

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent – December 21, 2025

### **Call to Worship/Lighting of the Advent Candles**

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.**

*Light all four Advent candles here.*

### **Hymn**

*O little town of Bethlehem*

**165**

1. O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie!  
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by:  
yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light;  
the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.
2. For Christ is born of Mary, and gathered all above,  
while mortals sleep, the angels keep their watch of wondering love.  
O morning stars, together proclaim the holy birth,  
and praises sing to God the King, and peace to all on earth.
3. How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given!  
So God imparts to human hearts the blessings born of heaven.  
No ear may hear his coming, but in this world of sin,  
where meek souls will receive him, still the dear Christ enters in.
4. O holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray;  
cast out our sin and enter in; be born in us today.  
We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell;  
oh come to us, abide with us, our Lord, Emmanuel.

"O little town of Bethlehem." Words by Phillips Brooks. Public domain

### **Prayer of Adoration and Confession**

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 depths of space.

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

**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 neighbour does not please 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 joyfully in us.**

### **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.

### **Prayer for Understanding**

God of life and love, we turn to your Word to hear your will and your wisdom for our times. Open our hearts and minds by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit so that we might hear what you are saying to the church through Christ, your Love Incarnate.

### **Scripture Reading Luke 1:57-80**

<sup>57-58</sup> When Elizabeth was full-term in her pregnancy, she gave birth to a son. Her neighbors and relatives, seeing that God had overwhelmed her with mercy, celebrated with her.

<sup>59-60</sup> On the eighth day, they came to circumcise the child and were calling him Zachariah after his father. But his mother intervened: "No. He is to be called John."

<sup>61-62</sup> "But," they said, "no one in your family is named that." They used sign language to ask Zachariah what he wanted him named.

<sup>63-64</sup> Asking for a tablet, Zachariah wrote, "His name is to be John." That took everyone by surprise. Surprise followed surprise—Zachariah's mouth was now open, his tongue loose, and he was talking, praising God!

<sup>65-66</sup> A deep, reverential fear settled over the neighborhood, and in all that Judean hill country people talked about nothing else. Everyone who heard about it took it to heart, wondering, “What will become of this child? Clearly, God has his hand in this.”

<sup>67-79</sup> Then Zachariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied,  
Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel;  
he came and set his people free.

He set the power of salvation in the center of our lives,  
and in the very house of David his servant,

Just as he promised long ago  
through the preaching of his holy prophets:

Deliverance from our enemies  
and every hateful hand;

Mercy to our fathers,

as he remembers to do what he said he'd do,

What he swore to our father Abraham—

a clean rescue from the enemy camp,

So we can worship him without a care in the world,  
made holy before him as long as we live.

And you, my child, “Prophet of the Highest,”

will go ahead of the Master to prepare his ways,

Present the offer of salvation to his people,  
the forgiveness of their sins.

Through the heartfelt mercies of our God,

God's Sunrise will break in upon us,

Shining on those in the darkness,

those sitting in the shadow of death,

Then showing us the way, one foot at a time,  
down the path of peace.

<sup>80</sup> The child grew up, healthy and spirited. He lived out in the desert until the day he made his prophetic debut in Israel.

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Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church. **Thanks be to God.**

### **Message** Merciful Love

As Maria sung in *The Sound of Music*, “Let's start at the very beginning, it's a very good place to start.” When coming to this story, one has to understand that the main character in part of Luke 1:57-80, was Zechariah and he was temporarily mute. Now Zachariah was a priest on duty in the temple and given the special task to offer incense to God in one of the most holy places in the temple. As he was doing this, he was visited by the angel Gabriel who tells him that he and his wife, who was now beyond child bearing years, well, they are going to have a child.

Not surprisingly, Zachariah was somewhat skeptical that this could happen and because of it Gabriel hits the mute button and Zachariah was unable to speak, well that was until the promised baby was born. Yes, Zachariah's wife Elizabeth did get pregnant and had a healthy baby boy. On the eighth day, after the child was born, and when a child was traditionally named and circumcised in Hebrew culture, the people were wanting Elizabeth to name the child after his father. They did not want to listen to her as she knew the child was to be named John. Finally, Zachariah was given a tablet and was able to write down the name for them, the name John.

Immediately after Zachariah was able to speak, we get what is known to us as Zachariah's song. It is a song of remembrance of what God has promised and a looking ahead to what God will do. It is a song about his son John who will prepare the way for Jesus. John's message will be one that tells people that they will have to turn away from what they have been doing in order to prepare their hearts and minds to receive Jesus and his message of love, grace, and compassion.

Today is the day we light the candle of love on our Advent wreaths. It is a day that we celebrate the love of God for all humanity. God's love is not just for good Christians; God's love is for everyone. It is love that embraces people of all countries, all tribes, all races. It does not matter your stature, your economic status or viability. This love does not care if you are black, brown, white or any shade in between. This love does not care if you are male, female, or identify as LGBTQ2S+. This love is for everyone.

God's love does care about how others are treated. God's love cares about the marginalized and the vulnerable. This love is generous, kind, forgiving, and is meant for all. This love is merciful and unconditional.

