

8th December 2024 CAROL SERVICE

led by Rev Kate Whyman

1. **PRELUDE** - piano - *Prelude No 9 in E*, J S Bach

2. **WELCOME/CHALICE LIGHTING**

Welcome to our Christmas Carol Service on this 2nd Sunday of Advent. Welcome to you all. Members of the congregation, visitors, friends, hirers, and of course all of you who are joining us online this afternoon. Welcome.

I'd like to open with words by the Unitarian Universalist Gretchen Haley...

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

one that has been shared over and over for two thousand years,
But still somehow it remains unheard; still radical and risky;

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

Wondering if we will yet be the ones who make room in our lives 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 worship together.

Let's begin by lighting our chalice candle, as is our custom, as a symbol of our free religious faith...

May this flame be a sign of the spirit of Christmas, and of the light that dwells within each and every one us. May it shine ever more brightly and warmly at this festive and holy time.

3. 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

4. FIRST READINGS

Isaiah 11 vv 1-9 – SHEILA

'A humanist advent poem', Rob MacPherson - GAV

The Peaceful Kingdom

The royal line of David is like a tree that has been cut down;
But just as new branches sprout from a stump, so a new king will arise from among
David's descendants.

The spirit of the Lord will give him wisdom, and the knowledge and skill to rule his
people. He will know the Lord's will and honour him, and find pleasure in obeying
him.

He will not judge by appearance or hearsay. He will judge the poor fairly and defend
the rights of the helpless.

At his command the people will be punished, and evil persons will die.
He will rule his people with justice and integrity.

Wolves and sheep will live together in peace, and leopards will lie down with young
goats. Calves and lion cubs will feed together, and little children will take care of
them.

Cows and bears will eat together, and their calves and cubs will lie down in peace.
Lions will eat straw as cattle do.

Even a baby will not be harmed if it plays near a poisonous snake.

On Zion, God's sacred hill, there will be nothing harmful or evil. The land will be as
full of knowledge of the Lord as the seas are full of water.

A humanist advent poem, 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.

5. 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.

6. SECOND READINGS

- i) Luke 2:1-7 - LINDA
- ii) The Innkeeper's story, Anne Dilenschneider - VIV

Luke 2: 1-7 - LINDA

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered... 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.

The Innkeeper, by Anne Dilenschneider - VIV

The innkeeper isn't part of most Nativity sets. No one sings carols about innkeepers. There don't seem to be any paintings that include them. But we can imagine the scene:

Bethlehem is crowded with people coming home for the census. It's late at night when the innkeeper responds to a knock on the door and finds a young couple standing there. The woman is very pregnant. She and her spouse look exhausted. They've walked a hundred miles over rough, rocky terrain to get here from Nazareth.

The innkeeper is confronted with a dilemma. The inn is full; there just isn't any more room. At the same time, the innkeeper knows that offering hospitality is part of being God's people, because they had been sojourners and strangers in Egypt. That's why the innkeeper has always made sure there's an empty chair for an unexpected guest at the annual seder meal celebrating Passover.

What to do?

As a child, the innkeeper had learned the story of Abraham and Sarah welcoming three strangers into their home. After they made the strangers a lavish feast, the couple discovered their guests were messengers ("angels") sent to bring great news: as laughable as it seemed, the elderly Sarah was going to have a baby. So, the innkeeper knows the tradition of entertaining strangers; the innkeeper knows strangers are messengers ("angels") from God.

Tonight there is a bedraggled and weary couple on this very doorstep.

What to do?

The innkeeper pulls the door to a bit, hastily assessing the situation. Is there any space, anywhere? The beds are all taken. There are even people sleeping on the floor. What to do? Is there any possible solution?

In a moment of inspiration, the innkeeper remembers the stable out behind the inn. It's not much, but it's some protection from the wind. No matter how bitter the weather may become, the heat from the animals will keep these guests warm.

The innkeeper flings open the door and welcomes the couple with a broad smile. There's not much, but there's a possibility. A stable. Will it suffice?

It does.

And the innkeeper saves the day.

7. CAROL 84 While shepherds watched

While shepherds watched their flocks by night,
all seated on the ground,

the angel of the Lord came down,
and glory shone around.

'Fear not,' said he, (for mighty dread
had seized their troubled mind),
'Glad tidings of great joy I bring
to you and all mankind.'

'To you, in David's town, this day
is born of David's line
a saviour who is Christ the Lord;
and this shall be the sign:

'The heavenly babe you there shall find
to human view displayed,

all meanly wrapped in swathing bands
and in a manger laid.'

Thus spake the seraph; and forthwith
appeared a shining throng
of angels, praising God, and thus
addressed their joyful song:

'All glory be to God on high,
and to the earth be peace;
goodwill henceforth from heaven to men
begin and never cease!'

8. READINGS

i) Luke 2:8-20 - STEPHEN

ii) 'First Sight', Philip Larkin - ELIZABETH

Luke 2: 8-20 (NRSV) – STEPHEN

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.

First Sight, Philip Larkin - ELIZABETH

Lambs that learn to walk in snow
When their bleating clouds the air
Meet a vast unwelcome, know
Nothing but a sunless glare.
Newly stumbling to and fro
All they find, outside the fold,
Is a wretched width of cold.

