

Prelude: “O Come, Little Children” [Annie Schulz]

Women’s Chorus: “O Come All Ye Faithful” [HWB #212]

*O come, all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant;
O come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem;
come and behold him, born the King of angels;*

*Refrain: O come, let us adore him; O come, let us adore him;
O come, let us adore him, Christ, the Lord.*

*Sing, choirs of angels, sing in exultation,
sing, all ye citizens of heaven above;
glory to God, all glory in the highest; [Refrain]*

Gathering Thoughts and Call to Worship: [Beth Woelk]

Welcome to worship with Grace Mennonite Church for December 20th the fourth Sunday of Advent! For our service today we will be weaving together a beautiful tapestry of liturgy, music, scripture and reflections. We are deeply grateful for the volunteers who are offering their gifts and time to sing and record today and we hope that your hearts will be encouraged as you listen or read from home. As we continue to explore our Advent theme “*Prepare! Restoration is Coming*” we listen today for the voice of young Mary and ask how we might join in her sacred “Yes” to the Divine invitation to give birth to Christ in our time and reality.

Come! O come let us adore him.
Let our spirits rejoice in God our saviour.
Let us tell of the great things the Mighty One has done for us.
Let us worship our Maker
who redeems and restores us,
and from generation to generation
pours mercy and love upon us.
Come let us worship and adore Love Incarnate - our Hope - Emmanuel.

Women's Chorus: "Hope Is a Star"

[VU #7]

*Hope is a star that shines in the night,
leading us on till the morning is bright.*

Refrain: *When God is a child there's joy in our song.
The last shall be first and the weak shall be strong,
and none shall be afraid.*

*Peace is a ribbon that circles the earth,
giving a promise of safety and worth. [Refrain]*

*Joy is a song that welcomes the dawn,
telling the world that the Savior is born. [Refrain]*

*Love is a flame that burns in our heart,
Jesus has come and will never depart. [Refrain]*

Lighting the Candle of Love:

[Beth Woelk]

Today we light four Advent candles. The first candle is the light of hope for our weary souls. The second candle is the light of peace that surpasses our understanding. The third candle is the light of joy for the healing of the world. And today we light the fourth advent candle that reminds us of God's love in Jesus, poured out for the restoration of all things. Come; let us prepare our hearts. Restoration is coming!

Women's Chorus: "Rejoice, rejoice, the Savior comes" [STS #4]

*Rejoice, rejoice, the Savior comes, the Savior promised long;
let ev'ry heart prepare a throne and ev'ry voice a song.*

*He comes the pris'ners to release, in evil bondage held.
The gates of brass before him burst, the iron fetters yield.*

*He comes the broken heart to bind, the bleeding soul to cure,
and with the treasures of God's grace to bless the humble poor.*

*Our glad hosannas, Prince of Peace, your welcome shall proclaim,
and heav'n's eternal arches ring with your beloved name.*

Scripture:

Luke 1:26-35,38

[Beth Woelk]

26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, 27 to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28 And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." 29 But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. 30 The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31 And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 32 He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High... and of his kingdom there will be no end." 34 Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" 35 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... 38 Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

Prayers of the People:

[Beth Woelk]

Today for our Prayers of the People I have adapted an Advent prayer written by Dr. Susan Elliot. This prayer will connect us to the Luke passage, young Mary's ancient hymn of praise - The Magnificat - that Pastor Doug will read for us just before his sermon. I invite you to settle into a comfortable position, both feet upon the ground, notice your breath deepening it gently, consider placing your hands upon your lap, palms facing upward in a posture of readiness and receptivity. Let us open our ears and attune our hearts together:

Great God of the prophets and truth-tellers,
Great Voice of Truth who speaks through unexpected voices,
Great Power of the Universe who works mighty deeds
from fragile possibilities,
we gather here to know Your presence and to listen for Your truth.

We listen in Your presence. We listen for You.

Let our listening reach to hear the voice of young Mary.
Let us listen for her voice,
the voice of an adolescent girl in an insignificant village
in a marginal province,
far from the centers of power.

Extend our listening to hear her where she may be speaking to us today:
through the voices of those around us and around the world
who live in conflict, poverty, isolation or oppression.

