



South Cayuga Community Church

of The United Church of Canada

Pastor Dawn Ballantyne, DLM

VAMs: Joan Willis, Rev. Bryan Melick

Pianist, Joan Melick

Music Leader: Donna Mulder

Sunday, Jan 7, 2024

EPIPHANY

Welcome

Good morning and welcome! Welcome to those of you who are here in the sanctuary and to those who are joining us online! Whoever you are and wherever you are at along your faith journey, we're so glad you've chosen to worship with us this morning!

Territory Acknowledgement

Since time immemorial, Indigenous peoples have occupied and cared for this land, the country we now call Canada – from the Atlantic to the Pacific oceans. Specifically here in Haldimand County, we acknowledge this land as the traditional home of the Haudenosaunee people.

As a community of faith, we seek to rebuild right relations with all of God's people – to learn from one another and to live with respect and gratitude for all of creation.

Lighting of the Christ Candle

The light of a lone candle casts its path a surprising distance.

May this light remind us of the infinite ways that Jesus illumines our lives and guides our steps.

Let all that we are, reflect God's light and love and grace.

May the light shine – gathering us in and bringing us together to worship here this morning.

Call to Worship

One: The Magi had a dream.

All: They dreamed of a Messiah.

They dreamed of just rulers.

They dreamed of a new day for all people.

One: The Magi had a dream, and this dream led them to action.

All: They journeyed to unknown places.

They followed a star.

They walked for days to get to Jesus.

One: So may we be like the Magi,

All: May our dreams inspire action.

May we worship the one true God. Amen.

Opening Prayer

God, we love to worship you when the stars are bright above us. We love to worship you when the sky is clear, and the breeze just right. We love to worship you when the journey to Bethlehem is an easy one. Unfortunately, as you know, this journey of life, love, and faith is rarely easy. Now and again, the stars disappear. Blisters form on our feet, and the journey is far too long and lonely. On these days, forgive us for giving up quickly. Forgive us for allowing the dream to die and for taking the

shortcut home. We want to be as brave as the Magi. We want to persevere. Guide our feet. Show us the stars. We are walking towards you, O God. Amen.

Opening Hymn

A Light Is Gleaming

VU 82

Theme Time

“What keeps you going?”

Tell me about your Christmas! What did you get? Who did you see? What was the best thing you did over the holidays? Did anyone do something they'd never done before?

I did something I'd never done before on Christmas Day – I went fishing!

Dan and I went with our friend Matt in his boat, out of Port Maitland and we were fishing over by Rock Point, trolling back and forth, back and forth. We went out at about seven in the morning and didn't get back until almost noon. What do you think kept us out there that long? What kept us going?

Catching fish! (And every time I reeled in another fish, our captain Matt would put on his elf costume so we could take pictures with him as an elf!) We had even planned to go in at one point but then we caught another fish! So we decided we had to stay a little longer and keep fishing!

Today's bible story is about the magi or the wise men who came to visit Jesus and Mary and Joseph. They travelled from a faraway country; it was probably a long, difficult journey to get there. God sent a star to guide the magi to meet Jesus. They didn't have planes or trains or buses. But they kept going even though it was hard.

I wonder what it was that kept them going... Kept them travelling along the road with their camels and all their luggage and their presents for Jesus... (the good news of Jesus, the Messiah)

God keeps shining, day and night – that's what the Bible tells us in the book of Isaiah 60:1-2, “Jerusalem, get up and shine. Your light has come.

The glory of the Lord shines on you.

Darkness now covers the earth.

Deep darkness covers her people.

But the Lord shines on you, and people see God's glory around you.”

God keeps shining to guide us and to show us the way, because the good news of Jesus is just that important.

I wonder what helps you keep going when you're doing something important?

Now, those magi probably were wearing sandals on their journey. Because it's usually pretty hot in Bethlehem. But around here – it's not so hot outside right now, is it? It's not even as warm as it was on Christmas day, now – now it's below freezing and pretty chilly and nobody's wearing sandals, right?