What this love does expect from us is that we too will be loving, kind, merciful, and compassionate. This love hopes that we will be generous and that our love will move us to action. This love connects and restores relationships with ourselves, with God, and with each other.

God's love, that is lived out in the life of Jesus Christ, is meant to move us to actions that include justice and mercy for those who do not have a voice. Zachariah is one who speaks out to announce that this is what God is up to.

One might wonder if we should be like Zachariah's son, John the Baptist, and prepare the way of the Lord by demonstrating what love looks like. Now, I am not talking about romantic love, I am talking about love that goes so much further. This is love for people, even those we disagree with. This is the kind of love that we are looking at here. It is love that is willing to listen to those with whom we disagree and find ways that we can work together to bring about healthy community.

This love is so radical that it would see wars end, strife cease, people fed, housed, and clothed. Can you imagine and world where Gaza would no longer be a war zone, Ukraine

would be rebuilt, Afghanistan would be a place of peace, and no one would be murdered on a beach in Australia because of their faith tradition. This is the radical love of God.

This love has room for others. It has hope. This love is the kind of love we are called to in our own time. We are to love our neighbours, our families, anyone who crosses our path, and love them.

It would seem that as people, cultures, communities, we are not able to love this way on our own. It takes the deep love of God, the recognition that every life is of value, before we seem to be able to even begin to comprehend what we are called to as Christians...as human beings.

This takes work. It takes listening attentively, even when we don't agree. It requires that we engage in the work of restoration as the hands and feet of God in this world. It means that we pay attention to what God is doing in and through us in the power of the Holy Spirit.

It is for us to do this work of kindness, compassion, and love, so that people might even be receptive to hearing about God's love for them. How can people know about that kind of love if they never experience it from another human being?

Like Zachariah, we are called to use our words to share the love of God with others. We are called to act to bring about hope, peace, joy, and love in a world that is seriously lacking in compassion and justice.

Christmas is not some joyous remembrance of a baby's birth as we have made it out to be. To celebrate Christmas is to celebrate Jesus, the embodiment of God, come into the world to change it. It is God in-breaking into the world in a way that is unimaginable, transforming, and radical. This is about love so strong, so deep, so wide, and so high, that it cannot be contained, it must be shared and in so doing nothing can remain the same.

We can no longer tolerate injustice, harm, and suffering. We must work to overcome it, in the name of merciful love. Not the love that commands that one conform or bow down to power in order to achieve lasting peace, but love that transforms, that lifts up those who are the least and love that gives of itself.

We are called to radical, merciful, compassionate, yet powerful love. The love of God that comes to us in Jesus and in the power of the Holy Spirit moving and working in us and in the world. Today, may you begin to practice loving in unexpected ways, ways that bring wholeness, justice, and life-changing experiences to your relationships, this community, and maybe, just maybe the world. Amen.

## **Prayers of the People**

*This prayer is written to use a line from Hymn 161 What child is this as a sung response.*

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 anger 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:

***Sung Response: Joy, joy for Christ is born, the babe, the son of Mary.***

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:

***Sung Response: Joy, joy for Christ is born, the babe, the son of Mary.***

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:

***Sung Response: Joy, joy for Christ is born, the babe, the son of Mary.***

Come, Christ Jesus,

be our king and claim your rightful place in our hearts.

Our world is struggling and yearning 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:

***Sung Response: Joy, joy for Christ is born, the babe, the son of Mary.***

With voices united in love and loyalty, we offer the prayer you taught us:

## **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**

We sing of God's love. We sing of God's faithfulness. We sing of God's strength. We give an offering in gratitude for God's love and faithfulness. It is a sign that we trust in God whose strength gives us strength for each day and the resolve to make a difference in the world.

There are various ways that people give to this congregation for our work as God's people, through signing up for a monthly donation, or sending an e-transfer.

Check out the opportunities to support St. Andrew's ministry at our website, [St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Thunder Bay, ON – Part of the PCCWeb network of churches](#)

### **Hymn**

#### *Hark! the herald angels sing*

**139**

1. Hark! the herald angels sing  
glory to the newborn King,  
peace on earth and mercy mild,  
God and sinners reconciled.  
Joyful, all ye nations, rise;  
join the triumph of the skies;  
with the angelic host proclaim,  
"Christ is born in Bethlehem."  
Hark! the herald angels sing  
glory to the newborn King.
2. Christ, by highest heaven adored,  
Christ, the everlasting Lord,  
late in time behold him come,  
offspring of a virgin's womb.  
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see!  
Hail the incarnate deity!  
Pleased on earth with us to dwell,  
Jesus, our Emmanuel.  
Hark! the herald angels sing  
glory to the newborn King.
3. Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace!  
Hail he son of righteousness!  
Light and life to all he brings,  
Risen with healing in his wings,  
Mild, he lays his glory by,  
born that we no more may die,  
born to raise the lost of earth  
born to give us second birth.  
Hark! the herald angels sing  
glory to the newborn King.

"Hark! The herald angels sing." Words by Charles Wesley. Public domain.

### **Benediction**

Go out into the world, embracing the will to dream,  
and may the love God has for you warm your soul for the days ahead!

Words for this liturgy are from *The Presbyterian Church in Canada. Worship Planner. Fourth Sunday in Advent. Sunday, December 21, 2025. Year A.*