As they wait beside the ewe,
Her fleeces wetly caked, there lies
Hidden round them, waiting too,
Earth's immeasurable surprise.
They could not grasp it if they knew,
What so soon will wake and grow
Utterly unlike the snow.

9. CAROL 91 It came upon the 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.

10. READINGS

i) 'Stopping by woods on a snowy evening', Robert Frost - **JOHN**

ii) 'The bat', Jane Kenyon - **LISA**

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,

And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

The Bat, by Jane Kenyon

I was reading about rationalism,
the kind of thing we do up north
in early winter, where the sun
leaves work for the day at 4:15.

Maybe the world is intelligible
to the rational mind;
and maybe we light the lamps at dusk
for nothing...

Then I heard the wings overhead.

The cats and I chased the bat
in circles—living room, kitchen,
pantry, kitchen, living room...
At every turn it evaded us

like the identity of the third person
in the Trinity: the one
who spoke through the prophets,
the one who astounded Mary
by suddenly coming near.

11. SILENCE and MUSIC *Entrance of the Muses, Rameau*

12. SEASONAL THOUGHTS

Gretchen Haley says:

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.

And whatever else we do – or don't – believe about the Christmas story, we surely have to believe *this*. That it is not too late. This is surely what faith is. And even though it feels like we say this, or something similar, every year for (I'm sure I've been saying something along these lines ever since I first came here in 2014 and if anything the world seems worse than ever) it doesn't matter. What matters is that we – you and me – keep believing.

It's not necessary – and frankly, let's be honest, it's not realistic – to expect complete world peace, a mythical time when everyone everywhere gets on with each other in perfect harmony. That's too big, and too much, and any case is way out of our control, even though we hope for it.

But what we have to believe – and act on – is that we ourselves may each strive, in our own unique way, to be a strong and gentle person; that we ourselves may have compassion and speak the truth; that we – you and I – will continue to seek and to see the light within ourselves as well as in others. And be astonished by what we find there.

That is challenge enough, it's more than enough for my lifetime and I suspect it's more than enough for yours too. If we were each to practise these things, sincerely, as best we can, then the world and its people, its animals, and its ecosystems, would all already be a little better and a little happier.

Christmas is a reminder to keep believing. It is a wake-up call. It tells us – once again – what we keep forgetting: that love and kindness, openness and curiosity, strength and gentleness, faith and hope are really all we need.

This old story, this 2024-year-old story, takes as its starting point the birth of a naked, homeless, vulnerable baby born in a stable under the stars. There is nothing powerful or grandiose about him, and yet his light shines bright for all with eyes to see. He could be you. He could be me. He could be any of us.

This Christmas – and in this coming year – may you each keep on shining, brighter than ever, and keep your faith with this extraordinary, complex, messy, painful, joyous life, even in the darkest of days.

13. PEACE PRAYER

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

14. 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!

15. READINGS

'A Christmas prayer', Maureen Killoran - ANN

'Now the work of Christmas begins', Howard Thurman - POPY

A CHRISTMAS PRAYER by Maureen Killoran

Not gold, nor myrrh, nor even frankincense
would I have for you this season,
but simple gifts, the ones that are hardest to find,
the ones that are perfect,
even for those who have everything (if such there be).

I would (if I could)
have for you the gift of courage,
the strength to face the gauntlets
only you can name,
and the firmness in your heart to know
that you (yes, you!) can be a bearer of the quiet dignity
that is the human glorified.

I would (if by my intention I could make it happen)
have for you the gift of connection,
the sense of standing on the hinge of time,
touching past and future
standing with certainty that you (yes, you!)
are the point where it all comes together.

I would (if wishing could make it so)
have for you the gift of community,
a nucleus of love and challenge,
to convince you in your soul
that you (yes, you!) are a source of light
in a world too long believing in the dark.

Not gold, nor myrrh, nor even frankincense,
would I have for you this season,
but simple gifts, the ones that are hardest to find,
the ones that are perfect,
even for those who have everything (if such there be).

Now the work of Christmas begins by Howard Thurman

When the song of the angels is stilled,
when the star in the sky is gone,
when the kings and princes are home,
when the shepherds are back with their flocks,
the work of Christmas begins:
to find the lost,
to heal the broken,
to feed the hungry,
to release the prisoner,
to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among the people,
to make music in the heart.

16. CAROL 96 Joy to the world

Joy to the world for peace shall come:
Let this 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
with deeds of love, with 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 after Isaac Watts

17. BLESSING How the Light Comes, Jan Richardson

I cannot tell you
how the light comes.

What I know
is that it is more ancient
than imagining.

That it travels
across an astounding expanse
to reach us.

That it loves
searching out
what is hidden,
what is lost,
what is forgotten
or in peril
or in pain.

That it has a fondness
for the body,
for finding its way
toward flesh,
for tracing the edges
of form,
for shining forth

through the eye,
the hand,
the heart.

I cannot tell you
how the light comes,
but that it does.

That it will.

That it works its way
into the deepest dark
that enfolds you,
though it may seem
long ages in coming
or arrive in a shape
you did not foresee.

And so
may we this day
turn ourselves toward it.
May we lift our faces
to let it find us.
May we bend our bodies
to follow the arc it makes.
May we open
and open more
and open still

to the blessed light
that comes.

CHALICE

CLOSING MUSIC In Dulce Jubilo (after Bach)