

**10<sup>th</sup> December 2023 CAROL SERVICE**  
**led by Rev Kate Whyman, pianist Gay Jones**

**WELCOME**

Welcome to our Christmas Carol Service on this 2nd 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. We look forward to sharing some festive magic, singing and celebration together.

Sufi Elias Amidon recently wrote: *'No matter how different we seem  
All of us keep beginning in the same moment.'*

Welcome to this moment together.

**OPENING WORDS** 'We Have an Old Story to Tell', Gretchen Haley

Calling all who cannot wait any longer for joy, for hope and some good news (even a little).

The time has come, the waiting is over.

Here in this time we have an old story to tell:

one that has been shared over and over for thousands of years,

But still somehow it remains unheard; still radical and risky;

Breaking through into these days of darkness and cold, division and fear;

Interrupting the perpetual stories of violence and loss and the feelings of  
powerlessness.

Into the errands and errors of our everyday, Christmas arrives not only to comfort but  
to awaken;

to reassure and also to stir us up as a new life, a life of peace, and justice, and  
courageous love struggles to be born;

Wondering if we will yet be the ones who make room in our lives and in our world for

the refugee, the poor, the plain and messy sweetness of a newborn baby;  
If we will take the journey to Bethlehem;  
If we will be changed by the presence of a love that meets us where we are in the  
fields wherever we lay  
And calls us forth into a new journey: a braver and bolder life;  
Believing that it is not too late for strong and gentle people to win  
For compassion and truth to have the final say  
For the bright light of hope to shine through  
Even on the darkest night.

Come, let us celebrate the good news of Christmas  
And let us worship together.

### **CANDLE/CHALICE LIGHTING**

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, including our Advent  
candles.

While I begin by lighting our chalice candle, and invite those of you on Zoom to light  
one wherever you are.

May our flame be a symbol of the spirit of Christmas, of 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.

**PAUSE WHILE CANDLES ARE LIT**

**PRAYER** by Shari Woodbury

Spirit of Life that goes by so many names...

Spirit of Love that has taken so many shapes on our earth over the millennia of  
human habitation here...

...we open our hearts to make room for you.

With the innocence and imagination of a child, help us to hear the beauty and the magic in the Christmas story. Let us feel the love that surrounded the holy family, and allow that love to heal the cold and unsheltered parts of ourselves, the parts that are lonely and on the road.

Whatever may bring sorrow into our lives at this time, let us feel here the presence of a humble community. A community that offers warmth and a shelter from life's hardships – that offers companionship on our journeys...

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'.

### **1<sup>st</sup> 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*

## **1<sup>st</sup> 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.

### **A humanist advent poem, by Rob MacPherson**

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.

## **2<sup>nd</sup> 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.

*English Traditional melody, words from Phillips Brooks*

## **2<sup>nd</sup> 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.

## **Reading for 25<sup>th</sup> Christmas from ‘Fragments of Holiness’, Robert Fulghum**

I know what I really want for Christmas. I want my childhood back. Nobody is going to give me that. I might give at least the memory of it to myself if I try. I know it doesn't make any sense, but since when is Christmas about sense, anyway? It 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.

**3<sup>rd</sup> 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.

*Traditional air, words from Edmund Hamilton Sears*

### **3<sup>rd</sup> READINGS:**

#### **From 'Ulysses', Alfred Lord Tennyson**

There lies the port; the vessel puffs her sail:  
There gloom the dark, broad seas. My mariners,  
Souls that have toil'd, and wrought, and thought with me—  
That ever with a frolic welcome took  
The thunder and the sunshine, and opposed  
Free hearts, free foreheads—you and I are old;  
Old age hath yet his honour and his toil;  
Death closes all: but something ere the end,  
Some work of noble note, may yet be done,  
Not unbecoming men that strove with Gods.  
The lights begin to twinkle from the rocks:  
The long day wanes: the slow moon climbs: the deep  
Moans round with many voices. Come, my friends,  
'T is not too late to seek a newer world.  
Push off, and sitting well in order smite



The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds  
To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths  
Of all the western stars, until I die.  
It may be that the gulfs will wash us down:  
It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles,  
And see the great Achilles, whom we knew.  
Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho'  
We are not now that strength which in old days  
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are;  
One equal temper of heroic hearts,  
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will  
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

**Peace Child, by Shirley Erena Murray**

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.

**CAROL 87 – 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,  
Cradles 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.*

**INTERNATIONAL PRAYER FOR PEACE** – let us say together to lead us into silence – a time for your 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 peace or hope. Or simply sit and be in the quiet and the stillness.

Lead us from death to life,  
from falsehood to truth.  
Lead us from despair to hope,  
from fear to trust.  
Lead us from hate to love,  
from war to peace.  
Let peace fill our hearts, our world, our universe.  
Peace, Peace, Peace

**SILENCE**

**INTERLUDE – PIANO**

**SEASONAL THOUGHTS**

*'Come, my friends, 'Tis not too late to seek a newer world.'*

Words from Ulysses, by Alfred Lord Tennyson, which Sheila read for us earlier.

It is not too late to seek a newer world without, but especially not too late to seek a newer world within.

It is *never* too late for that. Never too late to seek spaciousness inside ourselves where perhaps there has been stagnation; or to seek lightness where there has been

burden. It will never be too late for you or for me to seek curiosity rather than opinion. Or that generosity and love in our hearts, which is our birth right, in place of meanness or fear.

Tis not too late to seek a newer world, and we are always – all of us – called to do exactly that, every moment, but perhaps especially at Christmas.

Because the nativity story is not just a pretty tableau or a cosy tale. The Christmas story is meant to confound us. It is meant to challenge and more importantly, to change us. Like a Zen master rapping his students with a stick to wake them up to enlightenment, the Christmas story is a shock of contradictions. A virgin mother! A baby in a stable who is God! Kings who pay homage to commoners! It's impossible, and radical. A story that turns everything on its head in order to make us question everything we thought we knew. No need to get hung up on whether or not it's factually true – that is to miss the point. It is true in its own way. And is intended, surely, to jolt us out of habitual and tired ways of thinking, and yes, to see the world anew.

It is so easy to become despairing about the world. I know I sometimes do. So much seems to be wrong. Conflict, suffering, disaster and cruelty are everywhere we look. Yet, here again, is The Christmas story – in the shape of a clear-eyed, open-hearted, newborn child – once again fervently calling us to build a world fueled by joy and love. Crucially it does so by seeking first and foremost to transform each one of *us*. The process can't begin 'out there', it has to begin in here, with you and me waking up, and finding at last the peace, joy and love that is in truth already within our hearts, that child within who (as Robert Fulghum puts it) 'is impractical, unrealistic, simpleminded and terribly vulnerable to joy'. Then, and only ever then, will the outer world have a chance to being transformed too.

Tis not too late to seek a newer world. The only question is will I? Will you?

**5<sup>th</sup> 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!

*Music Mendelssohn, words from Charles Wesley*

#### **4<sup>th</sup> 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.

### **'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.

**6<sup>th</sup> 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.

*Music Lowell Mason, words from William Wolff*

### **BLESSING by Elizabeth Birtles**

I wish for you  
Your own Bethlehems;  
Where suddenly -  
Into the darkest, coldest, night

New hope is born;  
Where suddenly  
A natal light reveals  
New possibility  
And potency for new beginning.

I wish for you,  
Time and time again,  
The bright angelic flash  
Of your own Bethlehems.

*Extinguish chalice*

**POSTLUDE - PIANO**