

# ◆ MELROSE UNITED CHURCH ◆

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Rev. Sonia Ireson

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◆ **Sunday December 6, 2020** ◆  
**Second Sunday of Advent**

## MELROSE UNITED CHURCH

\* indicates a time to stand, if you are able  
congregational responses are in **boldface type**

### ◆ GATHERING ◆

PRELUDE -

\* OPENING HYMN - *Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus* VU 2

*1 Come, thou long-expected Jesus  
born to set thy people free;  
from our fears and sins release us,  
let us find our rest in thee.*

*2 Israel's strength and consolation,  
hope of all the earth thou art,  
dear desire of every nation,  
joy of every longing heart.*

*3 Born thy people to deliver,  
born a child and yet a King,  
born to reign in us forever,  
now thy gracious kingdom bring.*

*4 By thine own eternal Spirit  
rule in all our hearts alone;  
by thine all-sufficient merit,  
raise us to thy glorious throne.*

WELCOME AND LIFE AND WORK OF THE CHURCH -  
PRESENTATION OF SYNBOLOGIC WHITE GIFTS

(Our white gifts will be collected and presented to Wesley Centre)

## LIGHTING OF THE CHRIST CANDLE

One: Our Advent journey is underway. We are preparing for the celebration of Christ's birth.

**All: Wherever we are, in our hearts, or in our heads, we come to embrace the good news of the Light of the World. Christ is here among us.**

## CALL TO WORSHIP

One: All around us, we are seeing signs of preparation for the holy days of Christmas.

**All: We begin to slow down and take time to reflect, meditate and learn about Advent.**

One: We are reminded of the vigilance of our ancestors.

**All: They prayed diligently, sung boldly, and learned eagerly.**

One: We join them on the Advent path, embracing it wholeheartedly.

**All: Thanks be to God, our companion on this journey.**

## OPENING PRAYER (said together)

**Holy One, our hearts are filled with anticipation. The promise of new life is proclaimed. Our hearts are overflowing. Take any jadedness that we hold on to, any fear and anxiety that we express, and set it free, so that we might fully embrace this wondrous time of year. May the joy of this blessed season be experienced by all people especially in gentle ways for those who are hurting and lonely. Grant life-changing peace and love to your beloved ones. We pray focusing on the stable of Bethlehem. Amen.**

## ADVENT CANDLE LIGHTING (Candle of Peace)

*Candle lit by the Windhorst family; Eric, Janelle, Natalie and Gavin*

One: The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it

goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit. (John 3:8)

## WIND

One: We often associate the Holy Spirit with the wildness and unpredictability of the wind. May the breath of the Spirit bring us energy and creativity as we continue on our Advent journey towards Bethlehem.

**All: Spirit of God, Energy of Life, wherever you lead us, wherever you need us, give us the faith to trust your guidance, as Mary did, as Joseph did, as the wise ones did.**

*The second candle is lit - The candle of Peace/Wind. It is purple.*

HYMN- *Called By Earth and Sky*

MV 135, verse 2

*Called by earth and sky,  
promise of hope held high.*

*This is our sacred living trust,  
treasure of Life, sanctified,  
called by earth and sky.*

*Precious this gift, the air we breathe;  
wind born and free.*

*Breath of the Spirit, blow through this place,  
Our gathering and our grace.*

*Called by earth and sky,  
promise of hope held high.*

*This is our sacred living trust,  
treasure of Life, sanctified  
called by earth and sky.*

A TIME FOR CHILDREN AND THE CHILD WITHIN US

Story: Hidden in Plain Sight: The Meaning of White Gift Sunday

◆ **SERVICE OF THE WORD** ◆

Reader: Catherine Clase

## PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

One: We are surrounded by the grace of God. Let our Scripture call us in to receiving that grace and understanding as we hear God's Holy Word read aloud and may it seep into the very structure of our bones. Amen.

## WISDOM OF ISRAEL: Isaiah 40: 1-11

One: Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken." A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.

Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of

Judah, "Here is your God!" See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

One: The Word of the Lord.

