

Out of darkness, Light – A Blue Christmas Service 2020

Islington United Church, December 9th, 2020

(Inspired by Linda Wheeler and Mark Aitchison – 2001)

We gather this evening in the name of Christ, the one who gives rest to the weary, healing to the sick, joy to the sorrowful, and welcome to the lost. God calls us together in the Spirit. Praise be to God for the gift of new life given in Jesus. Welcome to this Blue Christmas service. We would like to offer you a time of reflection and mediation. So often, our pre-Christmas preparations leave us feeling exhausted. We can feel drained even more when we are carrying the heavy burden of grief. So tonight will be a time of reflection. You will meet three characters in the Christmas story that don't get a lot of attention – Simeon, Anna and King Herod. May their stories meet us where we are. Tonight there will be intentional periods of silence to allow us to slow down. Let yourselves be comfortable in the silence.

Moment of Acknowledgement – need for healing

Let Us Pray: Loving and Gracious God, in the quiet of the evening, we come to you, trusting that you hear our prayer.

We connect across screens

We come with feelings of deep hurt, sadness, anger, relief and hope. We know that your love is deep enough and profound enough to accept our feelings, our fears, and our longings that go beyond words. Just as candles break through the darkness of a room, let your light, dear Christ, break us open.

Give us the courage to open our eyes and hearts to your healing love. We pray in the name of Jesus, our Christ. Amen.

Hymn: O Little Town of Bethlehem (VU#64)

1. We know the Light through Tears

Scripture: Luke 3:27-35 Simeon

²⁷ Guided by the Spirit, Simeon^[f] came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, ²⁸ Simeon^[g] took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

²⁹ “Master, now you are dismissing your servant^[h] in peace,
according to your word;
³⁰ for my eyes have seen your salvation,
³¹ which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.”

³³ And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. ³⁴ Then Simeon^[i] blessed them and said to his mother Mary, “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed ³⁵ so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

Maya: We open our hands to you, Tender God
We open our hands in prayer.

Aware of each breath you offer.
Aware of your calming presence.
We offer to you our tears.
The tears that we have cried in the quiet hours of the morning:
The tears of anger and hurt:
The unexpected tears shed in the middle of crowded places:
The tears that spilled out of control:
The tears not yet shed.
You are so near, Dear Lord
That you can wipe away the tears that spill down our cheeks.
We offer to you dear Lord, all these tears.
And we look forward with hope to a time when our tears will be transformed to tears of joy. Amen

Silence

Quiet music

2. We know the Light through Pain

Luke 2:36-38 ³⁶ There was also a prophet, Anna^[a] the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, ³⁷ then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. ³⁸ At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child^[b] to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

I see your pain – Ann Weems – from Searching for Shalom

I see your pain
and want to banish it with the wave of a star,
but have no star.

I see your tears
and want to dry them with the hem of an angel's gown,
but have no angel.

I see your heart fallen to the ground
and want to return it wrapped in clothes woven of rainbow,
but have no rainbow.

God is the One
who has stars, and angels and rainbows.

And I am the one God sends to sit beside you until the stars come out
and the angels dry your tears and your heart is back in place, rainbow
blessed. -- Ann Weems -

Light the Rainbow Candle

Healer of our Every Ill (VU 619)

3. The Light in Grief (memorial light one) – Maya Light

Scripture: Mark 1:1-3 **1** The beginning of the good news^[a] of
Jesus Christ, the Son of God.^[b] **2** As it is written in the prophet
Isaiah,^[c] “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,^[d]
who will prepare your way;
3 the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord,

Mark's gospel does not begin with angels whispering in Mary's ear. There are no shepherds watching over their flocks by night; no wise men from the east following a star; no big-eyed animals standing around a straw-stuffed manger. Mark either did not know about these things or else he didn't think it important to record them.

For Mark, the good news of Jesus Christ begins in the wilderness of Judea, with an old-time prophet named Joh, the first real prophet to turn up in Israel for well over 300 years. If Mark's gospel were a movie, here's how it would begin:

First a long pan shot of the desert, east of Jerusalem: row upon row of buck-skin coloured hills with nothing on them but rocks, sand and silence.

In the distance, a Bedouin shepherd, dressed in black, leads his sheep up one of the hills, and as they disappear over the other side of it, the title appears on the screen just the way we heard it a moment ago.

The Beginning of the good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

It's a long title, bit there's plenty of room for it with all that desert.

Then you hear a man's voiceover as the camera continues to scan the hills:

“As it is written in the prophet Isaiah.” The voice says,
“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will
prepare the way”

the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, the voice goes on.
Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight...

