

Words of Welcome

On this fourth Sunday of Advent, you may want to prepare a candle or your advent candles in order to light them as part of the service. We begin...

Call to Worship

The light shines in the darkness,

We come to worship, seeking the love born among us in Christ Jesus.

Shine into our lives and your world this Advent.

Renew our trust in your undying love.

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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

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

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Prayers of Adoration

Emmanuel, God with us,

We praise you for your presence

throughout the amazing universe you have made.

The shining stars sing your praise which echoes in the depth of space.

The smallest snowflake and a baby's tiny fingers reflect your intricate love
for the details of each and every life.

In Jesus Christ, you were born among us,

one of a kind, yet one with a kind,

to show us how your great love is lived out day by day.

Inspire us with your loving Spirit

as we move through Advent toward Christmas Day,
so that our celebrations of love made flesh in Jesus
will share the presence of your love with those who need it most.
So may we live the praise we offer to you,
Emmanuel, God with us, now and evermore.

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Prayer of Confession

**Lord of love,
We confess we sometimes find your love daunting.
You called Joseph to honour his love for Mary,
even when custom called him to break his engagement.
We confess custom has a hold on us, too,
and challenging expectations for love's sake makes us nervous.
You call us to love our neighbour,
but we resist your call if our neighbours annoy us.
You call us to love our enemies, too,
but that seems impossible in these contentious times.
Forgive us for loving only in the safest situations.
Dare us to love as Jesus loved so he will be born again in us.**

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Assurance of Forgiveness

Receive the Good News in love. With great mercy, God forgives what we have confessed and offers us new life in Christ. Know that God's steadfast love is yours this day, and share that love with friend and enemy alike, so that the power of such love can change the world.

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Scripture Reading John 3:16-21

¹⁶ 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

¹⁷ 'Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.'

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Message Light of Love

If you grew up in the church and particularly went to Sunday school, the foremost verse you would have learned was John 3:16. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believe in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

This verse seems to keep things in a fairly simple perspective. And it is a good place to start when learning about God’s deep love for people by sending Jesus to us, God in human form. But context, as always, is important. The story that comes before this statement is about a conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus. The conversation leaves a knowledgeable and learned Nicodemus confused and perplexed.

The verses that follow this statement are equally difficult. It hopefully continues with the words, “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” (v17) Then it gets challenging, speaking of condemnation, judgement, evil deeds, and hate. These words are powerful. They make us want to turn away and skim over them. These words are spoken about each of us.

There is a dialogue of opposites...light and darkness. We often speak in these ways, light and dark, day and night, male and female, heaven and earth, true and false. And this is the contrast that the passage is making. Jesus is the light that has come into the world illuminating the darkness. But what kind of light is Jesus? What darkness does Jesus’ light reveal?

The darkness that is written about is deeds of evil. We heard, “people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed.” (v19-20) If you are like me you don’t want to think of yourself as evil or doing evil deeds. We think of evil as sinister and dark. Our viewing of programs and videos on television or streaming services and social platforms shape our view of evil. We think of murder, sexual and physical assault, as well as a host of other actions as evil. Yet, with our exposure to all this on a near daily basis we are becoming desensitized to the horrors of it all.

For most of us, this is what evil looks like. But what of the lesser evils. None of us would like to think about gossip, adultery, or stealing as evil. They are just bad things that people do. If one looks more broadly, are we complicit in the oppression and exploitation of others by our attitudes, purchases, or complacency? Does injustice move us to working toward the transformation of the world, or are we content to read about it or view it and not be moved by the suffering of others?

What does it mean to *believe* in Jesus? Is it just agreeing that he was a good guy and a great example? Or is it something more? Is it about changing the world and shining the light that is Jesus into it?

Professor Samuel Cruz writes,

To change the world or save it requires a process that ends hate, injustice, oppression and replaces it with justice, compassion, mercy, love, equality, etc.

However, verses 19-21 tell us that some choose hate over light, evil deeds over good deeds, and therefore they reject the light of the son of God. Others, however agree with Jesus' quest to change or restore the world to its original intent from a world full of evil and injustice to a loving, just and caring world. Therefore, for John, believing in Jesus has more to do with what people believe regarding evil, hate, exploitation, and injustice rather an esoteric "religious" conversion.¹

In other words, it is not enough, in the Gospel of John, to just love Jesus. That love, that belief in Jesus is belief in his teachings that are meant to transform us and transform the world.

Of course, we know that nothing is as black and white as the light and darkness spoken about in the scripture. There are always shades of light and dark, shadows where the light is dim or darkness where the light cannot seem to reach. Those who struggle with mental illness, addictions, or suicidal thoughts know how darkness can snuff out the light. Those who are blind or whose sight is, as we say, "growing dim" know that light and dark are realities they struggle with and it has nothing to do with evil.

Skin colours range from deep black to pasty white, this too has nothing to do with good or evil.

Yes, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." And, "God did not send the Son into the world not to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

Yet...what we believe about Jesus means something, we are imperfect people striving to be more like Jesus, and if that is the case, we continually need to be aware of injustice, of where mercy is lacking, where hate abides and be working toward changing things where people are cared for compassionately, where hate has no place, and justice is the rule especially for those on the margins of society, those who feel helpless, lost, and forgotten.

It means trusting that Jesus is the light of the world. That God loves the world and is working through us in the power of the Holy Spirit as we grow in understanding and faith.