**All: Thanks be to God!**

REFLECTION: The Word of our God Will Stand Forever! -Isaiah 40:1-11

"The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever." When everything else fails, *God's word* endures forever. Having left the judgment behind in the first portion of Isaiah, the writer now moves to the good news of God's comfort and promise for redemption of a people who have lived in exile. Blame and accusatory words are set aside in favour of comfort, hope and joy. This does not mean that we can read one in isolation of the other because judgment precedes forgiveness, mercy and grace. There would be no need of God's actions of mercy if we were without sin. If we were a people who did not turn from God at every opportunity, chronicled, throughout the pages of our Bible, then we would not need the extraordinary intervention of pardon. This text provides us with insight into two very different conflicting ideas of God: God's mighty hand can lift up, make low and level, in an omnipotent display of power, yet this same hand can mend, restore and soothe.

I have seen pictures of a large mama bear with her wayward cub. The cub has gotten itself into a predicament through its own foolishness and the mama bear rises her clawed paw to strike out. It is an action that is not so much rooted in anger and

punishment, as one in which correction and teaching occur. The cub is reminded not to do that again. It is like the small child who reaches out to the hot stove and has its hand smacked away, to prevent the burn. In each of these cases, it is love that draws the response.

Those who find themselves in exile are left with no hope other than in God. Hope does not come from external sources because humans who are mortal, are fickle and break their promises, however, the Word of God prevails. First, they hear words of comfort, then they are told to prepare for the king is coming. Imagine the affect this would have on this abandoned, battered community who believed that God had left them. Next, they are assured that there is a steady, durable, reliable foreverness in God's divine word. Finally, the herald emphasizes three times - "Look" Your God; Look, your God comes with strength; Look, your God's reward is with him!" This God's strength is not in the vision of power, rather in gentleness, and caring.

We spoke last week about God's seeming absence in the call to Come on Down. Isaiah continues to speak of God's hidden presence with a promise of future deliverance. The scene is set in the heavenly realm. God assembles a council of a heavenly host. At issue, is the situation of God's children, the people of Israel. He tells the people, you will come through this, not just yet, there will be more to endure, but you will come out the other side. Isaiah could be speaking to our condition here in the midst of Pandemic. We have no idea how long it will last, we can only trust that we will come out the other side. I am asked by one of those who are weary of the restrictions, "is there ever going to end to this?" Yes, I tell them, because I believe it is, but not for some time. We have evidence from the past that pandemics do

end and no matter what we face, we learn that “this too, shall pass” (a Persian saying, not biblical; however, the Bible does speak of impermanence).

The words of hope in “shall, will and if” are given to those who are bent by life’s crushing load, whether it is disease, violence, discrimination or economic hardship. Those who are in want will see it as a word of hope, whereas those who are in power, will see it as a threat. The proud will be scattered; the powerful will be toppled, but those who mourn, the meek of the earth they shall see God. “Here is your God” we shout to those on the threshold of death; “Here is your God” we sign with Handel. This is a God that trumps the worldly powers of consumerism and greed. In the face of apparent derision and indifference, we are to have faith in the God whose word endures. It is a time for us all to find our voice, to speak out words of comfort to anyone who feels abandoned or separated by God. God will come in gentle power. Amen.

\* HYMN – *O Ancient Love*

VU 17

1. *O ancient love, processing through the ages:  
O hidden love, revealed in human form:  
O promised love, the dream of seers and sages:  
O living Love, within our hearts be born,  
O living Love, within our hearts be borne.*
2. *O homeless love, that dwells among the stranger:  
O lowly love, that knows the mighty's scorn:  
O hungry love, that lay within a manger:  
O living Love, within our hearts be born,  
O living Love, within our hearts be borne.*
3. *O gentle love, caressing those in sorrow:  
O tender love, that comforts those forlorn:*



- O hopeful love, that promises tomorrow:  
O living Love, within our hearts be born,  
O living Love, within our hearts be borne.*
4. *O suff'ring love, that bears our human weakness:  
O boundless love, that rises with the morn:  
O mighty love, concealed in infant meekness:  
O living Love, within our hearts be born,  
O living Love, within our hearts be borne.*

PSALM - PSALM 85: 1-2, 8-13

One: To the leader. Of the Korahites. A Psalm.

Lord, you were favourable to your land;  
you restored the fortunes of Jacob.  
You forgave the iniquity of your people;  
you pardoned all their sin.

*Selah*

Let me hear what God the Lord will speak,  
for he will speak peace to his people,  
to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts.  
Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him,  
that his glory may dwell in our land.

Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;  
righteousness and peace will kiss each other.  
Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,  
and righteousness will look down from the sky.  
The Lord will give what is good,  
and our land will yield its increase.  
Righteousness will go before him,  
and will make a path for his steps.