Every valley shall be filled

And every mountain and hill shall be made low,

The rough ways made smooth...

And all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

Maya: Certain seasons, certain circumstances in life make it
difficult for people to see the salvation of God.

Every living soul knows situations that cause Grief. Grief is the
result of loss. The loss may come from any number of changes;
a death, an illness, a move, a lost friendship, a broken
relationship. It may be something totally out of our control. It
may be the result of choices we have made. Grief is a common,
human experience. And grief can make us feel as if we are
living in the wilderness: far away from home; in a cold, dark
place with no familiar landmarks. Sometimes the dark,
unfamiliar place is simply inside of our head, which can be a
very lonely feeling. At other times, the cold, dark place is all
around us where we feel ourselves on the outside of love and
friendship – wanting to get in, but not knowing how. That, too,
is a sad and lonely place to be.

I don't know where your lonely place is anymore than I know what grief you bring with you tonight. No one else really knows what, or how, we feel. It's hard, even to put it into words. It's hard for nay of us to lay it on the table, to analyze or pray about it. And that is one of the reasons we gather here tonight = to simply acknowledge the events and circumstances that cause us grief, and to acknowledge in the safety and serenity of this space that that is how life is.

Tonight, we are being reminded that the first Christmas did not happen in a vacuum. The Christ event was part of a long evolution in the work of God, from the very creation of the world, God has been working to bring salvation to humankind. Through the people o Israel, God sent light shining into the world. And the light shines on you tonight, finding us wherever we are, calling us to name the sorrow and wounded places within us and between us, and to not hold onto them alone.

The light that shines in grief is calling us to name those places and give them to the God who commanded: that every lofty mountain be made low, that age-old depths and gorges be filled in, that the rough places be made smooth so that we may see the salvation of God, that we may, at last , find our way out of the wilderness, that we may find our way home

In silence and in faith let us name the rough and broken places within us...and as we light the candle of Grief, let us ask God to shine the healing light of Christ upon our way
(the second memorial candle is lit) Silence

In the Quiet Curve of Evening VU278

The Light of Hope

Matthew 2:1-7

2 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men^[c] from the East came to Jerusalem, **2** asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising,^[d] and have come to pay him homage.” **3** When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; **4** and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah^[e] was to be born. **5** They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

6 ‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd^[f] my people Israel.’”

7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men^[g] and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. **8** Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.

We know what happened – not only did the wise ones find the baby and then return another way, but Herod was threatened and did what any desperate ruthless dictator would do

– sent his henchman to find and kill any young boy living in the vicinity. Through the slaughter of the Innocents Herod uses violence as a tool to gain and maintain power. But this baby, who Herod seeks to kill will model another way – his tool will be service not violence – and he will use his power to heal and empower others. He will reveal a vision of God that is reflected more in the vulnerability of children than in the violence of men, more in the caring of mothers than in the cruelty of kings. Some of you come tonight full of grief over the slaughter of innocents, the call to listen from indigenous communities and people of colour in Canada. Tonight we keep Herod in Christmas because he helps us be alive to how God is best seen in the image of a helpless baby, identifying with the victims, sharing their vulnerability, full of fragile but limitless promise? And we pray together tonight in the hope that this promise will be fulfilled - for as long as elites plot violence, as long as children pay the price, and as long as mothers weep, we cannot be satisfied We keep Herod in Christmas so that we are reminded that In this Advent season, on this night, no matter what ugliness the promise will prevail. So let us light a candle for the children who suffer in our world because of greedy, power-hungry and insecure elites. And let us light a candle for grieving mothers who weep for lost sons and daughters, throughout history and today. And let us light a candle for all people everywhere to hear their weeping. we dare to believe, to hope that God feels their pain and comes near to bring comfort. If we hope for this, and believe that it is true, to join God and come near to bring comfort.

(From Brian McLaren: We Make the Road by Walking)

Song: Now the heaven's start to whisper

The Light of Peace

Maya: Some of us may grieve the loss of a parent, spouse, child, friend or lover. It may have been through illness, separation, or death. Many of us know deep sadness from the loss of a job, a dream, or direction. We may feel forgotten by God, so we come with deep prayers.

You are invited to light a candle to symbolize your prayer coming to light. Do it as a prayer of gratitude for your loved one, who touched your life profoundly as a way of celebrating your life together.

Offer it as a prayer for rebirth and new hope: a prayer of guidance for new dreams, and new possibilities. Light the candle for a prayer that is too deep for words. When all the candles are lit, there will be a quiet moment for peace, and then we will sing "Silent Night.

Lighting of Candles

Silent Night – VU#67

Blessing and Invitation to One on One Prayer