

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Thunder Bay

207 South Brodie St.

<http://standrewspres-tbay.ca>

December 20, 2020

4th Sunday in Advent

Words of Welcome

Welcome to worship this 4th Sunday of Advent. We are only a few days away from our celebration of Jesus birth. As we worship this day may you be at peace, able to lay down any burden or care and able to trust in the love of God present with us.

We begin with a call to worship.

Call to Worship

God comes to us in the cry of a child:

Let every heart prepare a welcome.

God comes to us in the whisper of loving parents:

Let every heart prepare an embrace.

God comes to us, abides in us:

Let every heart prepare to receive the Christ.

Let us worship the God who has come, who is here and who will come again.

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Advent Candle Lighting: Love

Last Sunday we lit the candles of hope, peace, and joy. In these we are reminded to put our hope in God's promises of a peaceful kingdom, to trust in God's peace for our lives and be joy-filled because of Jesus with us now and always.

[Light two blue and the pink candles.]

On this fourth Sunday of Advent, we light the candle of love. Our God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16). We light this candle to remember God's love, which brings joy to the world and peace on earth. *[Light the last blue candle.]*

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Be not Afraid: A Worship Series for Advent By Meg Jenista Kuykendall and Kathryn Roelofs

Hymn

Hope is a star

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1. 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.

2. Peace is a ribbon that circles the earth,
giving a promise of safety and worth.

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.

3. Joy is a song that welcomes the dawn,
telling the world that the Saviour is born.

Refrain

4. Love is a flame that burns in our heart.
Jesus has come and will never depart.

Refrain

"Hope is a star," words: Brian A. Wren. Music: Joan Collier Fogg

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Opening Prayer

God of majesty and mercy, Creator, Christ and Spirit,
you are powerful, you are holy, and you are loving.
You come among us not as a warrior or tyrant,
but as a child. new life born among us and for us.
And so we come to worship you this day,
trusting your wisdom with Joseph, pondering your mystery with Mary.
We offer you our love for all that you have been, all that you are,
and all that you will be, one God. Holy and loving.

God of mystery and mercy, you came to be with us and offer us new life in Christ,
and yet we often stray from your side.

You came to offer us love, but we confess that we can be stubborn and selfish in the
ways we live. You came to reconcile all people, but we confess that we often resist
repairing relationships and so remain divided.

Forgive who we have been, amend who we are, and direct who we shall be.
through Jesus Christ who reaches out to us from the manger and the cross.

Living, loving God, open our minds and hearts by the power of your Spirit to hear your
Word afresh. Make us attentive to Jesus, the Living Word, and gift he brings to our
midst. Amen.

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Assurance of Pardon

Words from English poet Christina Rossetti fit the Advent theme for today:
"Love came down at Christmas; Love all lovely, love divine.
Love shall be our token, Love for plea and gift and sign."

We meet God's gift of love in the Christ Child,
whose forgiveness restores us for whatever lies ahead,
giving us reason to rejoice. Thanks be to God for this hope!

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Scripture Reading Matthew 1:18-25 The Birth of Jesus the Messiah

¹⁸ Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰ But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' ²² All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

²³ 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel', which means, 'God is with us.'

²⁴ When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, ²⁵ but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

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The word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Message Fear of a Ruined Reputation

What is something that many celebrities or powerful people fear? I think it is fair to say that a ruined reputation would be close to the top of the list. A ruined reputation would mean loss of opportunities, respect, and influence and that just for starters.

The Bill Cosby Show ran for eight seasons between 1984 and 1992, prior to that an animated series called *Fat Albert and the Cosby kids* ran from 1972-1985. Cosby was a celebrated father figure and comedian and then he wasn't. On April 26, 2018, he was found guilty of three counts of aggravated indecent assault against a Toronto woman, after a jury trial.

In a year where #Black lives matter has become a major movement, Jessica Mulroney, wife of T.V. personality Ben Mulroney and daughter-in-law to former Prime Minister Brian Mulroney, found herself out of step. Jessica had just started hosting a brand new T.V. series called *I do Redo*. The premise of the show was to give couples the opportunity to redo their weddings. After just a few episodes aired the show was cancelled. Jessica was called out for textbook white privilege when she threatened the work of black influencer and writer Sasha Exeter. CTV pulled the plug on the series and scrubbed it from their website.

From television personalities, to politicians, to corporate figures, there is no lack of examples of people whose reputations have been ruined often due to their own choices about how to be in the world. This is especially true in a time of social media where the line between public and personal has become almost redundant, a post, tweet, or remark can take a person down overnight.

