

# *Faith United Church of Christ*

*"An inclusive spiritual family shaping a better you for creating a better world.*

*A place to make a difference."*

December 24, 2017

**The 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent**

Sacred Fellowship 10:45 AM

*We are delighted that you are here today! We hope you will find us an affirming, uplifting, and committed family of faith. Here we work to make everyone, without any exceptions, to feel accepted, inspired, and encouraged in their spiritual journey. In dialogue, we seek to understand. In encouragement, we seek to heal. In all things we yearn to live by love, for peace, with joy. This is a place where your intellect will be challenged, your heart will be nurtured, and your spirit refreshed. Varying beliefs are expressed openly and freely, and your doubts will not be suppressed. We trust that we are all, every person and part of creation, continuing to be blessed by God's grace; and that in community we can help each other to see this grace alive in our lives and relationships. We hope to share our gifts with you, even as we pray that you will want to share your gifts with us. Whoever you are and wherever you may be in your life's journey, we invite you to be a part of our lives and our spiritual home. Welcome!*

## **POINTS TO PONDER**

**"(Mary) gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn."**

**— Luke 2.7**

**"One sentence is all that Luke devotes to the description of Mary giving birth to Jesus. This tells us that the gospel paid less emphasis to the event itself, and more to what it meant for holy history. The context and place of the divine into the world should not go unnoticed. It is not in a palace, a place of wealth or influence, or even a majestically beautiful place. Quite the opposite! Jesus is born homeless, since there is no room at the inn...a traveling vagabond, as his parents were only in Judea rather than Galilee in order to abide by law of an oppressive empire. The first introduction to the world is in a feed trough for domesticated livestock – service animals that are not allowed to think, act, or do anything without the permission of their master, much like the people of Israel in Jesus' comparison to Caesar Augustus and the Roman government."**

**— Rev. Bret S. Myers, 12/28/2017**

**"In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night."**

**— Luke 2.8**

**"In the first century, shepherds were scorned as shiftless, dishonest people who grazed their flocks on public lands...graphically picturing Jesus as one sent to the lowly and outcast."**

**— R. Alan Culpepper, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. IX, p. 65**

**"In Luke's account, the infant representing the divine coming into the world is not visited by royalty or even wise men from the East, but by local shepherds – the scourge of human existence, despised by many for not only their poverty but also because they fed their flocks on land that wasn't theirs. Shepherds were trespassers, not landowners. They were the disempowered ones without rights, not the entitled and privileged. It is to these, the lowliest of the low, that the proclaimed good news. It was in a rural, impoverished area, where the birth of that which was holy took place. It is clear for Luke that God comes to, and sides with, the oppressed; not the ones who oppress them."**

**— Rev. Bret S. Myers, 12/28/2017**

**"The angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; do not be afraid, for I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people.'"**

**— Luke 2.10**

**"Shepherds are used to being threatened – not only by wild animals that try to make a meal of their sheep, but more often by landowners who threw them off their lands. Anyone, human or angel, that shows up in the field at night may be squatting on would be considered a threat to their and their flock's safety – especially at night. 'Do not be afraid' is a phrase we hear throughout the gospel, not only are to be seen as comforting words, but words to express their danger and that you need not fight to defend yourself. God is being made present to defend you. The good news**

one was being born who would make a way for deliverance for people – not just shepherds, but certainly them, people. Yes, God believes all lives matters, but God comes to share this news with those whose lives have for so long mattered. For shepherds' lives to matter, a whole new world order and value system would have to take place. This indeed a 'great joy' for the people who were lowest on the social ladder."

— Rev. Bret S. Myers, 12/28/2017

"This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger."

— Luke 2.12

"Neither the familiarity nor the season's festivities should prevent us from realizing the scandal that God came into history completely helpless, as a newborn, and was laid in a feeding trough.... By entering human history in this way, God identified with the powerless, the oppressed, the poor, and the homeless."— R. Alan Culpepper, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. IX, p. 67

"We generally think of divine signs as magnificent, stupendous, and awe-inspiring. How ironic that the sign given to the shepherds was something they could relate to in their daily lives: an infant wrapped in simple bands of cloth (not in robes), and lying in a manger for animals to feed (not in a gold-laced and jewel-laden crib, or a soft and comfortable bed). Shepherds must have laid their own children in such places as they cared for the animals among their flocks, perhaps the flocks of others. The rich symbolism of the divine entering the world in such wretched conditions surely gave them hope, and sparked their imaginations of the goodness that could be revealed in such common circumstances."

