



## South Cayuga Community Church

of The United Church of Canada

Pastor Dawn Ballantyne, DLM

VAMs: Joan Willis, Rev. Bryan Melick

Pianist, Pastor Dawn

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*Sunday, Dec 17th, 2023*

**those who dream... are not alone (love)**

### **Welcome – Territory Acknowledgement – Advent Prayer**

Good morning. Welcome – welcome to South Cayuga Community Church! Whoever you are and wherever you are on your faith journey, may you feel at home here with us.

The Indigenous people call the land their sacred home and for thousands of years, the Haudenosaunee people stewarded this land that we now gather on. As we dream this Advent season with the prophets, the Psalmists, with John the Baptist, Mary, Elizabeth, Joseph and the shepherds – as we step into the mystery and awe of God's dreams for the world – we dream not only of a deeper connection with God but also a deeper connection and reconciliation with all of God's people.

*Let us pray,*

As we wait for the Son, Jesus, to be born into our world again, Holy God,  
Help us to be ready.

Help us to dream of true hope, true peace, true joy, and true love.

And with these gifts filling our hearts and our souls, may your kingdom come. May we be those who dream this season and those who share your good news. Amen.

### **Call to Worship**

One: I knew joy, but when I heard the laugh of my child,

**All: Suddenly, joy was overflowing.**

One: I knew love, but when you held my hand,

**All: Suddenly, love was overflowing.**

One: I knew God, but when you showed me grace,  
when you forgave me,  
when you loved me,  
when you raised me,

**All: Suddenly, God was overflowing.**

One: So, let us worship Holy God together  
as a reminder that God is here and we are never alone.

**All: This is community.**

One: This is the body of Christ.

**All: Welcome home.**

## Gathering Song

## *I'll Be Home for Christmas*

## Candle Lighting Liturgy | The Candle of Love

A: I dream of music that makes my heart swell.

B: I dream of trees that take my breath away.

A: I dream of sunrises that wrap me in light.

B: I dream of family dinners that feel like home.

A: I dream of church services that give me hope.

B: I dream of love as the default.

A: So today, as we draw nearer to Christmas day, we light the candle of love.

*Light candle.*

B: May this light burn bright as a reminder that God is here and God is love.

A: We are not alone. Thanks be to God for a love like that. Amen.

## Sung response

## *Dream a Dream*

MV 158

## Prayer of Confession

God of Good News,

You say to me, "You are highly favored," but I struggle to see how that could be.

You say to me, "Do not be afraid," but I am afraid all the time.

You say to me, "Even the impossible is possible, just look at Elizabeth!"

But hope slips through my hands like water.

The impossible still feels impossible.

So today I pray,

Today we pray:

**Teach us to sing like Mary.**

**Teach us to laugh like Elizabeth.**

**Teach us to trust like the angels.**

**Forgive us when we can only do one at a time, or none at all.**

**Amen.**

## Words of Assurance/ Affirmation of Faith

We believe that this world is hard—

Harder than it has to be.

When the world falls apart around us,

We believe in listening for the angels that say, "Do not be afraid,"

And in seeking out the Elizabeths in our lives—

Those who laugh with joy at our arrival

And throw open the doors to their homes.

We believe that healthy relationships can offer healing,

Through the laughter of cousins,

The joy shared between siblings,

And the home found in partnership.

Therefore, we believe in church families,

In chosen families,

And in the love that extends beyond family.

We believe in friendships,

In neighbors,

And in leaning on each other when the going gets tough.

We believe in the Triune God—

Lover, Beloved, and Love itself—

Inherently relational, always connected, and never alone.  
We believe that that same belovedness exists for us.  
We believe that we are loved and claimed,  
Never alone.  
Thanks be to God for a love like that.

## **Opening Hymn**

## ***A Candle Is Burning***

**VU 6 v1-4**

### **Theme Time**

What do these things have in common?

I wonder if you have a person in your life that brings you comfort? That feels like a fuzzy blanket or a mug of tea/hot chocolate?

My grandma used to be my person – and today that person for me is my best friend Wendy – we’ve been friends since we were young and she’s the person that I would call today with great news or with terrible news. She’s the person that feels like a warm fuzzy blanket and brings me comfort. Today’s Bible story is about Mary and her cousin Elizabeth. Mary is going to be the mother of Jesus and she’s pregnant and she’s feeling a little bit scared, a little bit confused, a little bit stressed and she goes to see her cousin Elizabeth. Elizabeth must have been like my friend Wendy is to me. Her person, the person that brings her comfort.

