

Immanuel United Church
Second Advent | Seeking the Spirit | Branch of Peace
Dec 5th, 2021

Welcome

Announcements

Choral Introit: VU 8 *Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming*

Call to Worship:

Arise, take courage, and catch a glimpse of peace!
The warm glow of the Divine lightens our hearts.

Lighting the second Advent Candle

Candlelighter:
Peace is real and possible.
In solidarity, we pray, work, and wait for its blossoming.

**All: God-of-peace-and-possibility,
kindle in the hearts of all compassion and love
so that goodness, just deeds, the common good,
and trust may flourish.
Bless and gift all with hope for a future of peace
built on justice for all.
In the name of the Child, the peaceful one.**

(Light the second Advent Candle — Branch of Peace)

Hymn: VU 34 O-so-so (Come Now, O God of Peace)

(Singing with action)
**O-so-so o-so-so, pyong-hwa-ui-im-gum,
u-ri-ga han-mom i-ru-ge ha-so-so.**

(Singing together)
**Come now, O God of peace, we are your people;
pour out your spirit that we be one body.**

Scripture: Luke 3:1-6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,
‘The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
“Prepare the way of the Lord,
make God’s paths straight.
Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” ’

The Choir Anthem: *Come, Emmanuel, Come* (Debbie Bilous, the flute)

Reflection: The Lungs of Prophecy

In the past, I often felt that today’s reading, one of the staples of the Advent lectionary, is a disturbing text. Disturbing – and problematic for us, who live in the 21st century. We’ve witnessed the catastrophic consequences of giving ourselves unlimited power to alter nature according to human needs and greed. (Show the pictures of the former Sumas Lake and others). Make nature’s path “straight... Every valley shall be filled... Every mountain and hill shall be made low... The crooked shall be made straight... And the rough ways made smooth.” Whenever I read this passage, I could not think of anything but images of big construction projects. Dividing the mountains and cutting the hills to build a highway. Splitting natural habitats and living water’s course; shutting down nature for man’s convenience. I often thought, “This can’t be the only picture for us to envision how to prepare the way of God!” I have long admired the protesters who fight to preserve and protect nature from the unfettered human desire to accumulate wealth. In Korea. In Canada. In and around the world. I especially admire the fight for Indigenous rights to the land, culture and self-governance. This passage hits me in the wrong way; I’ve even tried to skip today’s Advent lectionary in the past. Some phrases make sense to us, Winter-peggers. Pot holes should be filled. I do enjoy the thrill (?) and fun of driving in Winnipeg. Sometimes it feels like I am driving a

horse-drawn wagon or riding an old train. Clattering. Rattling. We do have rough roads that could be made smooth. Not to mention we already have no mountains or hills to make low. But, I wonder what could be an alternative image for God's way, truly as "the voice of one crying out in the wilderness", that would not require a bulldozer to prepare a path for God.

Originally, the mountains and hills to be made low in Isaiah are analogous to the kings. The power and principalities who rule over the valleys - - the disenfranchised, those who suffer from oppression and despair. In today's reading, these mountains are presented with many names: Tiberius, Pilate, Herod, Philip, Lysania, Annas, Caiaphas. John the Baptist sends a clear message for us: The earthly powers are corrupt, and God will intervene to "Bring down the powerful from their thrones." (1:52) In this sense, with Isaiah, John the Baptist visualizes God's ground-breaking redesign of the landscape, so much more than just repairing potholes and well-worn ruts. The voice of one crying out in the wilderness is to prepare us for the arrival of a transforming God, by constructing a highway of peace, a Skytrain of the new spirit.

As we journey this Advent, with the theme of seeking the spirit, this week, the spirit of peace, holding everyone and every creature on earth, I call us to reimagine the land work, how to prepare God's path, whose process itself is peace-building and healing.

This year, I have been reading "The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma" by Bessel Van Der Kolk, at my friend's high recommendation. It beautifully demonstrates to me how the path to peace can be possible for trauma survivors, freeing them from the tyranny of the past through healing with "body", not just talk therapy. There are many forms such as neurofeedback, theater, meditation, play, and yoga.

