

◆ MELROSE UNITED CHURCH ◆

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Kevin Geluch

Michelle Millson

◆ Sunday November 29, 2020 ◆

First Sunday of Advent

MELROSE UNITED CHURCH

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

◆ GATHERING ◆

PRELUDE – Allemande, *Lute Suite #1*
Chris Palmer, guitar

J.S. Bach

*OPENING HYMN – *O Come, O Come Emmanuel*

VU 1, verses 1, 2, 6, 7

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

Refrain:

*Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel
shall come to you, O Israel.*

*2 O come, O Wisdom from on high,
who ordered all things mightily;
to us the path of knowledge show
and teach us in its ways to go. Refrain*

*6 O come, O Bright and Morning Star,
and bring us comfort from afar!
Dispel the shadows of the night
and turn our darkness into light. Refrain*

*7 O come, O King of nations, bind
in one the hearts of all mankind.*

*Bid all our sad divisions cease
and be yourself our King of Peace. Refrain*

WELCOME AND LIFE AND WORK OF THE CHURCH

LIGHTING OF THE CHRIST CANDLE

One: In this dull and cold November, we seek warmth and reassurance of God's presence.

All: As you gather your Christmas candles in your own homes, light them with the awareness that Jesus is present in a way that reflects his flame of pure love. Let its radiance fill your innermost being.

CALL TO WORSHIP

One: We gather only in spirit during this Advent season, so we ask "The" Holy Spirit to join with us to inflame us in wholeness.

All: We reflect upon our lives, our faith, our past, our present, and our future to come.

One: We offer words of support and hope for each other throughout this coming season of Christmas.

All: We are all too aware that for some it is a time of joy, for others it is a weight of sorrow.

One: Let us use this time to reset ourselves on our faith journey within our Christian family.

All: Let us worship this awesome God who gives us Jesus, the Christ, alive in the past, in the present and in the future. Thanks be to God!

OPENING PRAYER (said together)

Amid many boastful words, your hopeful Word endures, O God.

Amid the self-serving words, your selfless Word endures, O God.

Amid the uncaring words, your compassionate Word endures, O God.

Amid the apathetic words, your courageous Word endures, O God.

Amid the indifferent words, your Word of Love endures, O God.

God says to us: Heaven and earth will pass away, but Jesus, my Word, will never pass away.

ADVENT CANDLE LIGHTING (Candle of Hope)

Candle lit by the Young family (Patricia, James and Wilamena)

One: This Advent we attach the symbols of the elements of sky, wind, earth and water to our familiar litany of hope, peace, joy and love.

“Jesus, in human form felt the earth beneath his feet and the sun on his face, experienced the wind on the water and the rain falling to nourish the soil. The lakes, seas, sun, wind, moon, and stars were all part of his life. He looked up and saw the glory of the night sky just as we do. He gave thanks for trees and growing things, just we do. In this season of gifts and giving, we recognize the deep blessing of the world around us. With gratitude, we anticipate the birth of Jesus – the One who came to show us the way of hope, peace, joy and love.” (United Church Gathering)

One: Arise, shine for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. (Isaiah 60:1)

All: In the sun, in the stars, in the light of the moon, we see the glory of our God. Soon, the one we call the Light of

the World will be born again in our hearts, minds, and spirits.

The first candle is lit – The candle of Hope/Sky. It is purple.

HYMN– *Called By Earth and Sky*

MV 135, verse 4

*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 the fire that lights our way,
bright dawning day
Fire of passion, sorrows undone,
our faith and justice one
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.*

◆ SERVICE OF THE WORD ◆

A TIME FOR CHILDREN AND THE CHILD WITHIN US

Story: Waiting and Watching

Reader: Alan Bentley

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

One: Gracious God, in this season of anticipated joy of gifting and receiving, help us to accept that the greatest joy is the great gift of sacred scripture. Help us to unwrap the readings today, bless us in our receiving and understanding the

wisdom of our ancestors in faith. May we each hear the Word we need for our lives. Amen.

WISDOM OF ISRAEL: Isaiah 64: 1-9

One: O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence — as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil — to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence! When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him. You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways. But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed.

We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity. Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people.

One: The Word of the Lord.

All: Thanks be to God!

REFLECTION: Come on Down! - Isaiah 64:1-9

Yes, you are in the right place. And no, this is not the American game show, *The Price Is Right*, with Bob Barker, saying to the lucky contestants, "Come on down!" Nor is it one of my favourite gospel songs - "Come on down, let's go down to the river and pray.... However, I could get easily sidetracked by it. These words are instead, a remarkable plea by the author of Isaiah "Would that you would tear open the heavens and come down so that the mountains would quake at your presence -We can hear the longing in the voice for the presence of God to fill the void with the remarkable fireworks of God's past encounters. Now, still and quiet, distant and forlorn.