— Rev. Bret S. Myers, 12/28/2017

"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace, goodwill among people!"

— Luke 2.14

"The song of the angels connects the sacred with the profane, the heavenly with the earthly, the divine with the human. God's glory, so often thought to be so distant, is coming to humanity. Peace is to reign on earth, as well as in heaven. Goodwill is to prevail. And it starts humbly in a child. The lesson is clear: Even among the most vulnerable, weak, and powerless, God's grace will be revealed. Goodness is not reserved for the rule-makers, the strong, and the powerful. It finds itself in the most inauspicious places and persons." — Rev. Bret S. Myers, 12/28/2017

"Augustus was widely acclaimed as a bringer of peace. By relating Jesus' birth –and the accompanying announcement of 'peace on earth'– to Augustus's decree, Luke is able subtly to proclaim that the true bringer of peace was not Caesar Augustus but Jesus."

— R. Alan Culpepper, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. IX, p. 63

"All who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them."

— Luke 2.18

"The world was moving according to the orders of Caesar Augustus.... This is the story of the birth of a new kind of world. The birth reveals a new world order, a world not under Caesar but under the direction of God's design for the redemption of all peoples.... There is hope for the oppressed.... God has not forgotten us or abandoned us...."

— R. Alan Culpepper, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. IX, p. 67

"The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them."

— Luke 2.20

"The effect of the good news, as is typical in Luke, will be joy for all the people."

— R. Alan Culpepper, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. IX, p. 65

"Expectant joy, joy not yet realized but assured, may be the richest form of happiness. It kindles the imagination, frees the heart, mind, and soul of the labors of banal existence. Jesus was just a babe. It would years before he would have any kind of impact. But the thought that one was born who was blessed by God for a mission of liberating all the people, that light might shine on those who lay in the darkness, and that the imprisonment of oppression would cease, that this faith, lifts the spirit and reaffirms that God has made life, in spite of all the contradictory evidence, good."

— Rev. Bret S. Myers, 12/28/2017

# **CALLED TOGETHER AS SPIRITUAL FAMILY**

## **Welcome and Announcements**

*Please sign the registration pads at the ends of the pews on the center aisle.  
We ask that you please shut off cell phones and practice quietness during the service.  
Please join us for fellowship and refreshments after the worship  
in Romig Hall (lower level of elevator or stairs).*

\* = You are invited to stand as you are able

## **Prelude**

"O Hail this Brightest Day of Days"

D. Buxtehude

## **Welcoming the Light of Love in Our Midst** *(acolytes light altar candles)*

*We prepare ourselves for communing with the sacred as love's light is brought into our awareness. The light of love burns within and among each of us, and we carry that light into our sanctuary; visually reminding us of the image of the divine that lives in our hearts, minds, and souls – and that we nourish through our faith-filled fellowship.*

## **Affirming God's Presence in Us All**

"You Matter!"

## **Sharing Christ's Peace**

*As a sign of our reconciliation with God and one another, greet and welcome those around you and share "the peace of Christ."*

## **\*Centering Our Souls** *"Litany of Expectant Joy"*

You, O Spirit of the Divine, came to a young woman of lowly stature in the hinterlands of an empire:

**You remind us that goodness can find its way into our lives – no matter who we are, where we are from, or what the world may think of us.**

She gave birth to a child like any other, and yet she had a confidence that this child would be holy; and would grow up to liberate people from their bondage – physical, economic, political, emotional, and spiritual.

**He would be the saving grace for those most needing saved by grace – the poor, the oppressed, the weak, and the lowly.**

Shepherds were among the first to see the divine come into the world. They were heard the good news of an angel, and the music of the heavenly host: telling them that liberation was not as distant as anticipated, and that God's values would be revealed in one who was flesh and blood just like them.

**The shepherds did not just listen. They went to see, and to bear witness to what they had heard in thumping in their hearts.**

They were able to see the sign of the divine in something as simple as an infant child, born in the most humble of circumstances.

**They had yearned and prayed for peace, but now they had come to expect it. Now they had come to have faith that peace was possible, and that goodwill could be shared among all humanity.**

Their expectant joy overflowed with the good news of God's presence among them.

