

The Journey to Bethlehem

Advent One: Hope



An image from First United Church

"He hit me first. Hard".

Tad is speaking to the two police officers who stand in front of him. His face is tense and bloody as he gives his statement.

"I was sitting here on the pew, using the church phone, talking to my daughter. She's five years old and she was asking me if I am coming home for Christmas."

He suddenly chokes. More slowly he continues his statement to the police officers, "I was saying to her, 'Baby, Daddy can't come home.'"

He chokes again. He looks around him, a pitifully thin young man with scabs on his face. "How can I tell her I'm an addict and I can't leave the drugs? How can I tell my baby I want to die? I probably will die. There is no hope for me. I won't send her a present. I'll spend the money on drugs. I won't remember her "

His despair causes him to shake.

A police officer reaches out to him.

The man shakes off the attempt to give sympathy. He screams, "Don't touch me."

He lifts his fist to throw a punch at the officer. He is restrained and taken to jail.

Lighting the Advent Candle of Hope

One: Holy Mystery, we hold up into your bright warm Light your people who flail about in wild hopeless despair.

All: We pray, most humbly that your Hope will penetrate into the lives of the people who need you.

The candle is lit

One: Dear children of God, this candle is lit to remind us of the inspired gift of the Holy Spirit who delivers God's Hope to the world.

Hymn: Hope is a Star 7VU Verse 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.

The Journey to Bethlehem

Advent Two: Peace



An image from First United Church

"Really, what the hell does that mean? 'My Peace I leave with you.' Was Jesus talking about some out-of-body experience, because there is nothing on earth that looks peaceful. Syria, Iraq, Palestine, Russia, Israel and the good old U. S. of A are all killing each other. Canada is the second largest dealer of arms in the world. And the rich are getting richer and the poor are sucking up the Jesus platitudes."

He looks for a response from the prayer group he has just interrupted in the Chapel. The response was startled silence.

"So much for Jesus, huh?"

Sophia, who had been praying, starts laughing. "I'm sorry but does anyone see the irony? We are sitting here praying for the Peace of Christ and he barges in, interrupts us and tries to dominate and control us with his lack of faith."

Her tone changes. "Sir, where do you get off criticizing Jesus? Have you ever felt prayer? The real and passionate experience of prayer? You have to pick it up and grasp it with heart and soul. The words of Jesus are filled with power. They become powerless, manipulative platitudes when people use them as swords instead of invitations of healing. Now join us or get out. We don't have time for this."

Lighting the Advent Candle of Peace

One: Holy Mystery, when will Peace be a way of life for all nations?

All: Holy One, we need you. We can't do this ourselves. We need your vision of harmony. We ramble through complicated streams of conflict, taking sides and wallowing in subjective judgement. Help us to be integrated within the real Peace of Christ.

The candle is lit

One: Dear children of God, this candle is lit to remind us of the inspired gift of the Holy Spirit who delivers God's Peace to the world.

Hymn: Hope is a Star 7VU Verse 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.

The Journey to Bethlehem

Advent Three: Joy



An image from First United Church

"Jeremiah was a bullfrog" were the lyrics resonating to all corners of the church. The people in the accountant's office upstairs, in the rooms of the Women's shelter, in the Case Workers office and standing at reception can literally feel the beat of the music as the notes bounce off the walls of the church. It's Friday. Music jam day! Rudolph had arrived at 9:45 in the Chapel as always, after Spiritual Focus to set out the guitars, drums, amplifiers and then pull the piano out from the wall. Singers, guitarists, piano players, tambourine players, drummers and yes, some dancers had drifted in. The DTES is a depressing place but on Friday the music rolls out and washes over it all.

Melinda says, "I want to sing a Christmas song."

Someone begins, "Jingle Bells, jingle bells, jingle all the way..."

"Nooooo! I want a Church song about Jesus. Something that makes me feel happy."

"How about Joy to the World?"

"No, something happier. Silent Night."

"That is not a happy song. Its sad."

"It is happy because it tells a happy story. Its just quiet."

The music gears up, the first notes are played and everyone knows the words. The notes leave the Chapel and head into all corners of the church. Heads are raised. People stop to listen, to feel. This is Joy.

Lighting the Advent Candle of Joy

One: Holy Mystery, your Joy penetrates our very souls. It beats within our hearts.

All: Holy One, is there a way the gift of Joy can be received by every person on earth for even one moment? Would wars end? Would healing take place? Help us to bring out this possibility.

The candle is lit

One: Dear children of God, this candle is lit to remind us of the inspired gift of the Holy Spirit who delivers God's Joy to the world.

Hymn: Hope is a Star 7VU Verse 3

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

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.

The Journey to Bethlehem

Advent Four: Love



An image from First United Church

"I sit in Oppenheimer Park almost every day. Even the rainy days. My room is small. I sit here and I talk to God. God answers. When the cherry blossoms sway on the long row of trees God is waving hello. When the birds sing, I think God has sent them to sing just to me. When the sun shines on me sitting on my little bench it warms my aching bones and I know I am getting a God-hug. When someone stops to say hello I know God sent them. I might be poor and I might be judged for being poor but my God doesn't see me as others do. My God sees my heart and it twinkles with love. Once I had all the stuff of respectability. But what did it all matter? I had a son and a daughter who loved me, a husband who told me I was a princess."

She stops to smile at the memories. "That love mattered. As I lost each one of them, God remained. I am loved and comforted. *'My soul doth magnify the Lord and my Spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.'* It is here I give thanks. I am never alone."

Lighting the Advent Candle of Love

One: Holy Mystery, we pray all people of the world can experience the certainty of faith.

All: Your love is a blessing that transforms every molecule and cell of our being. Your love heals us.

The candle is lit

One: Dear children of God, this candle is lit to remind us of the inspired gift of the Holy Spirit who delivers God's Love to the world.

Hymn: Hope is a Star 7VU Verse 4

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

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.**

Micah 5: 2 “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me
one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient
times.”



Reaching Bethlehem

Christmas Eve

An image from First United Church

Leonard is sitting in the sanctuary of First United Church. It is Christmas Eve and he is remembering his childhood.

“I’m from Bella Coola. Rev. Bob Burrows was our minister when I was a kid. I remember I used to stare into the flames of the candles at the church when I was a child wondering what he meant when he said, ‘*Jesus is a light in the darkness*’ as he lit the candles. ‘Was Jesus the candle? Was he the flame?’ And then my little kid mind figured it out.” He stops. “By the way my brain hasn’t gotten much bigger since then.”

He laughs. Leonard, the loveliest of souls, always mocks himself.

“Like all bratty kids I thought there were monsters under my bed. My Dad would chase them away. He would leave the light on in my bedroom. He said monsters were afraid of light. So you know I get that now. I need Jesus to chase away the monsters in my darkness now. And it’s so crazy that Bob Burrows is here at this here church looking after us. He is still lighting candles and he is still talking about Jesus. But, somehow I just can’t believe that Jesus worries too much about this dirty old Indian.” He points to himself.

Hymn: 71VU ‘Twas in the Moon of Wintertime

All stand please – The *Christ Candle* is lit.

Silence



Community Prayer:

Holy Mystery, who are we that you love us? Frail yet strong, doubtful yet faithful, we struggle to accept these gifts you offer. Tinsel and twine are easier to receive. Please transform our awareness of

ourselves as lights within your Light. Fill our hearts with wonder. In the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen