

25th December 2022 – PLYMOUTH

BLESSINGS, LOSS and ANGELS SINGING – led by Rev Kate Whyman

1. **INTRO MUSIC** 'I saw three ships' 2'24"

https://youtu.be/7e4euOE_xuw

2. **WELCOME/CHALICE LIGHT**

Happy Christmas. Welcome to each one of you. Welcome to you just as you find yourself on this Christmas day, with all your hopes and expectations, your excitement and joy, as well as any sadness or anxiety or poignant memories you carry with you at this time. May we welcome the whole of ourselves here today.

Ask them to call out to Zoom!

Ask Zoomers to unmute and call out to congregation!

And so we all come here this morning to celebrate Christmas, one way or another, to share a part of this holy day together, to hold this sacred space open for any who wish to come in, to maintain our spiritual practice of Sunday morning worship together, and to hold a Unitarian witness in our city on this special day.

Most of all we come here, as we always do, to create community, to reconnect with the divine, to open ourselves to the spirit, and to enter in - with heart and soul - to the ultimate mystery of life, of love, of God.

So let us begin our service in our customary way, by lighting our chalice as a symbol of our free religious faith. (Do light one with me.)

LIGHT CHALICE

May this flame be an invitation to embrace the spirit of Christmas, may its light lead us in this time of shared worship towards the holy, and may its memory remain with us and continue to be our guiding light throughout this day and the days to come.

This service will include carols and readings; there will be prayer and time for lighting candles of joy and concern; there will be music and a short reflection from me.

3. PRAYER adapted from 'We are seeking Christmas', Tom Schade

O God, who moves among the stars of the cold clear sky,
whose voice whispers in the silence of falling snow,
whose silence stills our hearts and leaves us wondering and waiting.

We are seeking Christmas,
searching in this season
for a hidden door to a forgotten room in the house of our very being,
where we can live the lives we're meant to live.

We are searching for Christmas,
seeking in this season
to be finally persuaded
that hope is not just a good idea, and that love is not naïve, and that faith is not just
the brave face we put on a hopeless situation.

Holy One, our fear is that you have left us alone here,
But our hope is that You have, in fact, met us where we are,
at an inn at the end of the world, that we might have assurance;
that you have lifted a lantern to light our path, so we may follow your footsteps
through the snow.

Divine Spirit, grant us a measure of peace this Christmas;
fill us, each, with hope and good cheer;
may every one of us be surrounded by love,
and, in the joy and the tumult of this season, may you speak
a word of encouragement and provide a moment of grace to every human heart.

Amen

We have just celebrated the Winter Solstice. And in our carol service we sang Ralph Brown's words set to Holst's tune for 'In the bleak midwinter. This morning let's sing the same tune but with the original words by Christina Rossetti – the nativity story told in song.

Particularly potent for me are the final words...

*In the bleak mid-winter,
In this world of pain,
Where our hearts are open
Christ is born again.*

4. FIRST HYMN: 97 (G) 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.'

And so, this carol says that even in bleakness and pain, the Christmas story reminds us that if our hearts are open, then miracles are possible. Light and love and mystery can yet enter in.

5. **STORY of the NATIVITY as told by Unitarian Universalist Lyn Gardner. The blessings of the nativity.**

It was getting dark and the weary travelers needed a place to sleep. It's almost 70 miles between Nazareth and Bethlehem, and Joseph and Mary were making the long journey that was required of them in order to pay taxes to the Roman Empire. It was a long journey for everyone, but Mary was feeling it more than some, as she was about to give birth, and she was very tired. *But there was a blessing*: one of their neighbours in Nazareth had offered them a donkey for her to ride on the long trip. Kindness can make any journey a bit easier.

The trip to Bethlehem wasn't the only journey they were on. Mary and Joseph were on that exciting, sometimes nerve-wracking journey toward parenthood. It had been nine months since the angel Gabriel had appeared to Mary, asking her if she would carry this child, this son of God. "Here I am," she had said, "let it be with me." And so Mary was pregnant. *And there was another blessing*: her dear Joseph believed her, he had faith in her and in God. Faith can help when times are confusing and difficult.

And there in Bethlehem this young couple was blessed with generosity: a place to stay. They were given space to rest until their baby was born. It wasn't fancy, but it was warm and safe.

Out in the fields, there were shepherds, watching over their sheep. And angels came. Now, shepherds may not always feel important. They might not always remember that they matter, especially when they're out in a field at night. But on that night, *there was a blessing*: the angels came and sang, and they not only felt hope hearing of the birth of this little baby, but they also remembered, at least for that night, that they were each precious.

And a new star rose in the heavens, telling of the birth of one who would bring a message of peace, one who would bring change, one who would be called a king. Far away, wise ones heard of this star. They went to King Herod to tell him that a new king had been born. Herod was jealous, and afraid of what a new king might

mean, and so he sent them to find the baby. And though the stories say they traveled to find him, *there was a blessing*: the wise ones felt compassion for this family, and they chose not to tell King Herod what they had seen.

And as Jesus was held, and rocked, and fed, and sung to, *there was a blessing* of love and wonder. There they were, all the people and animals gathered around a new baby, caring for him and for one another, resting in that amazing love.

Over 2,000 years later, we still retell the story of Jesus' birth, and of his life and teachings. And *still there is a blessing*: a possibility of a better world. This possibility arises when we remember that we are all connected; when we choose kindness, faith, generosity; when we remember that each one of us matters. The possibility for a better world happens when we practise compassion; when we allow our hearts to be changed by love and wonder.