What are you wearing on your feet? And what's inside your boots and shoes? Socks!!! And we know that there are lots of people who don't have warm socks right now or maybe they only have one or two pairs of socks and they could use some more. So... do you know what those wise men or magi brought as gifts for Jesus? [gold, frankincense and myrrh]

I'm not sure that those are super helpful gifts right now – but socks are always a thoughtful and appreciated gift! So that's why we invited everyone to bring socks for Jesus today – and we're going to collect them and then distribute them to folks in need of warm socks.

We're going to collect them in a pretty fun way... I'm going to put my helmet on and everyone is going to have the opportunity to throw their socks and try to get them in the basket!!!

Socks for Jesus

Hymn

I Am the Light of the World

VU 87

Poem

I Imagine by Sarah Are Speed

I imagine they packed bags -

Water and food, blankets and clothes.

I imagine they packed tools –
Maps and telescopes that could bring the stars closer,
As if the sky was a comforter they could pull near.

I imagine they hugged loved ones and said,
“We’ll be back soon.”
And when loved ones said,
“Don’t leave,”
“It’s risky,”
“You don’t even know what you’re chasing,”
I imagine they put lips to foreheads and said,
“There is a light in the darkness. I must chase that.”

And then I imagine they walked.
I imagine they walked until legs were tired and knees gave out.
Maybe they told stories on the road and laughed into the open sky.
Or maybe they sat in silence and prayed for more light.
However the road unfolded, I imagine it was not easy.

I imagine all of this, not because I’ve chased stars,
But because I have dreamed
And these dreams for justice make the Magi’s story my own.
For every time we fight for justice,
We start in the dark.
We hug loved ones and say,
“There’s a light in the darkness, I must chase that.”
We walk until we’re tired,
And then we keep walking.
We laugh at the open sky as a form of resistance.
We pray in the night for signs of more light.
And no matter how important the journey is,
And no matter how much progress we make,
The journey to justice is never easy.

And so I pray,
That maybe one day,
We will be like the Magi,
And will walk ourselves into the light.
Until then, don’t forget –
There’s a light in the darkness. We must chase that.

Scripture **Matthew 2:1-12**

¹⁻² After Jesus was born in Bethlehem village, Judah territory—this was during Herod’s kingship—a band of scholars arrived in Jerusalem from the East. They asked around, “Where can we find and pay homage to the newborn King of the Jews? We observed a star in the eastern sky that signaled his birth. We’re on pilgrimage to worship him.”

³⁻⁴ When word of their inquiry got to Herod, he was terrified—and not Herod alone, but most of Jerusalem as well. Herod lost no time. He gathered all the high priests and religion scholars in the city together and asked, “Where is the Messiah supposed to be born?”

⁵⁻⁶ They told him, “Bethlehem, Judah territory. The prophet Micah wrote it plainly:

It’s you, Bethlehem, in Judah’s land,
no longer bringing up the rear.
From you will come the leader
who will shepherd-rule my people, my Israel.”

⁷⁻⁸ Herod then arranged a secret meeting with the scholars from the East. Pretending to be as devout as they were, he got them to tell him exactly when the birth-announcement star appeared. Then he told them the prophecy about Bethlehem, and said, “Go find this child. Leave no stone unturned. As soon as you find him, send word and I’ll join you at once in your worship.”

⁹⁻¹⁰ Instructed by the king, they set off. Then the star appeared again, the same star they had seen in the eastern skies. It led them on until it hovered over the place of the child. They could hardly contain themselves: They were in the right place! They had arrived at the right time!

¹¹ They entered the house and saw the child in the arms of Mary, his mother. Overcome, they kneeled and worshiped him. Then they opened their luggage and presented gifts: gold, frankincense, myrrh.

¹² In a dream, they were warned not to report back to Herod. So they worked out another route, left the territory without being seen, and returned to their own country.

Reflection

For many years, I was never really into new year’s resolutions. But twice, I can tell you they’ve been really, really transformative for me. The first time was in 2019 when I decided to have a year of scaring myself actually; of doing things that I had never done before and getting right out of my comfort zone. It started with signing up for power skating – which was gruelling and hard – I could skate but I was out of shape and much older than I had been when I had last been skating on a regular basis; next up was a snowmobile trip near Algonquin Park. I had only ever been a passenger on a snowmobile, riding behind a family member, on short jaunts around Caistor, never on northern trails in the middle of nowhere. That’s also the year I got my motorcycle license, my beginners, anyway, because then I crashed and never actually got my “M” designation... and that’s also the year I left the pastoral charge that had supported me through school and loved me through great loss and I began here at South Cayuga – came home – by another way. When I left at 19 I said I’d never be back... and I took a roundabout way, but eventually, a journey that took 20 years – I made my way back home again. That was 2019.