**We are not forgotten. God loves us and cares for us. God wants the best for us. God wants peace and goodwill to reign within us and between us. May God be praised!**

## **\*Hymn for Expectant Joy**

"Awake! Awake, and Greet the New Morn"

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## **Our Stories of Random Acts of Kindness & Intentional Deeds of Compassion**

## WE LISTEN FOR THE SACRED IN THE MIDST OF OUR LIVES

Advent Wreath Ceremony    The Candle of Joy & Celebration    *The Bair Family*

A Time for All God's Children

### Prayers

*Sharing Our Joys and Concerns*

*Silent Meditation: The Prayers of the People*

*Pastoral Prayer*

*Unison Prayer*                    *"Prayer from the New Zealand Book of Common Prayer"*

Eternal Spirit, Earth-maker, Pain-bearer, Life-giver, Source of all that is and that shall be, Father and Mother of us all, Loving God, in whom is heaven: The hallowing of your name echo through the universe! The way of your justice be followed by the peoples of the world! Your heavenly will be done by all created beings! Your commonwealth of peace and freedom sustain our hope and come on earth. With the bread we need for today, feed us. In the hurts we absorb from one another, forgive us. In times of temptation and test, strengthen us. From trials too great to endure, spare us. From the grip of all that is evil, free us. For you reign in the glory of the power that is love, now and forever. May it be so.

**\*Hymn of God's Immanence**

"Angels, from the Realms of Glory"

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**Scripture Lessons**

Luke 2.1-20

**Message**

**"The Joy of Witnessing the Divine"**

**\*Hymn of Good News**

"Cheer Up You Ones of Hope and Faith"

*see insert*

## WE DEDICATE OURSELVES TO GOD'S SERVICE THROUGH FAITHFULNESS

### Giving of Our Tithes and Offerings

*"Generosity arises from gratitude like heat arises from fire. Like fire, gratitude is lovely to see; but when it warms others with generosity, that is when it becomes a true blessing."*

**Offertory**                    "Organ Improvisation"

**\*Song of Dedication**

*Tune: Old Hundredth; p. 7*

The advent of the Christ draws near.

With hope and faith we conquer fear.

Let love and peace in us be found.

Let joy within our hearts abound.

**\*Unison Prayer of Dedication**

O God, whose coming was tender and mild, but whose presence is empowering and passionate: We are thankful for the hope you inspire in our world where poverty is painful and loving-kindness is lacking. Jolt us with justice that the world's prayers for peace may be answered. Jostle us with generosity that we may know the joy of giving. In this season of Advent, enter into our hearts that hope may arise within us to expect that which has been promised: that nourishment will be provided for the hungry...that comfort will call upon the suffering...that freedom will ensue for the imprisoned...that justice will be imparted to the persecuted...that compassion will nurture the oppressed...that peace will pacify the violent...and that love will live in the midst of all peoples and creatures that you have declared good. May this gift of hope that you give to us be passed on to others by how we give of ourselves through our time, talents, tithes, and offerings. May it be so.

## \*Encouragement for the Journey

This is the season of Advent, the season of something divine coming into the world.

Prepare yourselves for the divine to come into your life.

Hope for it; but more than that, expect it.

Look for ways in which the divine can find its way into you.

Then look for ways in which you can share the divine with others.

Love like you want to be loved. Forgive like you want to be forgiven.

Be the peace to others that you want for yourself.

Give such that others will call you generous.

Live such that others see the beauty of your Spirit.

Postlude

Voluntary in D Major

W. Selby

## \*The Light of Love Goes into the World

*Love's light is not extinguished from our worship, but is transferred from the flame of the candles to the passion in our hearts that we may go forth to let the light of love shine through us as we go to serve in the world!*

### **WE GO FORTH AS PEACEMAKERS** **TO CREATE JUSTICE FOR ALL**

*Our worship is fulfilled, and our purpose is confirmed,  
through our service as God's stewards to the world and all creation.*

*Use the blessings God has given you as you share  
the joy in your heart, the wisdom in your mind,  
the love in your spirit, and the peace in your soul.*

*Thank you for sharing sacred fellowship with us.*

## *Nourishment for the Journey*

"What is the real work of Christmas? Howard Thurman, a theologian, educator, and civil rights leader, described it in his poem, 'Now the Work of Christmas Begins.'

