

**SPRINGVALE UNITED CHURCH
SUNDAY, DECEMBER 24th, 2023**

Ministry of Caring: The Whole People of God
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REGIONAL COUNCIL PRAYER CYCLE

Stamford Lane: Niagara Falls

Fourth Sunday of Advent "Love"

"Love came down at Christmas,
Love all lovely, love divine;
Love was born at Christmas,
Star and angels gave the sign."

OFFERING PRAYER

Lord of Love and Light, shine through our darkness, bringing us hope. Open our hearts for the journey, our eyes for the light, our spirits for the peace which you bring. We thank you that we can give these gifts this morning with love in our hearts. We offer this prayer of offering, in the name of the One who is coming into the world bringing your hope, love, peace, and joy, Jesus Christ. **Amen.**

PRELUDE AND WELCOME

ANNOUNCEMENTS, BIRTHDAYS AND CELEBRATIONS

CALL TO WORSHIP

L: This is the fourth Sunday of Advent, a time to rejoice in the wondrous things that God is doing.

P: Our hearts are filled with the hope that is coming into the world.

L: The time is fast approaching, not for parties or presence, but for the awareness of God's loving gift to us--the gift of the Christ child.

P: Help slow us down, Lord, that we may realize that your gift of love is at the center of our lives and our celebrations.

L: Thanks be to God who again reminds us of God's eternal love.

P: Open our hearts, O Lord, to receive your blessed gift. AMEN.

OPENING CAROL: #62 Once in Royal David's City

1 Once in royal David's city stood a lowly cattle-shed,
where a mother laid her baby in a manger for his bed.
Mary was that mother mild, Jesus Christ her little child.

2 He came down to earth from heaven, who, with God is over all,
and his shelter was a stable, and his cradle was a stall.

There among the poor and lowly lived on earth our Saviour holy.

3 For he is our lifelong pattern; daily, when on earth he grew;
he was tempted, scorned, rejected, tears and smiles like us he knew.
Thus he feels for all our sadness, and he shares in all our gladness.

4 And our eyes at last shall see him, through his own redeeming love;
for that child who seemed so helpless is our Lord in heaven above;
and he leads his children on to the place where he is gone.

OPENING PRAYER

Lord of all life and all seasons, help us open our hearts to hear the words of promise and love that you send to us. Like Joseph, may we trust in your abiding love and power. Prepare us to receive your gift of grace and peace. In Jesus' Name, we pray. AMEN.

THE LIGHTING OF THE ADVENT CANDLE: THE CANDLE OF LOVE

Reader 1: The prophet Isaiah tells us that a young woman shall bear a son and shall call Him Emmanuel--God with us.

Reader 2: God is no longer a distant God, but is in the here and now.

Reader 1: As Joseph trusted in the message of God's angel, so we can trust in God's message of redemption and love.

Reader 2: Rejoice! God is lavishing us with God's love and peace.

Today we light four candles. The first is the candle of Hope, reminding us to watch and wait for what God is about to do. [*Light the first candle*]

The second candle is the candle of Peace, enabling us to look at our lives, to get rid of all those things that keep us from God, to change our ways and live as God would have us live. [*The second candle is lit*]

The third candle is the candle of Joy, through which we behold the love of God and believe in God's presence with us.

[The third candle is lit]

The fourth candle is the candle of Love, the promise of Love that came to a troubled world so long ago.

[The fourth candle is lit]

Reader 1: Come, see the lights. Let their brightness fill you.

Come, feel the warmth of the lights. Let them give you comfort.

Reader 1: Come, draw near to the lights, for God is breaking through to you.

Reader 2: Come, rejoice in the lights, God is with us!

SING VERSES 1 & 7 OF O COME, O COME EMMANUEL

1 O come, O come, Emmanuel,
and ransom captive Israel
that mourns in lowly exile here
until the Son of God appear.

*Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
shall come to thee, O Israel.*

7 O come, Desire of nations, bind
all peoples in one heart and mind;
O bid our sad divisions cease,
and be for us the Prince of Peace. **R**

ANTHEM

CHILDREN'S TIME

CHILDREN'S VIDEO

REFLECTIVE READING FOR CHRISTMAS

Congregation and Choir: singing verse 1 of "Still, Still, Still"

1 Still, still, still: the night is calm and still.
The Christchild in his crib lies sleeping,
angels round him watch are keeping.
Still, still, still: the night is calm and still.

Leader: Christmas is for children! Isn't that right? Look at all the ads in the papers and on the TV--everything for children! So innocent. So trusting! Little do children know about the real world--the world of struggle, the world of greed. They can believe in a little baby and angels and shepherds. They can hear the story of the birth and dream of God's love. With us adults, it's just different. There is too much to do. We don't have time anymore for these sweet stories of Christmas.

Voice: When did you stop being God's beloved one? For all of your life, God has and continues to love you. Wonder and witness are not consigned to children--those young in years--they are for everyone. Imagine again the wonder of waiting for the day when you could sing with your whole heart and voice "O Come, All Ye Faithful" and "Silent Night." Do not lose that wonder. Open your heart to receive and believe, and rejoice!