Last year my resolution or motto became “Best me 2023.” I gave up alcohol, caffeine, fried foods and cut back on sugar. I went to the gym. I took vitamins. I took time to do things that fed my soul, like fishing and hunting and quad-ing and bird watching and reading, (58 books!). And this year I have committed to “More 2024.” ‘More sleep, more music, more tea, more books, more sunsets, more creating, more long walks, more laughter, more hugs, more dreaming, more road trips, more fun, more love.’ I posted that on Facebook and someone said that I’m missing ‘more fishing.’ But that list was written on an image that I’d seen online - I loved all that it had included, especially more dreaming... considering that our entire Advent season this year had been based on the theme, “those

who dream.” And yet when we got to Christmas and moved beyond it to epiphany the theme continued with the magi responding to a dream – a dream which sends them off course and home by another way.

What a dream they must have had to make them find a different route, rather than retracing their steps and going back the way they’d come – but to turn right instead of left, to head south instead of north, in order to avoid Herod the Great, or King Herod, the Roman ruler of Judea, who had asked the magi to send word once they had found Jesus. What a dream it must have been for them to be so sure of their decision that they wouldn’t risk running into him or his followers....

Which made me think of this poem by Joyce Rupp called, “Old Maps No Longer Work”; which seems like it describes the plight of the magi but also perhaps, it could describe each one of us as we are only seven days into a brand new year of a 365 page book of blank pages...

I keep pulling it out –
the old map of my inner path
I squint closely at it,
trying to see some hidden road
that maybe I’ve missed,
but there’s nothing there now
except some well-travelled paths.
they have seen my footsteps often,
held my laughter, caught my tears.

I keep going over the old map
but now the roads lead nowhere,
a meaningless wilderness
where life is dull and futile.

“toss away the old map,” she says
“you must be kidding!” I reply.
she looks at me with Sarah eyes
and repeats “toss it away.
It’s of no use where you’re going.”

“I have to have a map!” I cry,
“even if it takes me nowhere.
I can’t be without direction,”

“but you are without direction,”
she says, “so why not let go, be free?”

so there I am – tossing away the old map,
sadly fearfully, putting it behind me.
“whatever will I do?” wails my security
“trust me” says my midlife soul.

no map, no specific directions,
no “this way ahead” or “take a left”.

how will I know where to go?
how will I find my way? no map!
but then my midlife soul whispers
“there was a time before maps
when pilgrims travelled by the stars.”

It is time for the pilgrim in me
to travel in the dark,
to learn to read the stars
that shine in my soul.
I will walk deeper

into the dark of my night.
I will wait for the stars.
trust their guidance.
and let their light be enough for me.

May the light of the stars guide us this year – just as they led the magi to Jesus. And if we need a tighter turn or even a U-turn – may God’s guidance come in the form of a dream too powerful to ignore. Trusting that God’s dreams for us is a dream of hope – a dream so strong that it manifested in a child born in Bethlehem over 2000 years ago. Hope gives us the strength to live on in the world even when our dreams are crushed, when where we thought we were going or how we thought we were going to get there gets turned upside down and we’re lonely and afraid. Don’t give up on your dreams. Turn them into prayers of grounded hope. And if your dreams are dashed, know that God is with you, that God’s hope surrounds and uplifts you and that God’s plan is always filled with love.
Amen.

Hymn

The First Nowell

VU 91

Prayers of the People

It is a prayer practice in churches all over the world to give people a star word on this Epiphany Sunday. There are many reasons behind this tradition. First, we know that the Magi followed a star, which ultimately led them to Jesus. Therefore, we too use all the resources we have available to us— including creative prayer practices and intention words for the new year— to move closer to Jesus. Secondly, we trust that God uses multiple ways to guide us and speak to us. Star words are one such lens that might provide us with a way to look for God in our midst, both actively and in hindsight. Finally, we know that the most common prayer practice for many involves speaking to God as opposed to silence or contemplation. However, this prayer practice invites a new prayer rhythm of reflection and review that can be a powerful new way to connect with God.

