

Worship @ Home

Sunday 29th November 2020 – Advent Sunday

Hope for the Future

Worship Leader: Revd Val Reid

Reader: Claire Murray

Music: Tom Nicholls, Paul Arnold, Catriona Bevan

Christchurch Community Moment: Claire Murray

Technician: Tony Edmonds

Call to worship

Gathered here today,
we light a candle of hope,
knowing that in dark times
there is always a light that can be lit.
Let us, people in dusk and dawn,
light the light of hope,
knowing that God is always calling us
to justice, mercy and humility –
at this time of year,
and all times.
Amen.

We each light our candle...

Music – StF 176

Like a candle flame
Flickering small in our darkness
Uncreated light
Shines through infant eyes

God is with us, alleluia

God is with us, alleluia

Come to save us, alleluia

Come to save us, alleluia

Alleluia!

Stars and angels sing
Yet the earth sleeps in shadows
Can this tiny spark
Set a world on fire?
God is with us, alleluia...

Yet his light shall shine
From our lives, Spirit blazing
As we touch the flame
Of his holy fire
God is with us, alleluia...

Graham Kendrick



Let us pray

We come to your house, God,
sometimes aware, and sometimes not aware.
Sometimes aware of our need, sometimes ignoring others' needs.
You wait for us, O God, and as you wait,
you call us to wait for you, too.
As we gather around light and Word,
may we remember how you have helped us –
in the kindness of a stranger,
in the comfort of a friend,
in the call for justice,
in the shout for mercy.
And make us, who wait for you,
approach you and each other
with new vigilance, and with new hope.
Amen.

Luke 2:1-5

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.

Reflection

This week I went for a walk.
This may not seem much of an achievement, but for months now I've been suffering with plantar fasciitis. It makes walking very painful.
So at last finding some support trainers that enable me to walk further than from my kitchen to my study seemed like a miracle.
This was only my second walk outside.
It was cold, but sunny.
I thought I could make it round the field above the nature reserve if I could stop half way and sit on my favourite bench up by Wymondley Wood.
When I got there, I found the bench was already occupied by a bloke drinking cans of Guinness.
If that sounds a little judgemental – well I felt judgemental.
I tried giving him one of my looks – but he was oblivious.
There wasn't room to sit on the bench at an appropriate social distance.
He was right in the middle.
So I limped on along the top of the field, and down to the other bench.
This one is not in the sunshine.

I felt a tad annoyed.

As I sat there, resting my foot, I caught a movement out of the corner of my eye.

There was a bird in the tree in the hedgerow opposite.

I couldn't immediately recognise it.

It was a little bigger than a blackbird, but with an elegant slate grey back, and a beautiful mottled breast.

Then I saw there was more than one.

Two – three – the whole tree was alive with birds.

They were fieldfares.

They migrate to the UK for the winter from Scandinavia.

I've read about them in my bird book, but I've never seen them.

They don't venture into London, where I've spent the last 8 years.

I was delighted.

If I hadn't had to sit on the wrong bench, I would never have noticed them.

What a gift.

In her book 'An altar in the world', Barbara Brown Taylor offers a number of practices which help us locate God in our everyday lives.

She calls it 'finding the sacred beneath our feet'.

One of her suggestions is what she calls 'the practice of getting lost'.

Allowing yourself to be diverted from the expected path, the usual path, and just seeing what you might find.

This year we have all got a bit lost, I think.

We have all been diverted from our normal paths by COVID.

Have we stomped on grumpily, casting filthy looks at the bloke on the bench?

Or have we opened our eyes to a tree full of fieldfares?

Today is Advent Sunday.

We are moving towards Christmas.

But it will not be Christmas as we have known it.

Everything will be very different this year.

Our theme for Advent is 'hidden treasure'.

And this year, it may feel that the treasure is well and truly hidden.

In fact, it may feel as though there is no treasure at all, however hard we search.

Today we are invited to think about hope.

Where will we find hope, this Advent?

Where is it hidden?

The theme of Barbara Brown Taylor's book is that hidden treasure is all around us.

We only have to open our eyes.

It is not dependent on everything going smoothly.

In fact, it is not dependent on the outward circumstances of our lives at all.

The hidden treasure is the presence of God in anything and everything.

The hidden treasure is not the hope that things will be OK when the vaccine is rolled out, when we can start meeting our loved ones again, when we can gather in the church together to worship and sing our hearts out...