Do we not echo these sentiments when we are in the thick of misery? Where is God in my pain, my isolation, my humiliation, my loneliness? These verses are part of a lament that that presents a baffling God who hides from the people and a redeeming God who is near and intimately involved. The author begins by citing the wonderful deeds God has done in the past and finds it very troubling that God has chosen to remain aloof. This apparent hiding accomplishes two things; it prevents the Israelites from claiming that God belongs to them or that they have any control over what God chooses to do, or not do, and it symbolizes a withdrawal of protection to get their attention to the consequences of their sin.

We read of God's spectacular interventions and we long for God's powerful presence to be made known to us. We look in vain for signs of God's involvement in the world today. We want the mountains to quake, the Pandemic to disappear, the violence and prejudice against blacks, immigrants, and indigenous to stop, the political divisions that give rise to hatred and intolerance to be over. Our world is in need of our God to act. We are baffled by

the seeming irreconcilable fact of a God of power and might who refuses to act to end the wilful acts of our depraved humanity. Where is God in our need, in our pain, in our disillusionment?

We understand exile. We feel God's absence, God's silence and God's judgment. We drift along in this Advent season, going through the motions of living, drawn along on a moving platform of Pandemic responses. We move forward, unable to get off, jostled by changing safety regulations, visits blocked off from family, familiar recreation and spiritual sites closed, and wariness at every corner. Our illusions of control have evaporated in virus mist. Disasters are known to make people numb, afraid and hopeless. Faith allows us to reclaim our vision – a world restored, rebuilt and reunited. We live in the reality of the present, but, also in the hope of God's never-failing word. Herein lies our anchor. Its message is not confined to the ancient days of Israelite exile, it carries forward to all times, to our time, and is a timeless message of consolation for all peoples.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Jewish Theologian explains it this way. "God would have us know that we must live as men (and women) who manage our lives without him. The God who is with us is the God who forsakes us (Mark 15:34) , the God who lets us live in a world without the working hypothesis of God is the God before whom we stand continually. Before God and with God we live without. God lets himself be pushed out of the world on the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us."

This statement for Bonhoeffer is a new way of looking at his faith, of accepting God whose power is in suffering and whose

omnipotence is in vulnerability. He believes in a God whose reflection of divine character is in relating to the world through a noncoercive love and suffering rather than through domination and force. This traditional biblical lament does not invoke the past for nostalgia, nor does it dismiss our present despair; rather it draws on the collective memories of God's people as a source of hope for the future

The image of God as potter is of one who shapes and moulds. This is a God who chooses to work with the powerless, patiently molding and shaping the clay of creation into a new order. Amen.

* HYMN - *All Earth Is Waiting*

VU 5

1. *All earth is waiting to see the Promised One,
and open furrows await the seed of God.*

*All the world, bound and struggling, seeks true liberty;
it cries out for justice and searches for the truth.*

2. *Thus says the prophet to those of Israel:*

*'A virgin mother will bear Emmanuel,
one whose name is 'God with us' our Saviour shall be;
with him hope will blossom once more within our hearts.*

3. *Mountains and valleys will have to be made plain;
open new highways, new highways for the Lord.*

*He is now coming closer, so come all and see,
and open the doorways as wide as wide can be.*

4. *In lowly stable the Promised One appeared;
yet feel his presence throughout the earth today,
for he lives in all Christians and is with us now;
again, with his coming he brings us liberty.*

PSALM - Psalm 80: 1-7, 17-19

One: Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock! You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth

before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh. Stir up your might, and come to save us!

Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

O Lord God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?

You have fed them with the bread of tears, and given them tears to drink in full measure.

You make us the scorn of our neighbors; our enemies laugh among themselves.

Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand, the one whom you made strong for yourself.

Then we will never turn back from you; give us life, and we will call on your name.

Restore us, O Lord God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

REFLECTION: Distractions! - Mark 13:24-37

"Keep awake!" A call to be watchful, to not let the distractions of the world keep us from being prepared for the return of the Son of Man coming in the clouds. Jesus anticipates the end times when the heavens will quake and stars will fall out of the sky.

What sounds like a disaster will actually be a new beginning when Jesus gathers his “elect.” Advent takes us to the beginning with the miraculous birth of the divine babe, but here, we also see a glimpse of the ending.

Thirteen verses that contain three trains of thought. Some scholars break them up in their commentaries into different approaches. There are those who believed Jesus was talking about the destruction of the temple in the year 70 AD. However, his words can apply throughout the ages to our point of time, and beyond. His predictions are ambiguous and they are reminiscent of the apocalyptic scenes in the Book of Daniel. The basic message is that things will get worse before they get better. The rebellion against the reign of God is fierce, but if you hold on just a little while longer, God will intervene. End times predictions recycle frequently as those who do not like uncertainty try to pinpoint Jesus’ return. There was equal uncertainty to the arrival of the Messiah’s birth as there is towards his Second Coming. No one knows when they are to happen. Jesus did not intend his words to be a prediction of his return. He is instead urging us to live our lives as though his return was within our life time. In this waiting lies one of the greatest mysteries of the faith. Jesus has already come, therefore we have been drawn into a relationship with God, but not yet do we live in full communion of that relationship.

