

Immanuel United Church
Christmas Eve | Seeking the Spirit | 2021

Welcome

Choral Introit: VU 44 *It Came upon the Midnight Clear*

Call to Worship:

Arise and celebrate: God loves the world, a child is born.

The glow of the Divine lightens our hearts like an infant stepping to love.

Here we are together in a world caught between anxiety and hope, celebrating what God has done in Christ. We will never be alone. May our remembering and celebrating change how we live and open our hearts and communities, so that all can together live and share in fullness of life.

Lighting the Christ Candle:

(The Advent candles — Bud of Hope, Branch of Peace, Sprig of Joy, Blossom of Love — are already lit.)

Candlelighter:

Because God loves, holiness continues to break into the messiness of our lives.

We pray:

All:

God-always-with-us, we thank you for your love that keeps faith with and encourages us to imagine a world where the power of love can loosen the grip on restrictive ways to embrace a new life of flourishing possibilities. Through Jesus, stir us by the light of your love so that we may return to your way of fullness of life you intend for all.

(Light the Christ Candle.)

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: Genesis 1:26-2:4

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So God created humankind in God's image, in the image of God God created them; male and female God created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth."

God said, "See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so.

God saw everything that God had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. And on the seventh day God finished the work that God had done, and God rested on the seventh day from all the work that God had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that God had done in creation.

These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created, in the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens.

Hymn: VU 58 *Infant Holy, Infant Lowly*

Scripture: Isaiah 9:2, 6-7

The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.

For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.
He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time onwards and for evermore.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

Hymn: VU 74 *What Child is This*

Scripture: Luke 1:26-35

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.'

Hymn: VU 64 *O Little Town of Bethlehem*

Scripture: Luke 2:1-20

And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed.
(And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.)
And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city.
And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the

city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:)

To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child.

And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered.

And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.

And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.

And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.

For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.

And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, 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, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us.

And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger.

And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child.

And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds.

But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart.

And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.

Hymn: VU 69 *Away in a Manger*

Reflection: Merry Christmas and Good morning

This is our second Christmas Eve service since the start of the pandemic, in March, 2020. The pandemic is still ongoing. Sadly, the variant Omicron is at our doorstep, and so many families have cancelled their carefully planned, much anticipated Christmas gatherings. The variant Omicron seems to me to be like the villain Decepticon (which is

one of the villains in the once popular movie series, Transformers. My older son fondly enjoyed that series when he was younger.). The pandemic's nick name could be Fandemic. Not because it is fun. Fandemic, which I coined, is the combination of fatigue and pandemic.

Our wish or dream that we would spend one of the most special times of the year, Christmas, with family and friends at the dining table at our home or at a decent restaurant is offended by the villain Omicron, the fandemic. Advent means the "arrival" of the Messiah, the Christ Child, from which our "waiting" is the way of faithful response, begetting hope. Waiting, in this sense, does not tire us. We know, and may have told others that we will meet God, witness the birth of God. We do that even if where we are might seem to be a very unlikely and impoverished place to be pregnant of such beautiful glory. Waiting is also an anticipation that buoys our hearts up for love, joy, peace and hope. However, fatigue tests our faith, our patience, and drains our energy.

The Bible offers us many stories of fatigue. In Genesis, Hagar endures harsh treatment. She runs away from her mistress, Sarah, receives an angel's visit in the middle of the wilderness and is consoled with a promise: she will bear a son whom she shall name Ishamel. Her heritage will multiply like the number of the stars in the sky. Even so, she is later kicked out from the house of Abraham, and God hears the voice of the boy and the cry of Hagar in the desert. The angel of God calls to Hagar from heaven, and says to her, What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is, and your cry.

"In the Bible, the enslaved Hebrews endure hard work and cruel labour in Egypt.

The Psalmist is tired of crying. Their eyes are exhausted from waiting for God. The cry "how long" echoes in dozens of places through the Scriptures.

Jesus is tired from his journeys.

Early Christians and leaders endure weariness, lack of rest, and hunger.

Weariness, being tired, a sense of the ongoing nature of struggle, is certainly a frequent theme in the stories of our faith." (The reflection for this Christmas Eve service is largely inspired by Michel Anderson's article on fatigue and our faith in *40 Days of Engagement on Anti-Racism*. Michael is lead minister at St. Paul's United in Saskatoon. He serves on the executive of the General Council and he is a member of the English River First

Nation. Please visit the blog and read his full text: https://united-church.ca/sites/default/files/2021-10/antiracism-40_day07.pdf)

“Injustice and oppression do not only occur in the moments of big crisis, but are woven into every day life.” Especially it is true when we have our days under the limitations, isolation, unemployment, and pressure of living through the disruption and fatigue of a pandemic.

My colleague, Mitchel Anderson, continues to reflect and remember that Lauren Berlant, a scholar at the University of Chicago who inspired him deeply and whose recent death he grieved and mourned, while he was writing his reflection, he was struck by the motto, “We refuse to be worn out.”

“We refuse to be worn out. Just as stories of weariness are everywhere in the Bible, so too do *stories of refusal to be worn out* abound:

God rests upon the conclusion of God’s labours of Creation (as in the first scripture reading tonight, Genesis 2);

God rescues God’s people out of slavery in Egypt and then gifts them the institution of weekly sabbath, the cycles of every seven years of social and ecological sabbath for people and land, and every fifty years, Jubilee - - restoration into the fabric of a more just society.

The prophets promise rest to the people;

Jesus takes time for sleep and recovery”

and the Holy Spirit gives people energy to continue the work of God, with the gifts of the Holy Spirit being sought and shared.

On this “eve” of Christmas Day, so too, I invite us all to remember the intent of God for us: **rest, jubilee, rejuvenation, and renewal**, so that “we refuse to be worn out.” Refuse to be worn out by the Fandemic, Fatigue-mongering Pandemic. Instead, we leave tonight’s Christmas eve service with God’s promise of hope, peace and love; the imagination and embracing of the joy of the holy family, the holy community in our most beloved Nativity stories in which the community of shepherds, sheep, “chickens and chicks” (at our Immanuel’s Labyrinth Nativity story scene), Mary, Joseph, even later-arrived Wise Ones quiet their fear and worry, as they meet the infant holy in sound sleep..., in God’s rest after his first cry.

“And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger.” (Luke 2)

Tonight, we say,
Good night, holy family, holy ones. Good night, Jesus.

And we will say, on Christmas morn,
Good morning, Bethlehem. Good morning, to a new day.

It's a very good morning.

The Choir Anthem: *One Small Child Christmas Eve*

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: **God of stars and stables, of wealthy sovereigns and homeless youth, we each bring our gifts as we are able, knowing that the strength of community will bless each gift. Our community is empowered by your love, to work toward peace on earth. We pray to you, O God, bless these gifts, which are our expression of care and concern for each other.
Amen.**

Prayers of Thanksgiving

The Choir Anthem: *Peace, Peace*

Scripture: John 1:1-14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life,

and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.*

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only child, full of grace and truth.

Candlelighting: VU 67 *Silent Night, Holy Night*

Blessing

Hymn: *Joy to the World* (V. 1)

Hymn: *I Saw Three Ships*