The Bible says in the gospel of Luke,  
“Mary got up and went quickly to a town in the mountains of Judea. She went to Zechariah’s house and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the unborn baby inside Elizabeth jumped. Then Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.” Luke 1:39-31, ICB

As soon as Mary heard she was going to have a baby, she went to go see her cousin. And do you know what? Her cousin was going to have a baby, too! I think Mary wanted to be around someone who knew what she was going through. That’s always nice, isn’t it, when someone knows what you’re feeling and can help you feel better?

Today when you leave the sanctuary we have a very special craft planned for you. You are all going to get to make a comfort pillow! So for times when you need a little extra snuggle, maybe your comfort person isn’t available for a chat or maybe you just want to be alone to think – you’re going to have a pillow to hug and hopefully it warms you up and brings you a little bit of comfort. AND, we know that there are some folks from our congregation who could use a little bit of extra comfort, ones who don’t get out of the house much or who live in nursing and retirement homes – so after you’ve finished your pillow that you get to keep and take home with you, you’re going to work on a pillow that we’re going to give away!

We’ve got 35 pillows to make! So folks, don’t despair – you’re all going to have an opportunity to pour a little creativity and love into these pillows as well. Because after church today there’s going to be lunch. And then there’s the Christmas concert and dessert after that. But probably, between church ending and lunch and the concert, there will be time for everyone to tie at least a few knots in a few pillows so that hopefully we can get them all done today and distributed this week.

So before you go, we’re going to pray, we’re going to sing with the Joyful Strummers and then us adults will come join you for lunch and pillow making in about half an hour. Sound good?

### ***Prayer***

Dear God, thank you for sending other people to help us when we are in need of comfort. Please help us to be like warm fuzzy blankets and cups of hot chocolate to those who come to us in need. Thanks for always loving us God, amen.

## **Children’s Hymn**

## ***Put a Little Love in your Heart***

## **Prayer for Illumination**

Holy God,  
Before you could speak, you were speaking—  
Leaping in wombs, kicking, stretching, jumping for joy.  
You have always found a way to show up in our midst,  
Particularly on our fearful or lonely days.  
So today, as we crack open our Bibles,  
Fluttering through these old beloved pages,  
We ask that you would move again.  
Stir in us.  
Speak to us.  
Fill us with the Holy Spirit.  
And if we are not able to hear your Word clearly,  
Then give us Elizabeths  
Who will point out your presence in delight and joy.  
Before you could speak, you were speaking,  
So here and now, Creator God, we are listening.  
Amen.

### **Scripture**

### **Luke 1:26-45**

<sup>26</sup> In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, <sup>27</sup> to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. <sup>28</sup> The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

<sup>29</sup> Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. <sup>30</sup> But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. <sup>31</sup> You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. <sup>32</sup> He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, <sup>33</sup> and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

<sup>34</sup> "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

<sup>35</sup> The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called<sup>[a]</sup> the Son of God. <sup>36</sup> Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. <sup>37</sup> For no word from God will ever fail."

<sup>38</sup> "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.

<sup>39</sup> At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, <sup>40</sup> where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. <sup>41</sup> When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. <sup>42</sup> In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! <sup>43</sup> But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? <sup>44</sup> As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby

in my womb leaped for joy. <sup>45</sup> Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!"

Reader: Hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church. **All: Thanks be to God**

## Hymn

*There Was a Child in Galilee*

*MV 134*

## Reflection

"The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God' (v30). There are three possible responses to fear: fight, flight or freeze. Mary is, perhaps, frozen by the appearance of the angel Gabriel, whose greeting and message leave her perplexed and pondering. But she is not paralyzed by fear; instead she is suspended in time as the angel foretells her destiny: to bear the Son of God. Mary is also told that she is not alone because her cousin Elizabeth is miraculously pregnant after years of being barren. Fully awakened by the angel's declaration, "For nothing will be impossible with God" (v37), Mary accepts her destiny by saying, "Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" (v38a).

Why does Mary accept her destiny? Mary and Elizabeth are mutually confirming witnesses that God stands with those who are marginalized. They know that they are not alone; they have each other, and know that God deems them worthy. Today we often talk about the need for solidarity...

What Mary and Elizabeth's witness teaches us is that solidarity emerges when we share a dream that perplexes us into pondering what God intends for and requires of us. The late Congressman John Lewis wrote in a letter about solidarity that "Millions of people motivated simply by human compassion laid down the burdens of division. Around the country and the world, you set aside race, class, age, language, and nationality to demand respect for human dignity." People motivated simply by human compassion become the love that does justice.