Extend our listening, God,
to hear the song of truth and hope You are putting in their mouths.
Extend our listening, God,
to sense the motion of a future You are creating in their midst,
a future world put right.
Extend our listening, God,
that we may receive, affirm and listen
with the eager ears of elderly Elizabeth,
wise with years of waiting.

Let us listen fully and deeply for the life You are preparing.
Let us greet this new life with joy just as Elizabeth greeted Mary.
Let us feel the future moving in us as well.
Let us listen fully for the hope You are preparing in us.
Let us listen deeply to the peace You speak within us.
Let us listen fully to the love You place within us.

Extend our listening
to the deepest reaches of our own souls, God of Truth.
Extend our listening through the cares
that each of us brings on our hearts this morning.
Extend our listening through the financial worries,
and the preoccupations with our health,
our concern for loved ones whose lives are straying out of control,
our angers and aggravations, our inundation with activity.
Extend our listening into all that we bring today
to hear there the transforming truth about our lives.
Extend our listening until we listen with all that we are, our whole beings.

Extend our listening until we hear with Your whole voice.
Extend our listening until we become the voice that speaks as Mary to say,
“My soul magnifies God and my spirit rejoices.”
May the listening of our souls extend
until we truly hear You from unexpected places
in the farthest reaches of the earth
and the most remote territories of our own souls.
Extend our listening that we may magnify You.

[As prayer] Women’s Chorus: “Wait for the Lord” [VU #22]

*Wait for the Lord, God’s day is near.
Wait for the Lord, be strong, take heart!*

Scripture: Luke 1:46-55 [Doug Schulz]

46 And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord,
47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
48 for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
50 His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
51 He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
53 he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
54 He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

here she was, a girl being pursued by this fellow Joseph who was quite likely somewhat older than she. This was not Hollywood La-La Land America. Mary and Joseph were hated Jews living in occupied territory with the cruel Roman Empire regime dominating their lives – watching them, taxing them, harassing them, threatening them, killing those among them who didn't go along with the controls imposed upon them. Mary was already the victim of a domination system that could do what it wanted with a gentle young virgin.

And then this! This pregnancy implanted by the voice of God. Who would believe it? Joseph did not, at first. But then, this young woman and that man, we are told, came to accept, even to worship, the news that God can choose anyone to be touched by Spirit in order to experience, explore and expose beautifully, Love in new, deep measure in the world.

Maya Angelou, the late black American poet and activist, once said: "There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you." Mary of Christmastime gave birth to a child who is born and whose story is told for the pain of the world, for your fear and mine, your loneliness and mine... to set us free to love boldly, as Mary chose to do. And as the baby Jesus grew up into fully responsible adulthood, and lived in tune with God to prove. Maya Angelou wrote, in her poem "Touched by an Angel":

We, unaccustomed to courage
exiles from delight
live coiled in shells of loneliness
until love leaves its high holy temple
and comes into our sight
to liberate us into life.

Love arrives
and in its train come ecstasies
old memories of pleasure
ancient histories of pain.
Yet if we are bold,
love strikes away the chains of fear
from our souls.

that we are part of dominant social and political and even spiritual systems that exclude some people, or that don't favor them very well... in particular, people of non-white backgrounds. This year's emergence of powerful voices urging everyone to remember that "Black Lives Matter" has presented to those of us who are established and secure an opportunity to open up our minds and hearts to the true Christmas message all over again. Jesus was considered by those in power to be of lowly birth. Jesus lived to prove to everyone everywhere that anyone anywhere is, in fact, of noble birth as a spiritually alive person within the will of God, and therefore no one can be considered as an enemy or unworthy of love. Jesus came at Christmas to wake us up, to help us be reborn, to make us wonder, over and over, about what the purpose of life is meant to be.

Adrienne Maree Brown, another eloquent activist, says: "We each have a purpose worth the miracle and struggle of our lives." In her poem, "We Are No Longer Surprised", she pleads with those who have power over others to help the world change. She cries out like a prophet:

you have tried every which way
to strip us of the miraculous
to slice it from us, the future
to leave us without the womb
into which a next world can be born

In the poem, she reminds us what each and every person is worth:

Listen...
you are as precious as any stone don't you see
you are as sacred as any text don't you see
you are as holy as any treasure don't you feel

And then she paints pictures of what life can be like. Now, listen to see if you can hear the Spirit of Jesus in these words...