## THE GOSPEL - Mark: 1:1-8

One: The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way;  
the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:  
‘Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight,’”

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

One: The Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ

**All: Praise to you, O Christ!**

REFLECTION: Recognition for the One Who Came Before! - Mark 1:1-8

Foretold in Isaiah and Malachi and a reference in Exodus (23:20), a messenger will be sent before the arrival of the Messiah to prepare the way. John the Baptist was a larger than life, memorable, weird character who spoke eloquently not on his

own behalf, but in preparation for another. He made sure that his listeners understood that he was only a transitional figure. John, in his demeanour, is associated with Elijah, from earlier Old Testament days. This connection recalls the past saving activity of God, a time after which all prophecy ceased until the coming of the Messiah. While John must have had a strong charismatic flavour, the people who came to hear him, also had a deep yearning for connection to God. He was very successful in persuading many who came to him from the surrounding countryside, to repent, turn around, ask forgiveness for their sins and be cleansed by the waters of baptism. Repentance and confession may not sit well with us. It is difficult to face the truth about ourselves and to intentionally change direction in our lives. Repentance and confession require a searching and honest look back to how well we have conducted our lives. "I have baptized you with water", he said, "but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

John is spoken of as the one whose voice cries out in the wilderness. His role was to be a herald, a servant character and his presence fades into the background upon the arrival of Jesus. The River Jordan was his place of ministry, not the holy temples of Jerusalem. People flocked to his side to hear of the One who was to come. John's message was always to point to Jesus, the Messiah, whose power and Might were so much beyond that of John's. Our scripture proclaims hope for troubled souls and judgment for the self-assured. John taught that if we are looking for God to deliver us, we must first examine ourselves to determine if we are fit to stand before God. We must learn to be self-critical allowing scripture to correct us and we need to be honest about our self-justifying ways. John calls *us* to account as

surely as he did the crowds who followed him into the wilderness.

We are to look to Jesus in order to see God. As we stand in that crowd listening to our hopes and directions for the future, we see the man, John pointing to the saviour of the world, who came and is still to come. John was the forerunner who bore no desires for grandeur or acclaim on his own, yet he was instrumental in setting the stage for the expectation and acceptance of Jesus' arrival. He did the prep work and for that he deserves recognition. I am reminded of the really good warm up bands that make a name for themselves opening for the mega stars. They are worthy of recognition in their own right and they get the people hyped up and prepared for the main attraction.

All leaders owe a debt to those who have come before. Here, in Melrose, you went through a period of turmoil and you had the benefit of a well-trained intentional interim minister. Philip helped to get you stabilized and ready for your next step, which was to bring me in. My ministry here can be more successful and smoother because of his and your work together. Jesus sets the example for us in ministry. He acknowledges and pays tribute to John for his adept handling of the message to the people prior to Jesus' arrival.

John had a loyal following. His people could have clung to him and made him into the star attraction. But he gently disentangled them and encouraged them to go and see Jesus for themselves. Many of John's followers became disciples of Jesus. John did the job God sent him to do. He prepared the way with passion and style. As we look to this Advent time of waiting, I wonder if we are all preparers. We might ask ourselves; how might we prepare

for the coming of the Chosen One? Our work as Christians is to prepare the way for the symbolic annual coming of the Christ child, but it is also to live in the time of waiting for the appointed time of second coming. We prepare ourselves through prayer, study, and committed lives of social justice as we try our best to walk in the Way of Jesus while we are here on earth.

“I have baptized you with water,” John says, “but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” John’s words prepare us for the eventuality that the road does not even end with Jesus. It points beyond to the Holy Spirit, a very prominent proclamation at the end of Jesus’ life. We get to live in a time of preparation, but then we can relax because it is Jesus that does the rest. Amen.

#### INVITATION TO OFFERING

One: Your work, O God, requires many hands. Our online successful bazaar is over, the work of Christmas has begun. We are in your debt God for the many blessings that you shower into our daily lives. We live as thankful, yet expectant people. We give back in the manner that we are able. Melrose thanks you for your ongoing support in all the ways that you choose to give from your heart, your time and your money.