It is easy to find examples of people in the public eye who have fallen from grace, but one could hazard to say that all of us fear having our reputation ruined. Even gang members want to make sure that their reputation with the other members holds up. For most of us it is in the regular work or home environment that we desire to keep our reputation. Our lives may not appear to have a huge impact on many others, but you can likely name or have heard of people who have engaged in extra marital affairs that broke up a relationship, a person in an organization that took liberties in some way, or have a family member that has done something that ruined their reputation personally or publicly.

Most of us realize that it is easy to make mistakes, think too much of ourselves and take risks we think we can get away with, and yet it is all too easy for us to still judge others. We like to think that we are capable of doing better, but a ruined reputation can come in the blink of an eye, in a moment of poor judgement.

Joseph the earthy father of the babe that we celebrate each Christmas was faced with the reality of a ruined reputation. In the first century marriage was a contract, it was not the romantic sort of flourishing relationship with courtship that leads to marriage. The marriage contract was in place and then consummated. So in the eyes of the community, the fact that Mary is pregnant can only mean one thing, she has had a sexual relationship with another man.

Joseph sees that he has a couple of choices, he can declare his injury, the offense to his reputation publicly, in which case Mary will likely be stoned, or he can dismiss, in other words, divorce her quietly before the marriage contract is in effect. Either way he has been hurt and disgraced. We are told that Joseph is a righteous man, a good man, and is unwilling to expose Mary to public disgrace and planned to dismiss her quietly.

Though it is not stated, given the circumstances, Mary too must have been concerned for her well being. She knows that she has not been unfaithful, but how do you explain this pregnancy to someone. The case of a woman becoming pregnant without having sex would be considered a cover up for what is obviously a compromised situation. Mary's reputation is on the line as may well be her life.

We know from the birth narrative in the Gospel of Luke that Mary is fully aware of what has happened to her. She has had the visit from the angel Gabriel. That has not taken

away the danger she is in, but she does know that God is with her. She trusts in that. In Matthew, where Mary is not given a voice, God stands up for her.

In the Gospel of Matthew, just after Joseph has chosen to dismiss Mary quietly, he too gets a visit from an angel of the Lord and he told to not be afraid and to take Mary as his wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. The couple had the assurance from God that they were not alone in this. God was with them.

Still, this does not take away from the public awareness of Mary's pregnancy. People know how to count back nine months and could easily have figured out that Mary should not be giving birth to a child at this point had the consummation taken place after the wedding. There would always be rumours about the couple and this child.

It seems, in the end, that Mary and Joseph were able to live their lives, having other children, and Joseph having work as a carpenter. We do not know what the village gossip would have been, but for Mary and Joseph they knew what others did not. Their child was from God, was the Son of God. They had been promised that this child was something, someone special, and they could live with that.

On Joseph's part, he accepted what the angel told him, believed in what was said, and then did something about it. He took Mary as his wife, and named the child Jesus, meaning he took Jesus as his own son. Joseph was obedient to the command of the angel. He took the words of the angel, that had also been written in Isaiah, seriously and rather than worry about his reputation, he stood by what he now knew to be God's will for his life. He took on the responsibility that God had given him and raised the boy, claiming him as his own.

It was because of the courage of this couple and their faith in God that the prophet's words could be fulfilled. "Therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel." (Isaiah 7:14 NRSV) It likely did not take away their fear of how they would be judged, but at least they could be on the same page, trust one another, and trust God to be present with and for them.

A side note, in case you missed it, they named the child Jesus, not Emmanuel. The angel said to name him Jesus, which was not an uncommon name for a Hebrew child. It means "to save", but the prophet said the child would be named Emmanuel. The point is the child regardless of the name is fulfilling the bigger picture, that God was with people in Isaiah's time, in Jesus time, and with us now. Emmanuel means God with us.

What is also of importance is that God came to Joseph and Mary in the messiness of life and relationships. Minister and theologian David Lose writes, "God worked through real people with real challenges. He didn't choose a fairy-tale princess to bear the savior, but

rather an unwed peasant girl. He didn't choose a political or business success story to name and care for Jesus, but rather a man with his own doubts and questions who wanted to do the right thing but needed angelic guidance to accomplish it."¹

God chose them and now God chooses us. God chooses each of us to work in the messiness of our own lives to be a witness for God's love and God's grace. If we are truly paying attention to God, we will get it right most of the time. God will take our hands and feet, our heads and our hearts, to make a difference to those whose lives we touch.

