

24th December 2023 – PLYMOUTH

led by Rev Kate Whyman

1. **INTRO MUSIC** 'O Holy Night', Katie Melua (4'24")

https://youtu.be/7e4euOE_xuw

2. **WELCOME/CHALICE LIGHT**

Welcome to each one of you, here in the church and joining us online. You are welcome just as you find yourself on this Christmas Eve, with all your hopes and expectations, your excitement and joy, as well as any sadness or anxiety you may be feeling, or poignant memories you may be carrying at this time. May we welcome the whole of ourselves here today.

We come here this morning to share time together in anticipation of one of the most holy days in the Christian calendar. As always, we come with open minds and hearts, ready to allow the words and music we share together to affect and inspire us in whatever way they will.

And, of course, we come once again to build community, to reconnect with the divine, to open ourselves to the spirit of life, and to enter in - with heart and soul - to the ultimate mystery.

Let's begin by lighting our chalice candle, as a symbol of our free religious faith.
(Do light a candle with me if you are at home.)

LIGHT CHALICE

May this flame be an invitation to each one of us to embrace the spirit of Christmas. May its light lead us towards the holy, and be our guiding light throughout this day and the days to come.

3. **FIRST HYMN:** 62 (P) Here we have gathered

Here we have gathered, gathered side by side;
circle of kinship, come and step inside!
May all you seek here find a kindly word;
may all who speak here feel they have been heard.
Sing now together this, our hearts' own song.

Here we have gathered, called to celebrate
days of our lifetime, matters small and great;
we of all ages, women, children men
infants and sages, sharing what we can.
Sing now together this, our hearts' own song.

Life has its battles, sorrows, and regret:
but in the shadows, let us not forget:
we who now gather know each other's pain;
kindness can heal us: as we give, we gain.
Sing now in friendship this, our hearts' own song.

Words © 1979 Alicia S. Carpenter

4. **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

5. STORY Matthew 2: 1-7 (CHRISTINE)

Continues the story from our Carol Service with a reading from the Gospel of Matthew.

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi from the east came to Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star in the east and have come to pay him homage.”

When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him, and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah^[9] was to be born. They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it has been written by the prophet:

‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah,
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel.’ ”

Then Herod secretly called for the magi and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” When they had heard the king, they set out, and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen in the east, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

6. 2nd 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.'

At our heart & soul gathering online on Thursday a number of beautiful poems were offered. Both Edgar and Joan Wilkinson brought this one, which I hadn't heard before. It speaks to a difficult Christmas, a Christmas in exile.
Edgar will read it for us now.

7. Christmas, 1970, by SANDRA M. CASTILLO - EDGAR

We assemble the silver tree,
our translated lives,
its luminous branches,
numbered to fit into its body.
place its metallic roots
to decorate our first Christmas.
Mother finds herself
opening, closing the Red Cross box
she will carry into 1976
like an unwanted door prize,
a timepiece, a stubborn fact,
an emblem of exile measuring our days,
marked by the moment of our departure,
our lives no longer arranged.

Somewhere,
there is a photograph,
a Polaroid Mother cannot remember was ever taken:
I am sitting under Tia Tere's Christmas tree,
her first apartment in this, our new world:
my sisters by my side,
I wear a white dress, black boots,

an eight-year-old's resignation;
Mae and Mitzy, age four,
wear red and white snowflake sweaters and identical smiles,
on this, our first Christmas,
away from ourselves.

The future unreal, unmade,
Mother will cry into the new year
with Lidia and Emerito,
our elderly downstairs neighbors,
who realize what we are too young to understand:
Even a map cannot show you
the way back to a place
that no longer exists.

And an inspirational reading from Howard Thurman.

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

(By the way, 'freshet', means 'a great rise or overflowing of a stream caused by heavy rains or melted snow'.)

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.

9. TREE OF JOYS and CONCERNS

SILENCE

10. INTERLUDE:

O magnum mysterium, Morten Lauridsen

11. HOMILY

The readings and prayers we have shared this morning remind us that Christmas tugs at our heartstrings in different ways, in part: pain and in part: hope. It's a time that touches most of us with memories of loss and disappointment, and lends us an increased awareness of our existential aloneness. And also Christmas brings us alive to our many blessings. It heightens our capacity for wonder, for joy, family, community and even for transcendence. That sounds a lot for a day, which it is. And it is a big ask to hold in our hearts such a kaleidoscope of images and echoes, cameos of moments both poignant and magical, in which all our Christmases seem to reverberate in this one present day. Part of Christmas is managing our expectations. They won't all be met, and that's OK. There needs to be room, too, for the unexpected.

One theme that seemed to emerge for me this week, was the idea that Christmas symbolises ways in which we search for, and try to find, our way home.

The Gospel of Luke tells the story of Mary and Joseph seeking shelter and making a humble stable their home.

The Gospel of Matthew tells of the magi – the wise men – travelling in search of the new born king of the Jews.

Sandra Castillo's powerful poem describes a family doing their best to find joy in Christmas when they have had to leave their home. The last line is quietly devastating: 'Even a map cannot show you the way back to a place that no longer exists'.

Tom Schade speaks of searching 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'.

And Howard Thurman urges us to find space for the extraordinary. '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,' he writes.

What are you searching for this Christmas?

Is it for the love and acceptance of family or friends?

Or is it the hope of a whole new world order?

Is there any sense in which you are seeking a place that actually no longer exists, however hard that might be to admit to?

Or perhaps you are yearning to feel you're finally living the life you were truly meant to live?

Maybe it is moments of transcendence and joy that you hope for. The singing of angels.

Perhaps a combination of them all.

I think I am probably searching for all of those things. But it helps me to be aware of this and to remind myself not to place too much weight on the festive season itself. My hope is I will notice the various thoughts and feelings that come and go over Christmas and New Year, without getting too caught up in any of them. A moment of loneliness here, and a sense of togetherness there. Doubt followed by faith and hope. Sadness mixed with optimism and excitement. It's all fine. All part of the journey we are on, all part of finding our way home. Embrace it all if you can.

Finally, a story. A few weeks ago a young man, called Aaron, walked into the church during a Scrapstore session and asked to speak to me. I didn't recognise him. I imagined he'd come to ask for help or maybe just to talk, but actually he'd come to give. He handed me £25 for the church. I was surprised but he explained. He said he'd been homeless, and one day he'd come here and people had been kind to him and had given him a hot drink and he'd been grateful. And now he'd turned his life around. He had a job, and somewhere to live, and his partner was expecting a baby, life was going well, and he wanted to give back to everyone who'd been generous

and had helped him along the way. So here he was. I thanked him, of course, told him how pleased I was – and how pleased you would all be – to hear that he had managed to turn things around for himself. I wished him well, and he left.

Sometimes we can't see that we belong, and yet still we do. The small kindnesses we barely notice are testament to our belonging. They are part of what it means to live the way we were meant to live. They can offer acceptance to someone else who feels they don't belong. They can even contribute, in small ways, to changing the world order. And they definitely open up space for the singing of angels.

Whatever you are seeking for this Christmas, may you find beauty in the unexpected, joy in the small things, and peace in your own heart.

Blessed be.

12. 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 night with lowly fear;
we too will thither
bend our joyful footsteps:

O come, let us adore him...

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...

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...

13. CLOSING WORDS by LR Knost

So this Christmas...

Love intentionally, extravagantly, unconditionally.
The broken world waits in darkness for the light that is you.

Happy Christmas to you all!

14. POSTLUDE Fisherman's Friends 'I saw three ships a'sailing'

<https://youtu.be/y7TChVp09tc?si=cvmD6ljKYT4m4dFa>