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 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.

3rd READINGS:

God Gives Us Love to Fall Into, Rev Steve Garnaas-Holmes - EDGAR

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 Gospel stories 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.

Peace Child, by Shirley Erena Murray - SHEILA

Peace Child

In the sleep of the night, in the dark before light you come
In the silence of the stars
In the violence of wars –
“Saviour”, your name.

Peace Child,

To the road and the storm
To the gun and the bomb
You come,
Through the hate and the hurt, through the hunger and dirt –
Bearing a dream.

Peace Child,

To our dark and our sleep
To the conflict we reap now, come –
Be your dream born alive,
Held in home,
Wrapped in love:
God's true shalom.

4th CAROL – Circling planet - PIANO, words on OoS Written by Ralph Brown, who at 100 is our oldest member. Sung to the tune of ‘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 covet 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.

SILENCE – for our own thoughts and reflections, prayer or meditation. You may like to focus on your breathing, or on a candle, or a word such as love or hope. Or simply sit and be in the quiet and the stillness.

INTERLUDE – PIANO

SEASONAL THOUGHTS

This is a season and a time that invites us to turn our gaze away – for a while – from the mundane – by which I mean whatever we do by habit. So, away from our persistent busyness, away from our everyday grumbles, and away from the troubles of the world, however concerning. And to turn instead – even if just for a few moments here and there – towards the sublime and the extra-ordinary. It is a chance to enter a state of child-like wonderment.

To wonder, for example, at the magic in a simple candle flame. How its gentle light, and flickering movement, can, inexplicably, like fresh snow and fireworks, transport us somewhere beyond our ordinary selves – to a heightened place of hope, and of wide-eyed innocence.

To wonder, perhaps, how it is that the world keeps on turning. How it can possibly keep making its way around the sun year after year, tilting into different seasons as it travels? To wonder with what purpose, if any, do we circle and spin endlessly on this tiny globe in an infinite universe?

And maybe especially to wonder how it is that the ancient story of God apparently entering the world as a helpless infant, who cries and sleeps, and is naked and homeless, still manages to awaken the child in each of us today. Whether we quite believe it or not, and you may or may not, it's a story that can still stir within us the possibility of something that's beyond definition, beyond ourselves, some other dimension that is full of light and love and mystery.

Our winter festivals – whether Christian or Pagan, Jewish or Hindu or Sikh, seem to call to us across the centuries and millennia. They call not so much to our heads as to our imaginations. They entreat each of us, once again, 'Stop whatever it is you're doing and look at *this* for a moment! Light a candle, or gaze up at the stars and the planets, or hold a newborn baby in your arms, and allow pure astonishment to overwhelm your mind, your heart, your soul. Allow your self - your reasonable skepticism and doubts, your rational theories and explanations, your cherished arguments and opinions – to simply fall away, for while, and let the wonder in.'

In challenging times – and we are in challenging times once again – the greatest mistake might be to believe that we don't have time for this. That there's no time to stop, or even to pause. That there is no space for surrendering or dreaming, no point in imagining or hoping for a better way.

And yet all our faiths surely tell us in their different ways, over and over, that there is nothing more important we can possibly do.

5th 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!

4th READING

Christmas Lights, by Margaret Silf

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.

6th Carol – 96 Joy to the world

Joy to the world for we shall come
Let peace be our refrain
In every heart, in every land
Let peace and freedom reign
Let peace and freedom reign
Let peace and love and freedom reign.

Joy to the earth where truth is all
And justice our domain
In every mind, in every word
Let peace and freedom reign
Let peace and freedom reign
Let peace and love and freedom reign.

Joy to our hearts goodwill to all
The earth, the world, shall ring
In deeds of love, in songs of praise
Let peace and freedom reign
Let peace and freedom reign
Let peace and love and freedom reign.

BLESSING by Maureen Killoran

This evening in this community,
we have shared stories, sung carols,
opened our hearts to the beauty of music.
We have turned to one another,
lit candles together and shared silence in the dark.
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.

Extinguish chalice

POSTLUDE - PIANO