**'When the song of the angels is stilled,  
when the star in the sky is gone,  
when the kings and princes are home,  
when the shepherds are back with their flocks,  
the work of Christmas begins:  
to find the lost,  
to heal the broken,  
to feed the hungry,  
to release the prisoner,  
to rebuild the nations,  
to bring peace among the people,  
to make music in the heart.'** "

**Meister Eckhart, 14th century, quoted by Barbara Brown Taylor in *Gospel Medicine*: "We are all meant to be mothers of God. What good is it to me if this eternal birth of the divine Son takes place unceasingly but does not take place within me? And, what good is it to me if Mary is full of grace if I am not also full of grace? What good is it to me for the Creator to give birth to his Son if I do not also give birth to him in my time and my culture? Then, then, is the fullness of time: the Son of God is begotten in us."**

**Anne Lamott, 21st century: "Joy is the best makeup."**

***Jerry Van Amerongen, 21st century: "I feel like a tiny bird with a big song!"***

***Taylor Caldwell, 20th century: "I am not alone at all, I thought. I was never alone at all. And that, of course, is the message of Christmas. We are never alone. Not when the night is darkest, the wind coldest, the world seemingly indifferent. For this is still the time God chooses."***

***Rumi, 13th century: "When you do things from your soul, you feel a river moving in you, a joy."***

***Helen Keller, The Story of My Life, 20th century: "One can never consent to creep when one feels an impulse to soar."***

***Meister Eckart, 14th century: "We are all meant to be mothers of God."***

***Eleanor Roosevelt, 20th century: "The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams."***

***Mother Teresa, 20th century: "One filled with joy preaches without preaching."***

***Cheyenne saying: "A people is never defeated until the hearts of the women are on the ground."***

***Albert Camus, 20th century: "In the midst of winter, I found there was, within me, an invincible summer. And that made me happy. For it says that no matter how hard the world pushes against me, within me, there's something stronger...something better, pushing right back."***

***Mahatma Gandhi, 20th century: "In a gentle way, you can shake the world."***

***J.R.R. Tolkien, The Two Towers, 20th century: "The world is indeed full of peril, and in it there are many dark places; but still there is much that is fair, and though in all lands love is now mingled with grief, it grows perhaps the greater."***

***James Whitehead, 20th century: "Faith is the enduring ability to imagine life in a certain way."***

**"As Advent comes to an end and Christmas approaches, we look at our lives and the life of the church and ask: What is God doing today, here in our midst, that is too wonderful for our imaginations or our words? What is the hope of the congregation on this last Sunday in Advent? What extraordinary and grace-filled things have happened in your life? What extraordinary and grace-filled things may yet happen? What is our role in the midst of what God is doing, and are we willing to say "yes" to that role? Trusting that all things are possible with God requires a leap of faith, not just for Mary but for us today."  
— Rev. Kathryn Matthews Huey, from *ucc.org***

**Cheer Up You Ones of Hope and Faith**      Tune: "God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen" 86 86 86 w refrain

Music: God Rest You Merry, Trad. English Carol; melody from *Little Book of Christmas Carols*, ca. 1846

Words: Rev. Bret Stuart Myers

Cheer up you ones of hope and faith / And offer up your praise  
Your dreams of long-awaited peace / Come beckoning this day  
For through a babe in Bethlehem / God's promise has been raised  
O tidings of comfort and joy, Comfort and joy, O tidings of comfort and joy

God's light of love has dawned on you / Wake up and bless the day  
The opportunity's at hand / To love in all your ways  
A love that cancels out all fears / If on this path you'll stay  
O tidings of comfort and joy, Comfort and joy, O tidings of comfort and joy

The Christ child born so long ago / His Spirit lives in you  
Whatever circumstance you're in / Be thankful this is true  
Go forth to always do God's will / In all you say and do  
O tidings of comfort and joy, Comfort and joy, O tidings of comfort and joy

So make the change, commit yourself / Whatever does betide  
Your world does change by attitude / To us God does confide  
Let all your thoughts and words and deeds / Of violence in you die  
O tidings of comfort and joy, Comfort and joy, O tidings of comfort and joy

So live your days all full of grace / By trusting in God's way  
Let peace and love within you reign / And from this never stray  
Just shine your light on all the earth / Let all who know you say:  
O tidings of comfort and joy, Comfort and joy, O tidings of comfort and joy