

Opening Music: Pastorale per la Notte di Natale' - JD Heinichen

<https://youtu.be/ZCq35vj4qcQ>

Welcome: Whether you here in church, or are joining us on zoom, or watching a recording later, you are welcome. You are welcome whatever you bring in your heart - whether in sorrow, in joy, tired or restored by the recent festivities, or from curiosity, whatever your faith or none, welcome! Our worship this morning takes the form of a Reflective service with more music than usual, much of it seasonal, and some seasonal thoughts and reflections. Here is an opportunity to catch breath after what may have been hectic preparations for Christmas and a busy few days entertaining, and the next busy time of New Year. So, thank you for being here! Or if you spent the holiday quietly, here is a chance to meet up with friends again.

Here is space to reflect on this year fast drawing to its close, and to contemplate what our journey through the next one will bring. May each person here find something to comfort or inspire, whether from the words of a reading, a prayer, a hymn or piece of music, to strike a chord within, to take away and to treasure.

Opening Words by late Rev John Andrew Storey, a former Minister of this Church

The ceaseless round of endless time
No-one can check or stay;
We'll view the past with no regret,
Nor future with dismay.

The present slips into the past,
And dream-like melts away;
The breaking of tomorrow's dawn
Begins a new today.

The past and future ever meet
In the eternal now:
To make each day a thing complete
Shall be our New Year vow.

Chalice lighting:

We gather here, at this meeting point of two years, to kindle our Chalice Flame. May its light illuminate our path in the year ahead, encouraging us through whatever twists and turns our journeys may take, and guiding us to offer to the world, our best selves.

1st Hymn Purple 27 'Dark of Winter'

Dark of winter, soft and still,
your quiet calm surrounds me.
Let my thoughts go where they will,
ease my mind profoundly.
And then my soul will sing a song,
a blessed song of love eternal.
Gentle darkness, soft and still,
bring your quiet to me.

Darkness, soothe my weary eyes,
That I may see more clearly.
When my heart with sorrow cries,

And then my soul may hear a voice,
a still small voice of love eternal.
Darkness, when my fears arise,
Let your peace flow through me.

Words and Music (Tune 'Winter Meditation') © Shelley Jackson Denham, b 1950. Used by permission.

Prayers:

Spirit of compassion, we gather here on this meeting point between two years, in comfort and security, and for this rare blessing we are truly thankful

But save us from feeling too comfortable. Remind us that too many people are not as fortunate as we are so let us hold in our thoughts and prayers today those in our own families and church who are ill, lonely, or vulnerable in some way; may we find ways to give them support & strength in the year ahead. We hold in our thoughts today too, those in the wider community, in this city & beyond, who suffer worry, sadness or loss of any kind, may they find support and comfort from friends and neighbours.

We pray too, for all who have suffered in any way through disasters, natural or man made, or from conflict during the past year. We think especially of all those affected by war in many places around the world. We pray that the leaders find compassion to cease the fighting, so that the relief work can begin. We pray that the relief workers find strength and perseverance to enable them to do what is needed. We think too of those who have landed on our own shores recently, out of desperation to find a place of safety. These losses & sadnesses feel particularly poignant at this time when many are enjoying celebrations around the birth of that child 2,000 years ago, born in poverty who became a refugee himself.

May **we** have the gift of true compassion to enable us to be with these people in some way; however small it may seem to us, to offer what we can, for in our global village, for no man or woman or child, is an island, we are all neighbours ...*AMEN*

~ 2 min

I invite you to join in saying the Universal Prayer for Peace, the words are on the back page of the leaflet, and inside the front of the hymn books.

Universal Prayer for Peace All to join in

Lead me from death to life,
from falsehood to truth;
lead me from despair to hope,
from fear to trust;
lead me from hate to love,
from war to peace.
Let peace fill our hearts,
our world, our universe – Peace, peace, peace *A M E N*

Seasonal music:

Pastorale per la Notte di Natale'- JD Heinichen

6 mins 24 sec

<https://youtu.be/ZCq35vj4qcQ>

Northern Winter began on the Solstice – the Shortest Day' - just over a week ago, on 21st December. For ancient peoples, this was an important turning point in the journey of the year. The ever shortening days, with no new growth and dwindling food supplies, seemed to threaten their very existence. But then they noticed the sun was setting a little later each evening and after a few weeks, longer daylight hours lead to a re-awakening of the natural world. They learned to store food to tide them over the darkest times. Cold weather and dark days became a time of enforced leisure for most of those tending the fields, a time to rest and take stock before the busyness of the agricultural year began anew. It was a time to slow down, sit around the fire, weave stories and sing; there was mystery and magic in this season of winter for those with imagination to find it.

A seasonal Reading:

Our own Caroline, has written a poem, reflecting on this.

'Abide with winter'

Abide with Winter
Do not long for Spring
Sink deep into the darkness
As if returning home
Join hands with nature
Everything is as it should be
The wild winds
The sun catching the frost
Like a prism
The precious rain filling the rivers
And the snow tucked round the fields
Like a blanket.
Slow down to the pace of your heart
And just BE
Abide with Winter
Do not long for Spring.

