

'Soothing Sunday'**Opening music: Prelude from Christmas Oratorio by Saint-Saens 3 min 16 sec****Watch it here: <https://youtu.be/N-XOkRcKFRM>****Welcome and introduction**

Good morning and welcome! whether you here in church in person, joining us on zoom, or watching a recording later, and especially if you are joining us for the first time. 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! Today is Soothing Sunday, which in recent years has become something of a tradition, on the Sunday between Christmas and New Year. There is more music than usual, with 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, 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.

Chalice lighting

We rejoice in the winter light, as like this candle flame,
It warms and heartens us.
We rejoice in the gift of this new morning,
We rejoice in the light of this new day,
May it make plain our paths as the coming New Year unfolds before us,
This opportunity for a new beginning

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 Soothing Sunday
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.

1st Hymn: Purple book no 150 'Stillness creeping through this place'

Silence creeping through this place
softly come and gently hold me.
here, apart from urban race
your quiet calmness be among us.
May we rest within your calmness,

rest beside you, quiet stillness.

Silence, spreading all around,
quietly seeping in between us;
here, away from city sound
with your peacefulness enfold us.
May we feel and trust your presence,
know your peace, deep healing silence.

Spirit, moving through this space,
Weaving in and out among us;
here, your pattern brings new grace,
with your breathing, life endow us.
May we your first breath inherent,
feel your breathing, primal spirit.

Words © Andrew McKean Hill, b.1942 Used by permission.

Melody: 'Liebster Jesu' Johann Rudolph Ahle, 1625 – 1673 Harmonised Johan Sebastian Bach, 1685 - 1750

Prayers: Let us turn to prayer and reflection:

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 let us not be complacent..... we remember 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 lonely, vulnerable in some way, or ill. We hold in our hearts especially John Viv's husband, who had to go into hospital on Christmas Day, and the dear ones of Joan Frost, Ralph Brown and Suzanne Bolton, who are grieving their recent deaths. May we find ways to give them support & strength in the year ahead. We also hold in our thoughts today, those in the wider community, in this city & beyond, suffering worry, sadness or loss of any kind; may they find support and comfort from friends and neighbours.

We pray too, for all those suffering 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 their leaders find wisdom & compassion to cease the fighting and find better ways of resolving their differences, 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, most 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*

In the Christian tradition, today is the Feast of the Holy Innocents, which commemorates the baby boys who King Herod had butchered in his fear of being deposed by the new king of which the Magi told him. Sadly today, many children are at risk for various reasons. Let us pray:

Let us remember in our prayers the children of our world, that they may grow up knowing love and security.....

We pray for all children who suffer physical or mental abuse.....

We pray for all communities in our world who live with the memories of massacre and gross cruelty

We pray for all those corrupted by power, who regard human life as cheap...

We pray for those parents who have suffered the death of a child

We pray for parents + guardians, in their caring roles for the children entrusted to them

We remember and pray for the well being of children in families of our own church community, in the wider local community, our nation and the wider world AMEN

The Universal Prayer for Peace

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 AMEN

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

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

1. 'Halsway Carol' Watch it here: = https://youtu.be/99cfHs2q7_c
2. "'tis winter now' Sung. Watch it here: <https://youtu.be/LnP-TTWVRW8>
3. "What sweeter Music" sung by the choir of Trinity College Cambridge
Watch it here; <https://youtu.be/Lu9bKctD2pU?si=-0TpcCC6MuKVcm5Y>

Short story, 'The Littler Red Lantern' (from the internet)

In a small snowy village, there stood a tiny red lantern on the windowsill of Mrs. Holly's bakery. Every evening, it glowed softly, guiding customers to warm bread and sweet pies.

But the little lantern had a secret wish — it wanted to shine brighter than ever on Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve, so it could bring joy to the whole village.

On Christmas Eve, the lantern noticed a little boy named Oliver standing outside, shivering. His mittens were worn, and his cheeks were pink from the cold. The lantern flickered brighter, catching Mrs. Holly's attention. She opened the door, welcomed Oliver in, and gave him a warm bun and cocoa. That night, the lantern felt proud — it had helped someone feel the magic of Christmas.

A week later, on New Year's Eve, the lantern saw the villagers gathering in the square. But the fireworks cart had broken a wheel, and the celebration seemed ruined. The lantern thought hard, then shone so brightly that everyone followed its light to the square. They sang, laughed, and counted down together, using the lantern's glow as their "midnight sparkle."

When the clock struck twelve, the lantern's heart felt warm. It had learned that the brightest light comes from helping others — and that both Christmas and New Year's are about sharing joy. From then on, the little lantern didn't just shine — it glowed with love.