Hope is here and now.

Claire read the familiar opening of the Christmas story from Luke's gospel.

Nothing had gone smoothly for this couple.

An unexpected, unexplained pregnancy.

A hostile political environment which meant they had to travel at exactly the worst time.

The hospitality industry so overbooked that they found themselves street homeless on the night Mary gave birth.

Mary and Joseph had to learn to practice the divine art of getting lost.

Nothing about their experience was what they wanted or what they expected.

And we know it went from bad to worse when Herod got involved.

And yet Mary pondered all these things in her heart.

She held on to the hope which the first angel had promised her.

That this lonely, risky birth in a dirty stable meant that God was with her.

With all of us.

In a completely new way.

The practice of getting lost – we have had no choice about that this year.

And yet getting lost can be a gateway to God.

To that elusive Advent hope.

Barbara Brown Taylor also suggests the practice of carrying water.

By this, she means that the routine tasks of home can also be an altar in the world.

Just as we have all got a bit lost this year, so we have all spent far too much time at home.

We have been stuck in our cells, faced with all the things we so often try rather hard to avoid.

Some of us started out with a new enthusiasm for cleaning out the loft, sorting out the kitchen cupboards, giving the garden a makeover.

For many of us the enthusiasm soon wore off.

In my experience, there are only so many cobwebs you can clean before you remember why you are not a full time housewife!

But the practice of carrying water reminds us that holy treasure can be hidden in the dull everyday stuff too.

Barbara Brown Taylor says this:

Cleaning refrigerators and toilets helps you connect with the food cycle at both ends.

Making beds reminds you that life-giving activities do not require much space.

Hanging laundry on the line offers you a chance to fly prayer flags disguised as bath towels and underwear.

If all life is holy, then anything that sustains life has holy dimensions too.

The difference between washing windows and resting in God can be a simple decision: choose the work and it becomes your spiritual practice.

Spraying vinegar and water on the panes, you baptise the glass.

Polishing the window, you let in the light.

No task is too menial to serve as a path.

Fulfilling the requirements of Roman bureaucracy.

Feeding, changing, soothing a new-born baby.

Creating a little home in a dirty stable.

No task is too menial to serve as a path.

Perhaps Advent hope is hidden in plain sight in the very room where you are sitting this morning.

The practice of getting lost.

The practice of carrying water.

The book finishes with the practice of pronouncing blessings.

Of course, I'm paid to pronounce blessings – at the end of a service, at weddings and funerals and baptisms, when the lights on top of the steeple were re-lit after a long time dark.

But you don't have to be ordained to bless things.

Or people.

There are no special qualifications.

We can all do it.

You can start small.

When you go out for a walk – just notice the things that catch your eye.

Look at them.

Really look at them.

The colour of the leaves on the Autumn trees.

The last few roses still flowering against the wall.

The gorgeous bloom on the blackthorn sloes.

Offer them a blessing.

Inside your head if there's anyone around.

Out loud if you're on your own.

A blessing doesn't confer holiness.

A blessing recognises that this tree – this flower – this berry is already holy.

Full of the life of God.

And then perhaps you might move on to blessing things that are not so lovely.

Could you bless that bag of rubbish dumped at the side of the road?

Could you offer a blessing to that graffiti on the car park wall?

Who says things have to be beautiful to deserve a blessing?

And when you have practiced on lovely things and shabby things, perhaps you might move on to people.

To recognising the holiness and the hope in every person you meet.

Who will you bless today?

The story of the nativity reminds us that blessing is found in the most unlikely, the most insanitary, the most grotty places.

The most ordinary and extraordinary people.
If only we have eyes to see it.

I think in this year of COVID we have been invited to pause.
To pause and pay attention to what matters.
And that is exactly the task of Advent.
To stop our normal lives, and think about the coming birth.
To pause our headlong rush towards putting up trees and wrapping presents and buying food, to think about the significance of God with us.
To find hope in getting lost, in the mundane tasks of each day, in our extraordinary power to bless each other.
Perhaps that treasure is not so buried after all.
It was here all along.
Amen.