Have you tried stretching your body lately? How many of you have been enjoying yoga or other physical exercise? Many traditional physical and spiritual practices teach us how to breathe in and out while moving our bodies to achieve the maximum benefit, for health and healing of our mind and spirit, along with our bodies being stretched, supported, strengthened.

When I was reading chapter 16: Learning to Inhabit your Body: Yoga, I knew I would want to share it with Immanuel, especially in the Advent season. I highlighted some insights and research in my journal, and saved them for sharing when I would have the

opportunity to talk about peace. I hope that this is a helpful reminder for us as we, together and individually, seek the spirit of peace.

Here are some quotes:

“When people are chronically angry or scared, constant muscle tension ultimately leads to spasms, back pain, migraine headaches, fibromyalgia, and other forms of chronic pain.”

“Our involvement with yoga started in 1998 when we first heard about a new biological marker, heart rate variability (HRV), that had recently been discovered to be a good measure of how well the autonomic nervous system is working. ... The autonomic nervous system is our brain’s most elementary survival system, its two branches regulating arousal throughout the body. Roughly speaking, the sympathetic nervous system (SNS) uses chemicals like adrenaline to fuel the body and brain to take action, while the parasympathetic nervous system (PNS) uses acetylcholine to help regulate basic body functions like digestion, wound healing, and sleep and dream cycles.

When we’re at our best, these two systems work closely together to keep us in an optimal state of engagement with our environment and with ourselves. Heart rate variability measures the relative balance between the sympathetic and the parasympathetic systems.

When we inhale, we stimulate the sympathetic nervous system (SNS), which results in an increase in heart rate. Exhalations stimulate the parasympathetic nervous system (PNS), which decreases how fast the heart beats. In healthy individuals, inhalations and exhalations produce steady, rhythmical fluctuations in heart rate: Good heart rate variability is a measure of basic well-being.”

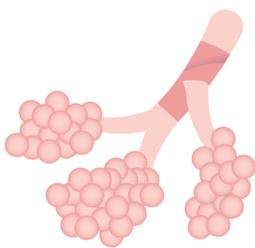
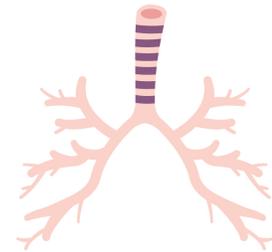
I was deeply interested in the idea that this awareness of our body as a way of trauma healing highlighted the importance of breathing, and showed us how exhalations, the moments when we breathe out, are connected to the Parasympathetic nervous system (PNS) that is engaged in wound healing, sleep and dreams! I thought that was very cool! ‘I would pay more attention whenever I can be mindful of breathing out! I am doing something that promotes wound healing and dreams, just by breathing!!!’ I immediately thought of Joseph’s dream in the Nativity story. What if we see Joseph’s dream in which the Angel visits him and tells him to accept Mary, not just as God’s instruction, but as a wound healing, God freeing Joseph from fear, through this body

work called dreaming, called exhaling. Prophecy as respiration, regulating and steadying our heart rates, tuned to God's rhythm! Balance, peace, wound healing, dreaming!

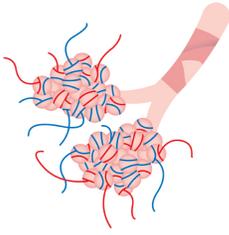
This new insight helped me to envision today's prophecy — "Prepare the way of God, making the path straight." — in the image of our lungs. "Making God's way straight" — I memorized the verse, like a mantra, when I started my stretching routine at night or early in the morning. It is very important, when you stretch your body, to use breathing as a way to guide it.

lung.ca explains how our lungs work. Imagine with me with these pictures - how lungs and other organs work when we breathe in and out: our mouth, nose, windpipe, the muscles in our chest — our lungs' contraction and expansion, flattening and relaxing, analogous to filling the valleys and lowering the mountains in order to prepare the path of peace.