Some silence:

Interlude video: 'Adoration of the Magi' by Respighi **Geoffrey Simon conducts**
Watch it here: https://youtu.be/5hkCH_2TBw8

Meditative Reading:

'Waiting to Be Discovered' by Unitarian Minister, Rev Joy Croft

In the chill dark of winter earth,
beneath a mulch of dead, discarded leaves, life begins again;

The seed, entombed, yet swelling with life,
gathering life in, unregarded, waiting ...

In the warm dark of a maternal womb, a life begins;
Cells dividing, then connecting – two, four, eight,
reaching toward the intricate miracle of human being;

Life, unrecognised as yet, though longed for, waiting ...
In the dread dark of dead dreams,
where love is lost and vision cowed by the injustice of injustice,

Even in such dull despair, even then
Life prepares;
Fresh hope, new purpose spark alive unnoticed, not even wanted then, waiting ...

In the soft dark of letting go,
surrendering to meditation's hold,
Now neither seer nor seen,
Waits what was always there
though shrouded in our need and knowing;

Life of our life, within us, of us, waiting ...always waiting to be discovered.

Music: Christmas Night Pastorale by Heinichen 4 mins 55 sec
Watch it here: <https://youtu.be/62J4d9NHj5c>

Short reflection on this time of year: The December solstice, which Edgar celebrated in his wonderful service last Sunday, occurred a week ago today. In the northern hemi-sphere this

brings winter, a season of late sunrises and early sunsets, with long dark nights, few hours of daylight, of frost pavements and frozen soil. (Though nowadays, we are noticing less cold weather due to climate change and flowers blooming at Christmas) . Most people living in our modern western lifestyle, with well built homes, artificial lighting and heating are insulated from the dark and cold, and live hectic lives, many workplaces based indoors operate 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. There is little time to stop to draw breath. It was different some three to four hundred years ago, say a dozen generations. This was before the Industrial Revolution, when most people lived much closer to the natural conditions; many worked the land, and in the wintertime, for a few weeks, around the solstice, there was little they could do outdoors. It was a time of enforced leisure. The word 'Leisure' originated c. 1300, *leisir*, "free time, time at one's disposal," also (early 14c "lack of hurry," and especially "opportunity afforded by freedom from necessary occupations" (late 14c).. To do something at (one's) leisure "when one has time" is from mid-15c. And so, working the land stopped for a few weeks, and began about a fortnight after Christmas.

The Agricultural Year was regarded as starting again, on what became known as Plough Monday: the first Monday after Epiphany. The tradition dates back to the late 15th century and is deeply rooted in the history of the British agricultural community. The day before Plough Monday is known as Plough Sunday, when, I have read, a ploughshare was brought into the local Christian church for prayers and blessings. Plough Monday itself became a time for community gatherings, when decorated ploughs were paraded through the villages, In some places, various customs developed, including the performance of plays and folk dances, reflecting the spirit of rural England. In some places this tradition is being revived.

What can we learn from our land based ancestors? Take this as a little fallow time, a time to step back from the everyday routines and hectic activity, and take a breather, let go and surrender to the need to rest, and take the opportunity to enjoy the freedom from necessary occupations. Our bodies and souls will benefit from this time of rest.

As Joyce Rupp and Macrina Wiederkehr wrote in "A Celebration of Winter Solstice" from 'The Circle of Life'

"There is a tendency to want to hurry from autumn to spring, to avoid the long dark days that winter brings. Many people do not like constant days bereft of light and months filled with colder temperatures. They struggle with the bleakness of land and the emptiness of trees. Their eyes and hearts seek color. Their spirits tire of tasting the endless gray skies. There is great rejoicing in the thought that light and warmth will soon be filling more and more of each new day.

"But winter darkness has a positive side to it. As we gather to celebrate the first turn from winter to spring, we are invited to recognize and honor the beauty in the often unwanted season of winter. Let us invite our hearts to be glad for the courage winter proclaims. Let us be grateful for the wisdom winter brings in teaching us about the need for withdrawal as an essential part of renewal. Let us also encourage our spirits as Earth prepares to come forth from this time of withdrawal into a season filled with light.

"The winter solstice celebrates the return of hope to our land as our planet experiences the first slow turn toward greater daylight. Soon we will welcome the return of the sun and the coming of springtime. As we do so, let us remember and embrace the positive, enriching aspects of winter's darkness. Pause now to sit in silence in the darkness of this space. Let this space be a safe enclosure of creative gestation for you."

As Joy Croft put it,

“In the soft dark of letting go,
surrendering to meditation’s hold,
Now neither seer nor seen,
Waits what was always there Life of our life, within us, of us, waiting ...always waiting to be
discovered.” *A M E N*

2nd Hymn: P 27: ‘Dark of Winter, soft and still’

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,
comfort and cress me.
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.

Closing words:

Win Andrews’ Prayer for New Year originally written for New Years’ Eve 2005, slightly adapted.

As we approach the New 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.... *Amen*

Closing Music: ‘Here we come A wassailing’

Watch it here: <https://youtu.be/GHZoGMvyanI>