Music – StF 173 Into the darkness of this world

Into the darkness of this world
Into the shadows of the night
Into this loveless place you came
Lightened our burdens, eased our pain
And made these hearts your home.
Into the darkness once again
O come Lord Jesus come

*Come with your love to make us whole
Come with your light to lead us on
Driving the darkness far from our souls
O come Lord Jesus come*

Into the longing of our souls
Into these heavy hearts of stone
Shine on us now your piercing light
Order our lives and souls aright
By grace and love unknown
Until in you our hearts unite
O come Lord Jesus come

*Come with your love to make us whole
Come with your light to lead us on
Driving the darkness far from our souls
O come Lord Jesus come*

O Hoy child, Emanuel
Hope of the ages, God with us
Visit again this broken place
Till all the earth declares your praise
And your great mercies own.
Now let your love be born in us
O come Lord Jesus come

*Come in your glory, take your place
Jesus, the name above all names
We long to see you face to face
O come Lord Jesus come.*

Maggi Dawn

Christchurch Community Moment – Claire Murray

- What does your life normally look like?
- What difference has COVID made?
- Where is God in all this?

Prayers for ourselves and others – using StF 168 as a prayer response

Come Lord Jesus Come (x3)

To this world of ours.

I invite you to place your candle – safely – on a table, or on the floor, at one end of the room.

Stand as far away from the candle as you can.

As you look towards that little flame, be conscious of the light of God in the place where you are.

It may be small.

It may be flickering.

It may sometimes be blown out.

But it can be re-lit.

There is no place where God is not.

Silence...

Lord we need you now (x3)

In this world of ours

I invite you to take a step towards the candle.

Bring to mind the people you know and love who need to feel the light of God today.

People who are ill, anxious, sad, lonely, fed up.

Hold each one in the light.

Silence...

Fill us with your peace (x3)

In this world of ours

I invite you to take another step towards the candle.

Bring to mind the times over this last week when you have lived as though this flame were not burning.

When have you tried to do everything in your own strength?

When have you ignored the little light of truth or kindness or love?

When have you given up and assumed the darkness is permanent?

Silence...

Touch us with your love (x3)

In this world of ours

I invite you to pick up the candle, and hold it in your cupped hands.

Carrying a candle from one little place of shelter

to another

is an act of love.

To move through the huge
and hungry darkness, step by step,
against the invisible wind
that blows forever around the world,
carrying a candle,
is an act of foolhardy hope.
Surely it will be blown out:
the wind is contemptuous,
the darkness cannot comprehend it.
How much light can this tiny flame shed
on all the great issues of the day?
It is as helpless as a newborn child.
Look how the human hand,
That cradles it, has become translucent:
Fragile and beautiful, foolish and loving,
Step by step.
The wind is stronger than this hand,
And the darkness infinite
Around this tiny here-and-now flame
that wavers, but keeps burning:
carried with such care
through an uncaring world
from one little place of shelter to another.
An act of love.

The light shines in the darkness
And the darkness can never put it out.

Jan Sutch Pickard

May we know your hope (x3)
In this world of ours

Lord's prayer

I invite you now to say the Lord's prayer out loud.

Use whichever version you are familiar with.

Use whichever language feels like your mother tongue.

Although we are apart, we join together in praying the prayer that Jesus gave us.

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.
Lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and for ever. Amen.

Blessing

We will move on from this place
Knowing that we arrived in a muddle
But are leaving with a clearer mind
And a more purposeful heart.

We arrived at this place alone
But we shall leave it
In the good company of One
Who chooses to travel with us

We found it hard to see beyond
Our own pressing needs – but we leave
With a broader understanding
Of your Kingdom ways

And now, as we move on, bless us;
As loving Father and Creator God,
As Saviour and friend,
As Spirit, guiding and empowering our lives
This day and forever.

Amen.

Music – StF 167

Colours of day dawn into the mind,
The sun has come up, the night is behind.
Go down in the city, into the street,
And let's give the message to the people we meet.

*So light up the fire and let the flame burn,
Open the door, let Jesus return.
Take seeds of his Spirit, let the fruit grow,
Tell the people of Jesus, let his love show.*

Go through the park, on into the town;
The sun still shines on, it never goes down.
The light of the world is risen again;
The people of darkness are needing our friend.

So light up the fire and let the flame burn,

Open your eyes, look into the sky,
The darkness has come, the sun came to die.
The evening draws on, the sun disappears,
But Jesus is living, and his Spirit is near.

So light up the fire and let the flame burn,

Sue McClellan, John Paculabo and Keith Ryecroft

*Some prayers are taken from 'Roots for Churches' (29/11/20)
And from 'Prayers from the heart - URC Prayer handbook 2020 (29/11/20)*

CCL 7011