We can take any age and layer on it the predictions of end times and they seem to fit. Wars, disruptive politics, economic uncertainty, world wide affliction. Our current age would certainly qualify, but then, so would many from the past two thousand years. Jesus issues a warning to the people to be on the lookout for the signs that God is bringing God’s reign to fruition.

He advises against being lulled into a false sense of security by our leaders who are on their own worldly agendas. They play to our fears, our prejudices and our self-interests so we do not notice their demonic behaviours.

Typically, Advent is one of the busiest seasons of the year. It ramps up after Halloween with loud messages of peace and joy, and shop, shop, shop. We are awake from the stress of trying to accomplish too much “perfection” with too little time and energy. But we are also asleep to much of what truly matters. One scholar uses the analogy of living beside a train track and no longer hearing the sound of the trains. We get used to the noise of Advent, to the coming of Christ, so that we no longer notice it.

The signs of the season become mere decorations that camouflage the underlying message of the coming of the Christ child into our lives, and the wonder, hope and awe that it brings. The Gospel of Mark issues a wakeup call, to be awake and aware of what God is doing in our world. As we filter out the distractions that keep us from appreciating God in our midst, we wake up to a restful peace. Amen.

THE GOSPEL - Mark 13: 24-37

One: “But in those days, after that suffering,

the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light,
and the stars will be falling from heaven,
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels,

and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

“From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

“But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake – for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

One: The Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ

All: Praise to you, O Christ!

INVITATION TO OFFERING

One: Through our virtual services our offerings are unseen. They arrive as if by magic through electronic means, or pieces of paper dropped in the mail.

Just like our microphone magnifies our voices so they can be heard, farther and louder, it doesn't look like much, but it makes a weak voice strong. Your offering in whatever

form and amount you are able, continues to support the ongoing work of our church. Melrose is grateful to you for your commitment.

*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 Christmas Story about Donkey Bells

Adapted from Catherine Doherty

I have chosen to take excerpts from the author's story to highlight the importance of the donkey in the life of Christ. It was a donkey that carried Mary, the mother of Jesus to his birthplace in the stable outside the inn. The book tells the legend of church bells ringing as the donkey entered the village. The donkey kept watch with the other animals and was amongst the first to hear the cries of the new born saviour. This humble beast of burden was chosen for this important and memorable work. The donkey is considered amongst animals to be very low in stature, yet donkeys are known and kept for protecting horses from coyotes when they are pasturing in the fields. This Christmas story was a lesson in humility, poverty and simplicity. When donkeys are born, they have a black cross on their backs that disappears as they get older. The Nubian donkey retains the cross into their adulthood as does the Sicilian cross donkey. When we lived in Osgoode, near Ottawa on our farm, we had a Sicilian donkey. It is said that this is the breed that carried Jesus when he made his celebratory entry into Jerusalem for his final Passover. Palm leaves were strewn in their pathway and onlookers hailed Jesus

as a king, the son of God. There are sanctuaries that take in donkeys that have been abused or neglected. One is located in Puslinch. Appeals are made to people encouraging them to adopt them to help pay for their keep.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

All: You call us to be on the lookout, O God

One: For the ominous signs: When concern for the environment is considered less important than profit; when returns to the shareholders are considered more important than care of employees; where corruption in government is ignored or hidden; where the powerless and despised are ignored and downtrodden.

All: We are your guardians, O God, and we stand ready to speak out and act.

You call us to be on the outlook, O God

One: For the ominous signs: The older person finding it harder to cope with everyday tasks; the troubled one who will not seek skilled help; the young one who is defiant and disrespectful; the despised ones who lack food or a safe place to live;

All: We are your guardians, O God and we stand ready to speak out and act.

You call us to be on the outlook, O God

One: For the ominous signs: Persons who speak of welcome but do not act in welcoming ways; persons who find it difficult to look beyond this faith community and its building; persons who worship is rooted in the way "it's always been done;" persons who are willing to give to local needs but will not consider giving to the mission work.

All: We are your guardians, O God, and we stand ready to speak out and act.

You call us to be on the lookout, O God

One: A reluctance to admit and learn from our mistakes; an unwillingness to open our eyes to new realities at home or in church; a narrow vision when it comes to helping those in need; a lack of enthusiasm when it comes to supporting or helping those at risk in our community.

All: We will listen to your guardians, O God when they call on us to speak out and act.

One: We pray for our community of Melrose, for Loretta, for Vic, 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 – *O Day of God, Draw Nigh*

VU 688

*1. O day of God, draw nigh
in beauty and in power;
come with thy timeless judgment now
to match our present hour.*

*2. Bring to our troubled minds,
uncertain and afraid,
the quiet of a steadfast faith,
calm of a call obeyed.*

*3. Bring justice to our land,
that all may dwell secure,
and finely build for days to come
foundations that endure.*

*4. Bring to our world of strife
thy sovereign word of peace,
that war may haunt the earth no more,
and desolation cease.*

*5. O day of God, draw nigh
as at creation's birth;
let there be light again,
and set thy judgments on the earth.*

COMMISSIONING

One: May the comfort promised by Isaiah be with you in your
days to come.

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.
Go in peace.

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