Some pieces of Music, reflecting the mystery and magic of this season:

"Hymn 2" = 'Halsway Carol = https://youtu.be/99cfHs2q7_c

"Hymn 3" = "Lux Aurumque' by Whiteacre <https://youtu.be/e6HVCqQStRE>

"Hymn 4" 'Moonsong' by Adrian von Zeigleby <https://youtu.be/ifQ3JRS4gqc>

A Seasonal Story: verses from 'The Journey Of The Magi' by TS Eliot

A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.'
And the camels galled, sorefooted, refractory,
Lying down in the melting snow.

There were times we regretted
The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,
And the silken girls bringing sherbet.
Then the camel men cursing and grumbling
and running away,
and wanting their liquor and women,
And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,
And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly,
And the villages dirty and charging high prices:
A hard time we had of it.

At the end we preferred to travel all night,
Sleeping in snatches,
With the voices singing in our ears, saying
That this was all folly.

Then at dawn we came down to a temperate valley,
Wet, below the snow line, smelling of vegetation;
With a running stream and a water-mill beating the darkness,
And three trees on the low sky,
And an old white horse galloped away in the meadow.
Then we came to a tavern with vine-leaves over the lintel,
Six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver,
And feet kicking the empty wine-skins.
But there was no information, and so we continued
And arriving at evening, not a moment too soon
Finding the place; it was (you might say) satisfactory.

Music: 'L'Adoration dei Magi' Respighi

<https://youtu.be/N15FGDumWrl>

Some Seasonal Thoughts:

So here we are again, at the meeting point of two years, almost halfway through the 12 days of Christmas, which end at Epiphany. According to tradition, this marks the visit of the Three Kings or Magi (Wiseman) to the infant Jesus, the culmination of a long journey.

Journeys feature large in the Christmas story, starting with the journey Mary made early in her pregnancy to visit her cousin Elizabeth, and share in her joy at being unexpectedly pregnant (with John the Baptist) late in life.

This was followed by the long journey the heavily pregnant Mary made with Joseph to take part in the census in Bethlehem, where Jesus was born.

The humble shepherds' journey to visit the baby was certainly much shorter than that of the Magi. The Magi travelled a great distance to visit the infant Jesus. They must have encountered many different experiences and hazards along the way, as imagined by TS Eliot in his poem, including the treacherous intentions of King Herod, which they narrowly escaped, before achieving their goal, and finding the child at last. Their journey home was via a different route following warnings of danger in a dream.

After the visitations, Mary and Joseph took the baby Jesus on another journey, all the way into Egypt to keep him safe. They only made the return journey when that particular danger ended with Herod's death. Many people are making similar journeys today in the same part of the world, and sadly, not all end in a safe place.

One could see these journeys as metaphors for the journeys we all undertake, both physical and spiritual, throughout our lives. Journeys to family and friends, to enjoy their company, and share our sorrows and joys. Many journeys, like the daily commute are for work, or for other duties. Others may be prompted by concerns for our own health or safety, or that of loved ones.

Sometimes we travel for the pleasure of the journey itself, as on a holiday, to explore new places, and learn more about our inner selves. Most physical journeys, whether easy, dangerous, straight or intensely convoluted, have a spiritual aspect, not always immediately evident. It is only when we turn to look back along the path we have travelled that we realize how far we have come, what obstacles we have overcome and what we achieved along the way. Each one of us has our own life journey, with many twists and turns, uniquely ours.

So, let us take a pause, as in Caroline's beautiful poem, to enjoy some restful time to slow down to the pace of our hearts and just BE – for a few precious moments, before turning our faces to continue our journey throughout 2025. May we do so with a smile, opening our eyes and hearts wider, as we travel through the days and weeks ahead, helping each other on our journeys, with compassion and love. May all our journeys in 2025 be so blessed. *A M E N*

2nd Hymn: Purple 186 "We are travellers on a Journey"

We are travellers on a journey
which brought us from the sun,
when primal star exploded
and earth in orbit spun;
but now as human dwellers
upon earth-planet's crust,
we strive for living systems
whose ways are kind and just.

We are travellers on a journey
which grows from human seed,
and through our birth and childhood
goes where life's path may lead;
but now we are delving deeper
in quest of greater worth
and reaching unknown regions
and planets of new birth.

We are travellers on a journey
through realms of inner space
where joy and peace are planets
that circle stars of grace;
and when we find the stillness
which comes at journey's end,
there'll be complete refreshment,
a resting place, a friend.

Words ©Andrew M.Hill b. 1942, used by permission. Music, Tune 'Ascension' Henry Hugh Bancroft, 1904 - 1988.

Closing Words: Written by the late Win Andrews, sister-in-law of Ralph Brown, who at 102 is our oldest member. Win was a member of this congregation for many years, serving for several as Treasurer. A fine pianist, she accompanied our hymnsinging for some years when Eve, Ralph's wife, was unable to play the organ. Win hosted many church events including New Year parties and wrote this prayer for New Year Eve 2005 - 20 years ago!

"In the last few moments of this year

Let us give thanks for friends and fellowship, and particularly the fellowship of this community.

Let us be one in hatred of all wrong,

One in our love of all things sweet and fair

One in the power that makes thy children free to follow truth and thus to follow thee.

May we face the uncertain future with courage, kindness and integrity.

Grant us the gifts of sympathy and companionship, and the grace of good humour and laughter to lighten our path through the New Year.... HAPPY NEW YEAR!"

Extinguish Chalice

Closing Video: 'La Rejouissance' Handel's Music for Royal Fireworks

<https://youtu.be/S5ov8iBDZp4>