

CHRISTMAS 2020

# CHURCH @ HOME

staying connected with God,  
each other, and ourselves



## INSIDE:

A CHRISTMAS EVE  
SCRIPTURE

CHRISTMAS READINGS

CHRISTMAS SERMONS

CHRISTMAS  
REFLECTIONS FROM  
OUR COMMUNITY

## Merry Christmas!

### Yes! Christmas is here!!

That is a lot of exclamation points but they are needed, aren't they? Christmas is a big deal. It is when we get to remember and celebrate the liberating, revolutionary, beautiful and everything-changing news that the Christ is born, God is with us, and we are not alone.

That's everything-changing news because it reminds us that God isn't somewhere up there, but is here, with us and for us, and because God is here, with us and for us, we don't have to live like God isn't – we don't have to live like death, darkness, and despair will win; we don't have to live like the ending to stories are written; and we don't have to live in a world of injustice, division, and violence.

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**red deer lake**  
united church

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We don't have to live like that and our world doesn't have to be like that because Extravagant and Indiscriminate Love is here showing us a new way to be human and that a new kind of world is possible.

Beautiful, right? It really does have the power to change everything.

We need to sit with that news right now because we need some Christmas. We need some of that in our lives and worlds right now. With so much anxiety, isolation, worry, fear, and division going on in us and around us, we need to remember there is a light shining in our darkness and it is a light that will never go out. So my friends, while I would love love love to be with you and be able to tell you this in person, I'll have to do it here:

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WITH SO MUCH ANXIETY, ISOLATION, WORRY, FEAR, AND DIVISION GOING ON IN US AND AROUND US, WE NEED TO REMEMBER THERE IS A LIGHT SHINING IN OUR DARKNESS.

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**To all of you walking in great darkness, may you see the Light that is shining and may you have the courage to not only step into and receive it, but to become it - to be a source of hope, peace, joy, and love for the world around you.**

From everyone here at RDLUC, we love you and we miss you. Merry Christmas,  
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## **THE Season is upon us!**

As I write this to you, I am excited! The sky is inky black but there is a touch of red, daring to streak across in the early morning hours as the sun is starting to herald in the day.

Directly in front of me, I am looking at the North Star, stark and alone. Its radiating beauty is bright, mesmerizing, and powerful. My thoughts immediately turn to that mystical, exciting, and holy time when the wise men followed THE star to where Jesus, a tiny baby, lay in a manger.

This captivating and awe-inspiring story of new birth, humility, and Divine Power heralds promises of a better world and what's to come. It has been a challenging year filled with change, uncertainty, anxiety, stress, loss, and grief. It has also contained moments of tremendous love, dedication, faith, hope, and grace.

I forward on these promises of hope and love to you for this Christmas season. I am sending my deepest gratitude to all who have offered their services to bring love and care into your homes and hearts this past year.

Please reach out and let us know how we can make your Christmas that extra little bit special this year, particularly if you live alone.

Christmas Blessings and much love to each of you.

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## A CHRISTMAS EVE SCRIPTURE:

During the rule of Herod, God sent the angel to the village of Nazareth to see a young woman named Mary who was engaged to be married to a young man named Jospheh.

Upon entering Mary's home, the Angel greeted her: "Good morning, Mary! You're beautiful from the inside out! God be with you." Mary wondered why an Angel would be visiting her.

Before she could say anything, the Angel assured her, saying: "Mary, you have nothing to fear. God is about to change the universe and wants to do it through you. If you say 'yes,' you will give birth to a son. You'll name him Jesus which means 'God is with us.' He will be the one who shows us how to live and lead us into a new kind of world."

Being a strong and courageous woman, Mary said: "Yes, I see it all now. Let it be with me, just as you say."

Then the angel left her.

About nine months later, the Emperor of Rome, Caesar Augustus, King Herod's boss, ordered a census to be taken throughout the Empire. Everyone had to travel to their hometown to be counted. So Joseph took Mary, who was very pregnant, on the three-day journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem. While they were in Bethlehem, the time came for her to give birth. Just as the Angel said, she gave birth to a son and she named him Jesus. She wrapped him in a blanket and laid him in a manger, because there was no room at the Inn.

Meanwhile, there were shepherds camping in the fields nearby. Suddenly, God's Angel stood among them and God's light blazed around them. They were terrified. But the Angel told them: "Friends, don't be afraid. I'm here to announce a great and joyful event that is meant for anyone and everyone:

The world is about to change. A Saviour has just been born! He will be a friend, a teacher, and a guide, someone who will show us what it means to be human and alive in this world, someone who will help us build a world of justice and peace! This is what you're to look for: a baby wrapped in a blanket and lying in a manger."

At once the Angel was joined by a huge angelic choir singing, "The Christ is born! Hope, joy, peace, and love to all!"

The shepherds ran off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. As they experienced it all, they knew it was true and they ran off, telling everyone the good news of Christmas:

God is here, with us and for us, we are not alone.



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## CHRISTMAS READINGS

One of my favourite writers is Fred Buechner. If you read any of his stuff (start with *The Magnificent Defeat*), I'm pretty sure you'd go, 'Oh, this guy influenced Nick.' What he does with words is just ... incredible and wondrous. Below are a few of his (adapted) pieces where he writes about Christmas from the perspective of some of the characters in the nativity story. Reading these many years ago completely transformed Christmas for me (and yes, this is where I got the idea for all those Open Letters we've done over the years) and I hope they'll do the same for you.