So I wonder what symbols represent solidarity to us? Solidarity of wondering together what God would have us do?

I have this pink, cat ear tuque that I wore a few years ago now, in 2017, in Toronto at a Women's march in solidarity with women around the world, but particularly in the United States who were fighting for women's and humans rights.

\*\*\*switch slide to nativity with rubble

Today we have not lit the candle of peace in solidarity with those in the Holy Land where there is no peace today. We heard the prophet Isaiah say last week, "Comfort, comfort my people says your God." (Isaiah 40:1) and so if we can in one small way, bring some comfort to those who are suffering in the Holy Land, those who have lost loved ones, lost their homes, their businesses... then let us stand in solidarity.

I wonder where else we might find solidarity this Christmas? Last week in the collection of bags and bags of food for the Salvation Army foodbank – recognizing that so many are struggling this year with paying bills and putting food on the table, let alone trying to give gifts or make the seasons special... Yesterday we gathered in solidarity with the Worrall family as we said farewell to Jim and on Wednesday night we'll gather for our Blue Christmas or Longest Night service in solidarity with all those who are grieving or mourning or not feelin' it this year.

How about meeting in solidarity at the grocery store? Commiserating with strangers about the cost of groceries? Or exhausted parents bonding in the line-up waiting to have their children's photo taken with Santa?

\*\*\*switch to outline of Santa and little boy

How about Santa himself? My friend and colleague Doug told a story this week about how he'd been voluntold by his wife to be Santa at the elementary school where their daughters attend. Doug was less than impressed until he got there and realized what joy his presence was bringing to everyone around him. And then, a little boy, a very sad looking little guy climbed onto Doug's lap.

The man he was with spoke only Spanish so he talked into his phone into a translate app, and then held it up for Doug to read. The man explained that the little boy's father had died recently and the little boy was wondering if Santa could get a message to him in heaven.

\*\*\*switch to four guys in camo and Santa hats with beards

That story reminded me of one of my favourite Christmas songs. Not a hymn or a popular carol – but a song from stars of Duck Dynasty, the TV series, Christmas album – the only CD that I have in my truck. It's called "Hairy Christmas." As in, 'we're wishing you a hairy Christmas and a happy, happy, happy new year.' One year at the church I served in Ailsa Craig, the children and I all dressed up in our camo and put on fake beards and lip synced to it. Anyway, one of the lines of the chorus is, "like Jesus and Santa Claus, we got love behind these beards."

\*\*\*switch to pic of Jesus and Santa side by side

Jesus and Santa both have beards, (with love behind them?) both offer gifts, both bring comfort – but I wonder why is Santa more successful? The church is pretty full today, there might have been a bit of congestion getting in the parking lot or even in the front door, but there wasn't a lineup like we'd find at the mall waiting to see Santa, was there... I wonder what the church can learn from Santa? Maybe it's all in what we'd tell Santa if we were sitting on his knee? Like the little boy who wanted to send a message to his dad in heaven for Christmas – what is it that we'd really, truly like for Christmas this year? Healing from an old wound, reconciliation for a broken relationship, freedom from the grip of habit or addiction, provision for a new job, peace that transcends all understanding, joy that will not fade in the face of circumstances, genuine friendships, equality for all people, true peace and harmony in war torn countries.

\*\*switch to Santa kneeling at the manger

Some will argue that Santa Claus has no place in the church. But as those of us who gathered a month ago now, to kick-off the Advent season we learned about the five stories of Christmas. Beginning with the nativity story – the story of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, the magic of Christmas – the origin of story of Saint Nicholas, thirdly was connection – gathering with others around the tree, and feasting around tables. The fourth story was of abundance – of shopping and gifts, of sharing and celebrating big. And finally, the story of heritage – of family traditions and weather patterns and how you recognize the winter solstice. And we discovered that each of us place different values on those five different stories – and that's okay because it's what makes Christmas special to each of us.

My friend Doug, who was playing Santa Claus at the school that day had started out asking the children what they wanted for Christmas.. until he realized that many of the little ones had lofty desires for expensive presents and knowing what neighbourhoods they lived in, Doug didn't think promising them that Santa would deliver such extravagant gifts was a good idea. So he started asking the children what they love about Christmas, what their favourite thing about Christmas is...