Congregation and Choir: singing verses 2 of "Still, still, Still"

2 Sleep, sleep, sleep: sweet Jesus, softly sleep,
while Mary sings and gently holds you,
safely in her arms enfolds you.
Sleep, sleep, sleep: sweet Jesus softly sleep.

Leader: My heart aches for the comfort and hope of Christmas. Life has been difficult. I want to rest in the assurance of God with us. But fears and doubts have crept into my soul. God, please send to all of us a special sign, the sign of your presence and your love. Please help us let go of the fear and embrace once again the hope of that promised One.

Voice: Let go of the fears. God is sending you God's richest blessings. This Child will bring peace. He will teach us of God's loving presence with each of us. He will bring healing to our wounds. He will teach us how to truly live as God's beloved children.

Congregation And Choir: singing verse 3 #47 "Still, Still, Still"

3 Joy, joy, joy; glad tidings of great joy!
For through God's holy incarnation
Christ is born for our salvation.
Joy, joy, joy; glad tidings of great joy!

SCRIPTURE READINGS: 1 Corinthians 13: 4-8,13, Christmas Version

I Corinthians 13, Christmas Version

If I decorate my house perfectly with plaid bows, strands of twinkling lights and shiny balls, but do not show love to my family, I'm just another decorator.

If I slave away in the kitchen, baking dozens of Christmas cookies, preparing gourmet meals and arranging a beautifully adorned table at mealtime, but do not show love to my family, I'm just another cook.

If I work at the soup kitchen, carol in the nursing home and give all that I have to charity, but do not show love to my family, it profits me nothing.

If I trim the spruce with shimmering angels and crocheted snowflakes, attend myriad holiday parties and sing in the choir's cantata but do not focus on Christ, I have missed the point.

Love stops the cooking to hug the child.

Love sets aside the decorating to kiss the husband.

Love is kind, though harried and tired.

Love doesn't envy another's home that has coordinated Christmas china and table linens.

Love doesn't yell at the kids to get out of the way, but is thankful they are there to be in the way.

Love doesn't give only to those who are able to give in return but rejoices in giving to those who can't.

Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never fails.

Video games will break, pearl necklaces will be lost, golf clubs will rust.

But giving the gift of love will endure.

MESSAGE: The Christmas Story is Love

I don't know about you, but to me, the Christmas story never gets old. Kind of like Christmas pageants. Everybody has their own favorite Christmas pageant story – one of mine is the one about this one young boy, about twelve, named Dennis. Dennis was looking forward to his church's annual Christmas pageant, because he was finally becoming the right age to play Joseph. He had been playing a donkey or a sheep or some other animal for years, and he thought it was about time he got a speaking part. Well, the time for rehearsals came around, and sure enough, Dennis got a speaking part, but as the Innkeeper, not as Joseph. Gotta tell ya, Dennis was very disappointed because he really had his heart set on playing Joseph. Soooo, he came up with a plan to get even. Pageant night arrives. Everything goes as rehearsed until Mary and Joseph make their entrance into Bethlehem, looking for lodging. They encounter the innkeeper, played by Dennis, and Joseph asks if there is room for them at his inn. Dennis, who has not forgotten his disappointment at not being picked to play Joseph, replies: "Sure, there's room for you. Come on in!" Ah, but the little girl playing Mary, remembering full well how the story is supposed to go, pronounces: "Let's keep looking, Joseph. This place is a dump!" Don't you just love it?

And we come here this morning to hear the Christmas story told one more time. We come, because Christmas wouldn't be complete without the singing of Christmas carols, seeing old friends, hearing me preach... (Okay, maybe that's not exactly why you all came today). As you listened to the Christmas story told through the words of Luke, did you notice that the story is very ordinary ... until ... until the angels arrive? But, when the angels enter, everything changes. The shepherds are terrified. All that light, all that glory. And the presence of something incredible. The first thing out of the angel's mouth is, "Do not be afraid." He doesn't launch into any learned theological discourse, no recitation of the Ten Commandments, no complicated statements of doctrine. No, there is nothing "churchy" about it. What he tells the shepherds (and I'm paraphrasing here): "Hey, guys, don't be afraid. I have some really good news for you ... I mean REALLY good news! "You can be filled with joy, everyone can. See, there is a newborn baby. And this baby is the Savior...the Anointed one of God.

The Messiah! “And, you can find that baby. You can touch, see, and hold that baby.”