To get the oxygen our body needs, we inhale air through our mouth and nose. The mucous membranes in our mouth and nose warm and moisten the air, and trap particles of foreign matter like dirt and dust. The air passes through the throat into the trachea (windpipe). The trachea divides into the left and right bronchi. Like a branch, each bronchus divides again and again, becoming narrower and narrower. (Note: the theme of this second Advent Sunday is "the branch of peace!" after "the bud of hope")



Our smallest airways end in the alveoli, small, thin air sacs that are arranged in clusters like bunches of balloons. When we breathe in by enlarging the chest cage, the "balloons" expand as air rushes in to fill the vacuum. When you breathe out, the "balloons" relax and air moves out of the lungs. Imagine with me, air as God's breath, peace; the membranes in our mouth and nose as the scripture; the windpipe as worship; "like a branch" each bronchus (God's Word) divides again and again, becoming narrower and narrower. The air sacs, the balloons, as the communities of faith. The communities of God's Love.



Now, tiny blood vessels surround each of the 300 million alveoli in the lungs. Oxygen moves across the walls of the air sacs, is picked up by the blood and carried to the rest of the body. It is God's love, peace, joy and hope being carried by the faithful people of God to the world. To breathe in God's spirit, we must let God inspire us – **the root of 'inspiration' means to 'breathe into'.** **There is no breath of faith without inspiration.**

As we stretch ourselves during Advent, we make a straight path for the breath of God, into our lungs, into our hearts and thinking and prayer.

**“Prepare the way of the Lord,
make God's paths straight.
Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low.”**

Hymn: VU 4 *God of All Places*

Offering

Let us join in the goodwill of Christmas and in the blessings of the Christ child as we give to the glory of God in all creation.

Hymn: VU 55 *In the Bleak Midwinter* (V 4)

**What can I give him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;
if I were a wise man, I would do my part,
yet what I can I give him — give my heart.**

Prayer:

In these days of waiting, O God, grow in us a spirit of generosity.

Bring to birth within us a passion for justice and peace. As we share these gifts, which you have entrusted to us, so may your dream for the world come closer to fulfillment.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Communion:

God be with you.

And also with you.

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them up to God.

Let us give thanks to God.

It is right to give God thanks and praise.

In the rich dark of winter, God makes an astounding promise:

"I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up." (Jeremiah 33:15)

In the wilderness, a voice cries out and seeks the Spirit,
longing for the Refiner's fire, repair, and renewal,
the promised birth (and rebirth) of hope.

Called to bear the weight and fruit of promise,
Mary sings ancient trust—the song of generations—
that God comes to fill the hungry and lift the humble.
She sings that love and truth will meet, that justice and peace will kiss.

In the midst of uncertainty, Jesus assures his disciples:

Just as the tree blooms, so the signs are clear that the kingdom of God is near.

In the deep of our own winter, we look for them:

bud of hope, branch of peace, sprig of joy, blossom of love.

While around us the snares of fear and conflict lie in wait of infant hope,
you, O Wisdom, O Endless Love, O Radiant Dawn, are there,
keeping vigil with us, in this season of expectation.

We give thanks for the mystery and wonder revealed that first night,
as humble people led by hope gathered in a quiet stable
and were witness to your promise reborn.

We give thanks for the blessing and love Jesus shared with all whom he met,
in food and story.

We remember that, on the night before he was handed over to die,

Jesus broke bread with his friends, blessed it, gave thanks, and said,

"Take, eat. This is my body, which I give for you. When you share it, remember me."

We remember
**that he took the cup and, giving thanks, said,
“This cup is the new covenant in my blood. When you drink it, remember me.”**

Revealed in stable, cross, and empty tomb, we give thanks, O God,
for your limitless love for all.

**Bless us, O God, and these your gifts.
Encourage us to share your life and love,
which make us, and the gifts we share, truly holy.
Transform us, God, and your world, and bless your children.**

Prayers of the People (Sharon Doerksen)

Sharing the Bread & Cup

Prayer after Communion

**At our tables, may Christ be our guest this day and always,
that we might welcome hope, peace, joy, and love into our lives.
God of Love, guide us to the stables of our world,
where the lonely and longing gather.
Lead us to the mangers of our time,
where hope and renewal are born again.
Make us heralds of your love and joy. Amen.**

May we go out strengthened because we have been together in this place and touched
by God's Spirit.

Hymn: VU 5 *All Earth is Waiting*

Choral Extroit: *Peace, Peace* (words and music by Rick and Sylvia Powell)

**Peace, peace, peace on earth and good will to all.
This is a time for joy, this is a time for love.
Now let us all sing together of peace, peace, peace on earth.**