In the world today, to be a Christian is to be judged. We don't feel it as harshly in Canada or even this community as others in other parts of the globe, but I doubt that you just interject into a conversation that you hold the beliefs you do, or act as you do because you are a Christian. To say that out loud invites opportunity to be judged, maybe even ridiculed, to be shunned, or simply thought to be less fun. At its worst you may find that your reputation is ruined or your opinion taken with a grain of salt because you have claimed your Christian identity and one finds themselves judged even more harshly when we make a mistake.

Which brings two pieces together. First, be careful about your own judgements on other people. Second, be patient and kind to yourself when you don't get it right. There is the quote that says, "What other people think of you is none of your business." When it comes to living your life as a Christian, trusting God is with you, it may be a good line to remember. What other people think of you is none of your business.

We can get very caught up in wondering what other people think of us, of our choice to be a Christian. We may feel judged, or ridiculed, but what others think of us is none of our business. What God believes about us is what matters, and we know that God is with us and loves us even in the messiness that is life. God is with us when we get it wrong and when we get it right. Jesus birth, life, death, and resurrection is the promise that God is with us and we need not worry about how we look to others as long as we seek God's guidance through scripture, prayer, and wise guides.

May you know God's love for you, God's blessing on your life, and that God goes with you this day and always.

Closing Prayer

Spirit of Hope,
whenever the world seems confusing and bleak,
you pierce the darkness with light, bringing hope and vision for the way ahead.
This has been a difficult and confusing year of pandemic,

¹ Lose, David. <http://www.davidlose.net/2016/12/advent-4-a-god-really-with-us/>

Accessed December 19, 2020

and so we thank you for lessons learned and changes of heart,
for new discoveries and hope restored.

As nature around us prepares for the long sleep of winter,
we pray for those who are ill or dying,
and for those who are bereaved or feel any burden of loss.

O God, reach out to all of us in Christ,
and give us hope for the living of these days.

O God of Peace,
within our lives and relationships, and in communities around the world,
there is conflict and antagonism, mistrust and resentment.
We pray for all places where violence has done its worst,
where cruelty and suspicion appear to win the day,
and where the vulnerable live in fear and despair.

O God, reach out to all of us in Christ,
and give us peace in these times.

O Creator of Joy,
we thank you for moments of joy and celebration in our lives,
for pleasure given and received,
for quiet times spent in reflection and remembering,
and for happy gatherings, even if they had to be small.
In these colder, darker days,
we remember those who feel left out or neglected,
those who have found the months of pandemic restrictions a heavy burden,
and those we find difficult to love, even at a distance.

Be their light and their warmth,
O God, reach out to all of us in Christ,
and give us joy to share in the days ahead.

O Love Come Down at Christmas,
you call us to live in communion with you and one another.
You form us into families, circles of friendship, and communities.
Today we pray for our family members, whether we're close or estranged,
for our friends, whether nearby or far away,
and for neighbours who share our community, like minded or not.
Help us express both our love and concern in gentle words and kind actions.
O God, reach out to all of us in Christ,
and strengthen our love for you and for one another.

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And now we pray together, using the words that Jesus taught...

Lord's Prayer

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and forever. Amen.

Invitation to make an offering

The fourth Sunday in Advent celebrates God's gift of love. At this time of year, we give gifts to express our love. Your offering today is a sign of your love for God and those in God's world who need our love to brighten dark days and difficult times.

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Hymn

The hands that first held Mary's child

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1. The hands that first held Mary's Child
were hard from working wood,
from boards they sawed and planed and filed
and splinters they withstood.
This day they gripped no tool of steel,
they drove no iron nail,
but cradled from the head to heel
our Lord, newborn and frail.
2. When Joseph marveled at the size
of that small breathing frame,
and gazed upon those bright new eyes
and spoke the Infant's name,
the angel's words he once had dreamed
poured down from heaven's height,
and, like the host of stars that beamed,
blest earth with welcome light.
3. 'This Child shall be Emmanuel,
not God upon the throne
but God with us, Emmanuel,
as close as blood and bone.'
The tiny form in Joseph's palms
confirmed what he had heard,
and from his heart rose hymns and psalms
for heaven's human word.

4. The tools which Joseph laid aside
a mob would later lift
and use with anger, fear and pride
to crucify God's gift.
Let us, O Lord, not only hold
the Child who's born today,
but, charged with faith, may we be bold
to follow in his way.

"The hands that first held Mary's child," words by Thomas H. Troeger
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Benediction

The love of God the Father, the faithful creator,
the peace of Christ, the child of the manger,
the joy of the challenging Spirit,
the hope of the Three in One
surround and encourage you
today, tonight, and forever.

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