I recently read the words of a faithful Christian physician, who was a friend and lived here in Thunder Bay, he wrote, "Christian principles must guide everything we do or say or think. There is no half way – you either are or you are not. We must go the whole way and have the golden rule as our guide 100 percent of the time. This is not to say that I consider myself or anyone else perfect. I have never

¹ Cruz, Samuel. [Commentary on John 3:14-21 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#)
Accessed December 16, 2022.

met a perfect man or woman and I don't anticipate that I ever will but perfection should be our aim."

Perfection of love, justice, mercy, compassion, and grace. These are not fully attainable in our lifetime, but we strive for them as Jesus taught us. He is the light that illumines our way and our living. Yes, to love Jesus and believe in him can be as simple as just knowing that Christ was born a babe, lived, died, rose again and ascended to the right hand of God. But to live in order that the world might be saved through Jesus means that we have a part in the ongoing transformation of the world.

God chooses to use each of us, as imperfect as we are, to change the world, to show others God's love, and to point others to Christ whose teaching were about healing, feeding, forgiving and freeing people.

It is personal relationship but one that reaches out into community and is lived in community, the community of the church locally and worldwide. Our relationship with Jesus, our believing in Jesus, exposes the evils in our lives, in systems, and in structures. We look for the truth that Jesus taught so that each day, and in the end, it can be said that, "Those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God." (v21) And that is something to hold onto. Our belief is in Jesus, our motivation is that our deeds are done in God.

In this time of Advent, as we prepare once again to hear the story of the Christ Child born to be God with us, we know that we live our lives in the hope of Christ, the peace of Christ, the joy of Christ, and in the light of Christ, which is love, the love of God for us. A love so expansive that it moved God to send love as a light in a world of darkness.

May the light of God's love, shine in and through us today and everyday, so that others may come to know the love that is there for them in Christ. May the star of Bethlehem lead us to the light of love. Amen.

Prayers of the People

Come, Christ Jesus,
be a guest in our hearts and our homes this Christmas.
Enter our lives today with your blessing.
We are grateful for the wonder you bring
into a world so full of complaint and criticism.
Draw near to us in friendship and faithfulness,
so that in this season of celebration,
we may know your presence and can sing with all your people:
*Jesus, Lord of love, **we open our hearts to you***

Come, Christ Jesus,
be our guide through the darkening days and the chill of winter.
Show us the way to wisdom and gratitude.

We are thankful for the kindness we know
in friends and good neighbours, in warm houses and warm smiles.
Encourage us to reach out to those who need your embrace and ours,
so that together we may sing of your presence:

*Jesus, Lord of love, **we open our hearts to you***

Come, Christ Jesus,
be our hope in the uncertain times in which we find ourselves.
Touch us with your healing and grace.

We remember before you those we know and those known to you alone
who are living with loss or illness this season,
those who face depression or discouragement,
and any who will find it hard to be merry this year.

Shine the light of your courage and comfort into their lives
so that we may sing together in your love:

*Jesus, Lord of love, **we open our hearts to you***

Come, Christ Jesus,
be our king and claim your rightful place in our hearts.
Our world is struggling for the justice and mercy you bring.
Draw near to all leaders and all citizens working for peace and justice.
Encourage honourable action and co-operation on all sides.
Give hope to people under oppression
and those who live with fear or hunger day by day.
Hasten the day when the world's peoples will live as neighbours,
reconciled in your truth and freedom
so that all may know the joy we sing:

*Jesus, Lord of love, **we open our hearts to you***

With voices united in love and loyalty, we offer the following prayer together:

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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 the offering

This Sunday we celebrate the Advent of Love, embracing us in Jesus Christ. Think of your gifts as seeds of that love which we can plant in the world God loves for Christ's sake.

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If you consider St. Andrew's your church, regardless of where you live, would like to learn more about St. Andrew's, get involved in our ministry and work, or make a donation toward the life and ministry of St. Andrew's Presbyterian, in Thunder Bay visit our website at <http://standrewspres-tbay.ca>

Hymn

Christians, awake

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1. Christians, awake! salute the happy morn,
whereon the Saviour of the world was born;
rise to adore the mystery of love
which hosts of angels chanted from above;
with them the joyful tidings first begun
of God Incarnate and the virgin's son.
2. Then to the watchful shepherds it was told,
who heard the angel herald's voice, "Behold,
I bring good tidings of a saviour's birth
to you and all the nations on the earth;
God has this day fulfilled the promised word:
this day is born a saviour, Christ the Lord."
3. Then went the shepherds straight to Bethlehem
to see the wonder that was told to them,
and found, with Joseph and the blessed maid,
her son, the Saviour, in a manger laid;
joyful, the wondrous story they proclaim,
the first apostles of his infant fame.
4. Oh may we keep and ponder in our mind
God's wondrous love in saving humankind;
trace we the babe, who has retrieved our loss,
from his poor manger to his bitter cross'
saved by his love, unceasing we shall sing
eternal praise to heaven's almighty King.

Words and music: public domain

Benediction

Go in love this day, to greet friend or enemy, neighbour or stranger with the warmth and wonder of Christ Jesus in your smile,

And may the all-forgiving grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the all-inspiring love of God, and the all-embracing communion of the Holy Spirit be yours this day and in each day to come, now and evermore. Amen.

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