\*\*\* switch to blue background Bethlehem with Mary & Joseph and donkey

I wonder what your favourite thing about Christmas is? I wonder what you love about Christmas? I wonder where you're finding love this Christmas? Where you're finding solidarity and comfort? I wonder where love and comfort and solidarity are finding you this holiday season? John 3:16 reminds us that God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believes in him will have everlasting life. The greatest gift of all, was given that first Christmas. The gift of unconditional love. The gift of solidarity – God with us – Emmanuel. The gift of comfort – the promise of everlasting life. Praise be to God for a love like that. Amen.

### **Prayers of the People**

Loving and gracious God, we offer you our thanksgiving and praise for the gift of the Son Jesus, for the gift of unconditional love and absolute forgiveness and the promise of everlasting life.

We ask for your forgiveness for when we turn away from you when we are in need of comfort and look elsewhere; towards the world, towards things, and people and even distractions rather than coming to you. Holy God, we know that you are the Great Comforter, that you are always with us, holding us firmly and securely in the palm of your hand. When we feel alone, when we feel

abandoned, when we feel like fear or grief is overcoming us – you are with us, like a warm blanket, enveloping us with your love and tenderly putting our pieces back together.

Almighty Creator, we pray for those who are mourning today, who are lonely, who are missing loved ones and dreading the upcoming holiday. We pray for those who are in nursing and retirement homes, those who are in hospital, those who are at home and in need of comfort – wrap them in your love we ask. May angels – family, friends, caregivers, staff, and neighbours – bring your love and your light with them.

We pray for those in the Holy Land where war and terror ravages and for those living around the world in violent situations as well as those in our own vicinity who face danger in their own homes. We pray for those who are struggling with addictions, those who are living on the street, in shelters and on couches – those who are wrestling with social services, with unemployment and underemployment. Give them your strength and courage Holy God, we ask.

Holy Mystery we give thanks for the children connected to this congregation, the youth and young adults who are finishing up their exams, coming home for visits and those who are spending their first Christmas away from home. We pray for the parents and siblings who love and miss them – we pray that they will feel our prayers lifting them and loving them. God we all have prayers weighing heavy on our hearts this morning and in a moment of silence we bring them before you...

In your way and in your time, we ask that they would be answered Holy God.

We give thanks to you God for the generous financial gifts offered to this church – may they be light for those in the shadows of society, food for those who hunger, refreshment for those parched by life, and hope for all who cry out to you, O God.

Thank you for the gift and ability to dream. May we be those who dream this Christmas – may we take our lead from Mary and Elizabeth and the prophets – may we dream new dreams – for ourselves, for our families, for this church, our community and the world. Dreams of new life, holy life. May those dreams in our hearts grow like seeds in fertile soil – trusting that you are the Great Gardener, warming those seeds like sunshine on a cold day. Thank you for the sun that warms our frostbitten cheeks and the Son, Jesus, the babe born in a manger, light of the world who taught his friends to pray to our Parent in heaven, saying the words together,

### **The Lord's Prayer**

Our Father, who art in heaven,  
hallowed be thy name,  
thy kingdom come,  
thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread.  
And forgive us our trespasses  
as we forgive those who trespass against us.  
And lead us not into temptation  
but deliver us from evil.  
For thine is the kingdom,  
the power and the glory,  
forever and ever. Amen.

### **Announcements**

#### **Closing Hymn**

***Hark! the Herald Angels Sing***

**VU 48**

#### **Sending Forth**

May you have the strength to dream wild dreams of justice, peace, and joy that overflows.

May you have the humanity to listen to the dreams of others.  
May you have the confidence to trust that the God who heard the cries of the Israelites in Egypt, hears your dreams as well.  
And may you have the conviction to return to this space, for our best dreams are those we dream together.  
In the name of God the original dreamer,  
Jesus – the dream come true,  
And the Holy Spirit who enables us to be those who dream –  
Go in peace, go in love.

***Walk with Me***

*Walk with me, I will walk with you  
and build the land that God has planned  
where love shines through.*

Take hope, peace, joy, love, and the light with you, as you go.  
And all God's people say, Amen.

***Go Now in Peace***

Go now in PEACE, never be afraid  
God will go with you each hour of ev'ry day,  
Go now in FAITH, steadfast, strong and true,  
Know God will guide you in all you do.  
Go now in LOVE, and show you believe,  
Reach out to others so all the world can see.  
God will be there, watching from above.  
Go now in PEACE, in FAITH, and in LOVE  
Amen Amen Amen

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