Learn... what it is to love as mother birds,
as a lioness, as peach against teeth,
as flower following sun

how a stand of trees teaches us family
until we see the truth of it all
how we are each of us a pulse
in the singular life of the divine
unable to comprehend how beautiful
it is to take one, whole, perfect, never again breath

Yes, Jesus came to wake us up, to help us be reborn, to make us wonder, to free up our every breath with the awareness of what the purpose of life is meant to be. And how that purpose is rooted and reflected, always, in Love.

Solo: “I Wonder As I Wander” (Appalachian Carol) [Julie Plunkett]

*I wonder as I wander, out under the sky,
how Jesus the Savior did come for to die
for poor, ord'nary people like you and like I;
I wonder as I wander, out under the sky.*

*When Mary birthed Jesus, 'twas in a cow's stall,
with wise men and farmers and shepherds and all.
But high from God's heaven a star's light did fall,
the promise of ages it then did recall.*

*If Jesus had wanted for any wee thing,
a star in the sky or a bird on the wing,
or all of God's angels in heav'n for to sing,
He surely could have it, 'cause He was the King.*

Reflection #3:

[Doug Schulz]

That is my favorite carol of all time. I love it! Years ago I told a good university friend of Annie's who had a wonderful voice and actually went on to become a noted Canadian opera singer, that if she happened to live anywhere near me when I was on my death-bed, I'd go straight to heaven if she came to sing that song for me. It's those words "I wonder as I wander" that mean so much to me. I feel like such a wanderer sometimes... I mean, like someone who too often gets distracted from the good news about

God's way of love in the world that Jesus asks us to give our whole lives for.

Maybe that's why you and I need Christmas. We all know that, really, we often get more caught up in the sentimentality of this special season than we get inspired to embrace the tougher teachings of Jesus about giving up shallow things and illusions in order to experience truth from God's Spirit more compellingly in our lifetime. We do give gifts to those we love, of course. And who doesn't like getting a gift or two? But the real gift of Christmas is, and always will be, even this year of the COVID reality, that we hear again the mysterious but very real and stirring voice in our soul that tells us to humble ourselves, to praise our Maker, and to find ways to share love more freely in the world.

And all this because of Mary who was willing to be a servant of God because she believed God "lifts up the lowly." Catholic writer Ronald Rolheiser says: "Christmas isn't automatic, it can't be taken for granted. It began with Mary, but each of us is asked to make our own contribution to giving flesh to faith in the world." How will I give birth to God-life this year? Who can I lift up? I wonder as I wander these days taking us ever closer to that miracle manger in that obscure little village of Bethlehem. What is in your heart and mind as we approach the "holy night" this strange, difficult year?

Hymn of Response: "Angels we have heard on high" [HWB #197]

*Come to Bethlehem, and see Him whose birth the angels sing;
Come, adore on bended knee Christ the Lord, the newborn King.*

Gloria in excelsis Deo, Gloria in excelsis Deo.

*See within a manger laid Jesus, Lord of heav'n and earth!
Mary, Joseph, lend your aid, with us sing our Savior's birth.*

Gloria in excelsis Deo, Gloria in excelsis Deo.

Benediction:**[Doug Schulz]**

Go now, knowing that no matter what in the world is happening, it's not a threat to the Creator of Life and Love. People who try to live in tune with the truth of God's ways know that the real source of peace and hope and joy in life is being aware of one's own true worth at all times because God's great gift of Love is capable always of transforming and restoring us and others – till one day the whole world will be remade into the beautiful kin-dom of God. So go forward toward this Christmas and the New Year coming with faith in God's grace, and with love for Jesus and for one another and for all other people near, or far from, this place. Soon we will reach that holy night. But always, may your heart burn with Love, merry and bright! May our hearts be filled with a song of love for God and all. Sing noel! Sing noel!

Sending Hymn:**“Love came down at Christmas”****[HWB #208]**

*Love came down at Christmas,
love all lovely, love divine.*

*Love was born at Christmas –
star and angels gave the sign.*

Sing noel, sing noel, sing noel.

Postlude:**“O Christmas Tree”****[Annie Schulz]**