This Christmas — and every day — may you each be touched by such blessings, and share them with all those you meet.

I invite you to pause now to reflect on the blessings in your life this Christmas.

6. **2nd HYMN – Coventry Carol**

The nativity story is a good news story that glosses over the part of the story in which Herod had babies murdered in his attempt to kill the threat to him of Jesus. But as Christmas is a time for including everyone, and to acknowledge sadness as well as joy. So let's sing the Coventry Carol. It's from a 16th century English mystery play and it's a beautiful lullaby for the mothers of all those lost children killed by Herod's men. Let's sing it for them now.

Lully, lullah, thou little tiny child, Bye bye, lully, lullay. Thou little tiny child, Bye bye, lully, lullay.

O sisters too, how may we do For to preserve this day
--

This poor youngling for whom we sing,
"Bye bye, lully, lullay"?

Herod the king, in his raging,
Chargèd he hath this day
His men of might in his own sight
All young children to slay

That woe is me, poor child, for thee
And ever mourn and may
For thy parting neither say nor sing,
"Bye bye, lully, lullay."

And I invite you to pause once more to gently bring into your hearts your own sadness on this day. It is all right to acknowledge that Christmas can be hard.

PAUSE

If Christmas is about gratitude for our blessings, and acknowledgement of our grief, then it is also about the possibility of transcendence. It opens a space in which we may be touched by – or touch – the divine.

7. Reading: Howard Thurman, Black American theologian and activist. It's from a book called 'The Inward Journey'

By the way, he uses the word 'freshet', which I had to look up. It's rather a lovely word. It means 'a great rise or overflowing of a stream caused by heavy rains or melted snow'. He writes:

There must be always remaining in every [person's] life some place for the singing of angels, some place for that which in itself is breathlessly beautiful and by an inherent prerogative, throwing all the rest of life into a new and creative relatedness, something that gathers up in itself all the freshets of experience from drab and commonplace areas of living and glows in one bright light of penetrating beauty and meaning—then passes. The commonplace is shot through with new glory; old burdens become lighter, deep and ancient wounds lose much of their old, old hurting.

A crown is placed over our heads that for the rest of our lives we are trying to grow tall enough to wear. Despite all the crassness of life, despite all the hardness of life, despite all of the harsh discords of life, life is saved by the singing of angels.

And now I invite you to pause once more. And consider whether you are keeping space open for the singing of angels. For what is breathlessly beautiful.

PAUSE

8. HYMN 87 (G) In the bleak midwinter

In the bleak mid-winter
Frosty wind made moan,
Earth stood hard as iron,
Water like a stone;
Snow had fallen, snow on snow,
Snow on snow,
In the bleak mid-winter
Long ago.

In the ancient story
Of the infant's birth
Angels in their glory
Promised peace on earth;
But only his mother,
With a mother's bliss,
Worshipped the beloved
With a kiss.

Christ was homeless stranger,
So the gospels say,
Cradled in a manger
And a bed of hay:
In the bleak mid-winter
Stable-place sufficed
Mary and her baby
Jesus Christ.
Once more child and mother
Weave their magic spell,
Touching hearts with wonder
Words can never tell:
In the bleak mid-winter,

In this world of pain,
Where our hearts are open
Christ is born again.

Music by Gustav Holst, words by Christina Rossetti, with additions.

9. CANDLES FOR CHRISTMAS

Blessings, losses and breathless beauty.

On this Christmas morning, in this sacred space and in this gathered community, I invite you to share something of what is in *your* heart right now. You may like to light a candle in silence. Or wish to light a candle and share a few words. Or you may prefer simply to remain seated with your own thoughts and prayers.

If you do choose to speak, please come to the lectern so we can all hear you. And I will give people online the opportunity to share also if they would like to. But I begin with those in church.

CANDLES

SILENCE

10. INTERLUDE:

O magnum mysterium, Morten Lauridsen

11. READING: '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.

3rd Hymn 95 (G) 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 or 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.*

12. CLOSING WORDS WHERE THE LIGHT BEGINS, Jan Richardson, *from Circle of Grace: A Book of Blessings for the Seasons*

A Blessing for Christmas Day

Perhaps it does not begin.
Perhaps it is always.
Perhaps it takes
a lifetime
to open our eyes,
to learn to see
what has forever
shimmered in front of us—

the luminous line
of the map
in the dark

the vigil flame
in the house
of the heart

the love
so searing
we cannot keep
from singing,
from crying out
in testimony
and praise.

Perhaps this day
will be the mountain
over which
the dawn breaks.

Perhaps we
will turn our face
toward it,
toward what has been
always.

Perhaps
our eyes
will finally open
in ancient recognition,
willingly dazzled,
illuminated at last.

Perhaps this day
the light begins
in us.

Robert Fulghum, UUA, writes that Christmas ...

... is about a child of long ago and far away. And it is about the child of now. In you and me. Waiting behind the door of our hearts for something wonderful to happen. A child who is impractical, unrealistic, simpleminded and terribly vulnerable to joy.

Our closing video is a...

13. **CLOSING VIDEO** Children's choir singing an arrangement of 'For unto us a child is born', from Handel's Messiah. I found this very moving. Their unaffectedness, their fidgeting, boredom, dancing, joy – all of it on display. Perhaps we can find a bit of that simplicity of being ourselves at this time. I hope you enjoy it.

<https://youtu.be/idt3IHoeOPU>