\*OFFERING HYMN – *The Race that Long in Darkness Pined*

VU 879, verse 2

*To hail you, Sun of righteousness,  
the gathering nations come,  
rejoicing as when reapers bear  
their harvest treasures home.*

### **A reminder of what Christmas is all about**

A resident of Michigan had finished the Christmas parade and wanted to dispose of the Christmas tree on his float so he decided to put up an ad announcing free Christmas Tree for anyone to pick up. He was overrun with needy families saying what a difference a tree would mean to their family for the holidays. One response indicated that they drew a picture of a tree on paper and put it in the corner of their living room as their symbol of Christmas. He was so touched by the need that he went out and purchased 40 trees with his own money to donate to the people who could not afford to have this simple basic Christmas joy. When one of the women in his town heard what he had done, she donated the decorations for all 40 trees so that Christmas could be complete for many who would have gone without.

A small five-year-old child took part in her school's Christmas concert. Her parents were to attend, but both her parents were deaf. So, this little girl signed the Christmas music so that they could be part of the celebration. Her kind gesture thrilled the audience, and it showed a maturity beyond her years.

Christmas is a special time that reminds us that kindness is always in fashion, 365 days a year. One deed of kindness can start a ripple affect that brings joy to many.

Try it, you will find that the joy it brings to you far surpasses that which you are able to give out.

### **PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE**

**All: Prepare for God's promised one!**

One: The promised one has a message to change the world: That the poorest and most disadvantaged are honoured by God; we think of the homeless, those looking for food vouchers,

the many who access our shelters, the COVID-19 fall out of lost jobs and incomes, and all who are trying to make ends meet month by month.

That the vulnerable and mentally challenged are precious in God's sight; that the most selfish and single minded are not beyond forgiveness the longest and most hate-provoking wars and racial conflicts can be settled.

**All: This is Good News! We stand with John, and wait for the coming of Jesus.**

**Prepare for God's promised one!**

One: The promised one has a message for the suffering: That even the most tongue-tied and shy will be noticed; that the elderly and young are worthy of respect; that God's love for the seriously ill is steadfast. That God is with the dying and those who wait with them.

**All: This is Good News! We stand with John and wait for the coming of Jesus.**

**Prepare for the promised one!**

One: The promised one has a message to inspire the church: That God's word is still relevant and urgent; that it takes just a few committed followers to make a difference; that the downhearted need encouragement; that those who are full of self-importance are not as important as they see themselves.

**All: This is Good News! We stand with John and wait for the coming of Jesus.**

**Prepare for God's promised one!**

One: The promised one has a message for each one of us: That we stand in a long tradition of Christian saints; that we have gifts to give and use in God's service; that we know and can promote the values of God's realm - justice, peace and sharing; that nothing can separate us from the love of God.

**All: This is Good News! We stand with John, and wait for the coming of Jesus.**

One: We pray for our community of Melrose, for Loretta, for Vic, for Jim Roberts in the death of his wife, Dawn, and all our shut ins, for those who are still grieving loss of their loved ones, for those whose incomes have been reduced through the pandemic, for those who are afraid or unable to go out, for those who are feeling the isolation of separation from family and friends.

We pray for those in our circle who are recovering from illnesses, who are struggling with imperfect relationships, who are filled with anxiety and despair.

We pray for those that we are not even aware that there is a concern, and for all those that we hold in our hearts we raise up to you for their safekeeping.

Lord, we ask that you be with them in the ways that each one needs.

(quiet reflection)

Followed by The Lord's Prayer (said together)

**Our Father, who art in heaven,**

**Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done**

**On earth as it is in heaven.**

**Give us this day our daily bread;**

**And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those that**

**Trespass against us.**

**And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil:**

**For thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory,**

**For ever and ever. Amen.**



\*CLOSING HYMN – *People Look East*

*1. 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.*

*2. 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.*

*3. Birds, though you long have ceased to build,  
guard the nest that must be filled.*

*Even the hour when wings are frozen  
God for fledging time has chosen.*

*People, look east and sing today:  
Love the bird is on the way.*

*4. 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.*

*5. Angels, announce with shouts of mirth  
Christ who brings new life to earth.  
Set every peak and valley humming  
with the word, the Lord is coming.*

*People, look east and sing today:  
Love the Lord is on the way.*

#### COMMISSIONING

May the comfort promised by Isaiah go with you throughout this week.

May the tenderness of God speak to your heart.

May the challenge of Christ give purpose to your rest and your work

And may the renewal of the Spirit call you into tomorrow.

#### BENEDICTION

One: May God keep us

In our going out and our coming in

In our lying down and our rising up,

In our work and in our leisure,

In our laughter and in our tears,

Until we meet again. Amen.

#### POSTLUDE

Additional Music: Vocal Solo, Niles