So in just a moment, you will be invited to draw a star word. However, as we prepare our hearts and minds for this centering moment, let us pray. . .

God of starlight,
There has always been something holy about stars for us. We wish on them. We look for them. We celebrate when we see them streaking across the sky on summer nights. We map out their designs, and consider glimpses of the Milky Way holy enough for bare feet. There has always been something holy about stars. We know that. You know that. The Magi must have known that. So today we come

to you in prayer, trusting that if you can paint the stars in the sky, then surely you can hear us over the noise.

So first we pray for people wishing on stars: We pray for those for whom 2023 was a year full of hospital rooms and isolation. We pray for those who lost love in 2023. We pray for those who lost life in 2023. We pray for those who lost a job, a home, or a sense of hope last year. We pray for parents and children who struggled in 2023. At the same time, we also say a prayer of gratitude for all the stars you have left for us this last year— the signs and mile markers of hope on the horizon. We thank you for slowing us down a little last year so that we could smell the roses. We thank you for the gifts of technology, backyard gardening, and sourdough bread. We thank you for everyone who makes our lives a little bit better. We thank you for doctors, nurses, health care aids, hospitals and hospices – all who help us with modern medicine. And we also give thanks for naturopaths and herbalists and those who care for us with earthy medicines. We thank you for protesters demanding justice and educating us about the plights of others. In so many ways, 2023 was a turbulent year, and in so many ways, you were there, leaving stars in the sky, painting hope on the horizon.

So today, Holy God, January 7, 2024, we ask that once more you would give us a sign. Pour out a double portion of your Spirit on these star words, so that these ordinary slips of paper might provide us a glimpse of something more. For like the Magi, we are seeking you. Like the Magi, we are looking up. Like the Magi, we just need a sign. Guide our feet. Show up in the mundane and the extraordinary. Be in the stars in the sky and in our everyday lives. Hear our prayers. We are hopeful, O God. We are hopeful. And so with the confidence of children wishing on stars, we pray the prayer you taught us to pray, saying. . .

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.

Receiving the Stars

As I mentioned in our prayer, I have star words for everyone today. These are intention words or guiding words that have been printed out on ordinary paper. In just a moment you will be invited to come forward and draw a word off the table – that paper is for you to keep and that word is to use as a guiding tool throughout the year. I encourage you to trust the word that you have drawn but no one is policing the words, if you strongly desire to put your word back and choose again, that will be fine. Friends, we have been seeking, but God is here. Thanks be to God. Please come and select your star word for 2024.

Prayer After Receiving the Stars

God of ink black skies and starry nights, like the Magi so many years ago, we are here, seeking you. Step by step, we have wandered into this space with the hope of feeling you in our midst. And step by step, you have claimed us, loved us, and fed us. Today we have all drawn star words. For some of us, these words are full of meaning, challenge, and invitation already. For others, these words are a blank canvas—inviting you into our lives. So as a new year dawns, we pray that you would be in our dreams and in our waking. Allow us to use these star words as a tool to see you in our everyday life. May they guide us, as the star guided the Magi. May they illuminate your path, as light always does.

And in a year, may we find ourselves here, together again, with a mouth full of praise for the ways in which you have been present to us. With hearts full to the brim, together we pray, Amen.

Closing Hymn

Arise, Your Light Is Come

VU 79

Sending Forth

Being light in the world can be as small as the twinkling of a faraway star or as bright as a bonfire.

Each time we bring light, the darkness is diminished and the light builds.

Go forth remembering that you are the light of Christ, precious and needing protection like a candle in a lantern, but also bold and strong and unstoppable if unleashed.

We are the light of the world – little signs of love, hope, joy and gratitude sent out into the world to do good, to be good, and to remind the world that, in the words of Desmond Tutu, we were all meant for more than strife.

So as the magi were welcomed into the nativity scene, may we welcome the light of Christ into our hearts and bear it boldly and bravely each day!

Hope Shines as the Solitary Star

MV 220

Hope shines as the solitary star.

Faith is the inner light.

***You and I together mirror the Light of Lights,
and illumine the pathway home.***

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.