7

Then the Angel Choir can't hold back any more, and they start to sing. Boy, did they ever sing! I think it might have been an early rendition of Handel's the Hallelujah Chorus!!! Well, when the angels are through singing, the shepherds go and check it out. And it is exactly the way the angel said it would be. Can you just imagine being a shepherd and seeing and hearing what they saw and heard? It had to be incredible – especially for a shepherd. To be a shepherd 20 centuries ago, you see, was a not a joyful vocation. Shepherds were outcasts, wanderers in desolate places, disconnected from society, with lives often filled with misery and hopelessness. God, however was present, surrounding them with a wonderful presence, inviting them to be among the first witnesses to the birth of God's son. And in that moment, they were affirmed as worthy persons, loved by God. They were not forgotten. Although I don't think any of you are shepherds, or even sheep, I believe there are still many who feel a real disconnect from the presence of God. Hardships, financial strain, health problems, aloneness or fragile relationships can keep us in darkness. “Where is God in my life?” “Why is it I don't feel God's presence?” I think, we can learn a lesson from the shepherds. Being at the bottom rung of the social ladder and having little to call their own ...they could have believed that the whole thing was a hoax ... Better to tend to the sheep then run up to Bethlehem and check out the news. But, they didn't, did they? They had faith – at least enough to go down the hill. The truth is, a life of faith requires a response. At any moment God can appear, speak or fill our minds and make His presence known in our lives. When we choose to accept that a guiding light, a joyous sound, or a heart-warming sensation is of God, we are responding in faith to the presence of God. But, when we brush off such an event as coincidence, or deny the impact on our lives, we just might miss the fact that God is in our midst. The text says: “The shepherds went with haste to see what had taken place in Bethlehem.” They didn't procrastinate or rationalize what was happening. They went and after witnessing the event they shared the good news, “glorifying and praising God.” In other words, they responded to God's presence. And that's what God asks of us once again. The Christmas story still means now exactly what it meant when it happened. You see, something special has happened. A baby has been

born. A Savior. Christ the Lord. And there is room for YOU around his cradle. In the same way that in our Christmas pageants, there is always

8

room in the Angel Choir for one more child. There is always room for one more soul in God's love, even if that soul messes up royally in the rehearsal for heaven, called life. I think it is fitting that the shepherds were the first to hear the good news. God's love is not limited to the rich and famous. God's love is inclusive. Anyone can be the bearer of God's love. God's love is amazing. The love of God can come to us, even in the remote places of our lives.

HYMN: #44 It came upon the Midnight Clear

- 1 It came upon the midnight clear,
that glorious song of old,
from angels bending near the earth
to touch their harps of gold,
'Peace on the earth, good will to all,
from heaven's all-gracious King!'
The world in solemn stillness lay
to hear the angels sing.
- 2 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.
- 3 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 warring humankind hears not
the love song which they bring.
O hush the noise, and cease your strife,
to hear the angels sing.

4 For, lo! the days are hastening on,
 by prophets seen of old,
 when with the ever-circling years
 shall come the time foretold,
 when peace shall over all the earth
 its ancient splendours fling,
 and the whole world send back the song
 which now the angels sing.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Lord God of love, we have truly succumbed to the “greased slide into Christmas.” We have cluttered our lives with schedules so busy we barely have time to breathe. We plan, prepare, cook, clean, party, and yet wind up exhausted and wondering what in the world happened to the joyous Christmas that we had so long ago. In this place, on this day, you have called us together, to hear your words of encouragement, and to remind us that you are with us. We do not need to rush about in order to have Christmas, for the witness of your love is here among us right now. Open our hearts and help us proclaim your presence. Help us reach out to one another in joy and peace. As we have brought our concerns to you in prayer, remind us again that you hold each and every one of us gently and lovingly in your constant care. For we thank you for your love and ask these things in the name of the One whom you sent to heal and free us, Jesus. AMEN.

LORD’S PRAYER

CLOSING CAROL: #48 Hark! The Herald Angels Sing

1 Hark! the herald angels sing,
 'Glory to the newborn King,
 peace on earth, and mercy mild,
 God and sinners reconciled!
 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 newborn King!'**

2 Christ, by highest heaven adored,
 Christ, the everlasting Lord,
 late in time behold him come,
 offspring of a virgin's womb.
 Veiled in flesh the Godhead see;
 hail, the incarnate deity,
 pleased with us in flesh to dwell,
 Jesus, our Emmanuel! **R**

3 Hail, the heavenborn Prince of Peace!
 Hail, the Sun of Righteousness!
 Light and life to all he brings,
 risen with healing in his wings.
 Mild he lays his glory by,
 born that we no more may die,
 born to raise us from the earth,
 born to give us second birth. **R**

SENDING FORTH

Look, a young woman is with child and shall bear a son.
 He shall be called Emmanuel.

We go forth with anticipation and longing.

Share the good news—Emmanuel—God with us,
 is coming.

**We go with hope, peace, joy and love, trusting in the promises
 of God.**

CHORAL AMEN

POSTLUDE

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**Please bring in your paper products for the
 Hagersville Food Bank**

Announcements

Sunday, December 31st: Joint Service at 11am at Hagersville. Come dressed in your best Christmas Sweater!! ****Please note time change.**

A Christmas Prayer

Dear Lord,
Please help us to listen like the Sheperd's...
Rejoice like the angels...
Seek like the wisemen...
Believe like Mary & Joseph...
And live all year long with the peace, joy & love
Christ came to give.
Amen.