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## THE INN KEEPER - BUECHNER



That was a long time ago and a long way away. But the memories of men are also long, and nobody has forgotten anything about my own sad, strange part in it all, unless maybe they have forgotten the truth about it.

But you can never blame people for forgetting the truth because it is, after all, such a subtle and evasive commodity. In fact, all that distinguishes a truth from a lie may be no more than the batting of an eyelid or the tone of a voice. If I were to say, 'I BELIEVE!' that would be a lie, but if I were to say, 'I believe ... ,' that might be the truth.

So I do not blame the world for forgetting these subtleties and making me out to be the black villain of this greatest story ever told—the heartless one who said, 'No room! No room!' I'll even grant you that a kind of villainy may be part of the truth. But if you want to speak the whole truth, then you will have to call me a villain with a catch in your voice, at least a tremor, a hesitation maybe, with even the glitter of almost a tear in your eye. Because nothing is entirely black, you know. Not even the human heart.

Do you know what it is like to run an inn—to run a business, a family, to run anything in this world for that matter, even your own life? It is like being lost in a forest of a million trees, and each tree is a thing to be done. A million trees. A million things. Counting them all until finally we have eyes for nothing else, and whatever we see turns into a thing.

The sparrow lying in the dust at your feet? Just a thing to be kicked out of the way, not the mystery of death. The calling of children outside your window? Just a distraction and an irrelevance, not life, not the wildest miracle of them all. That reverent whispering in the air that comes sudden and soft from nowhere? Only the wind, just the wind ...

Of course I remember the evening Mary and Joseph arrived. The stars had come out by this point. I remember one star in particular, though I don't know why I should, sitting inside as I was. I cannot remember either of them saying anything, although I suppose some words must have passed. Then it happened much in the way that you have heard. I did not lie about there being no room left—there really was none—though perhaps if there had been a room, I might have lied.

Their kind would have felt more at home in a stable, that's all, and I do not mean that unkindly either. God knows.

Later that night, when the baby came, I was not there. I was lost in the forest somewhere, the unenchanted forest of a million trees. So when the baby came, when the enchantment did happen, I was not around, wasn't even looking, really, and I experienced none of it. As for what I heard? Just that at the moment of the birth itself, I do not rightly know what I heard, only the wind ... But maybe something more.

But this I do know ... All your life long, you wait for your own true love to come—all of us do—we wait upon our joy, our heart's desire, we wait for wholeness. So, how am I to say it? When he came, I missed him. I missed my one true love. So, pray for me, brothers and sisters. Pray for the Innkeeper. Pray for all of us. Don't miss him because you're busy counting the trees.



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## THE WISE-PEOPLE - BUECHNER



"Beware of beautiful strangers. And on Friday avoid travel by water. The sun is moving into the house of Venus, so affairs of the heart will prosper."

We said this to King Herod, or something along those lines; I don't really remember because, of course, it meant next to nothing. To have told him anything of real value, we would have had to spend weeks of study calculating the conjunction of the planets at the precise moment of his birth and at the births of his parents and their parents back to the fourth generation. But Herod knew nothing of this, and he jumped at the nonsense we threw him like a hungry dog and thanked

us for it. A lost man, you see, even though he was a king. And he believed in nothing, neither Olympian Zeus nor the Holy One of Israel who cannot be named. So he was ready to jump at anything, and he swallowed our little jingle whole. But it could hardly have been more obvious that jingles were the least of what he wanted from us.

"Go and find me the child being born today,' the king told us, and as he spoke, his fingers trembled so that the emeralds rattled together like teeth. "Because I want to come and worship him," he said, and when he said that, his hands were still as death. I ask you, does a man need the stars to tell him that no king has ever yet bowed down to another king? He took us for children, that sly, lost old fox, and so it was like children that we answered him. 'Yes, of course,' we said, and went our way. His eyes darkening as we left.

Why did we travel so far to be there when it happened? To this, not even the stars had an answer. The stars said simply that he would be born. It was another voice that said to 'go'—a voice as deep within ourselves as the stars are deep within the sky.

But why did we go? I could not tell you now, and I could not have told you then. Curiosity, I suppose: to be wise is to be eternally curious, and we were very wise. And longing. Why will a person who is dying of thirst crawl miles across sands as hot as fire at simply the possibility of water? But if we longed to receive, we also longed to give. Why will a person labor and struggle all the days of his life so that in the end they have something to give their one true love?

So finally we got to the place where the star pointed us. It was at night and very cold. The Innkeeper, harebrained and busy, showed us the way. The odour of the hay was

sweet, and the cattle's breath came out in little puffs of mist. The man and the woman. Between them was Jesus, the Christ—the one who came to hold the world together and show us how to live and be human. We did not stay long. Only a few minutes as the clock goes, but in the moment? Ten thousand, thousand years. We set our foolish gifts down on the straw and left.

But I can tell you this. What we saw on that child's face? Love. Love so ancient, profound and deep we almost had to look away. It was as if we were looking at the very face of God. But we couldn't look away, because that face was looking at us. Imagine that ... God right there in that stable, looking at us! God among us! We left not really comprehending any of it, not even feeling we needed to, but we left with hope and thinking it wasn't so dark and cold anymore.

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## THE SHEPHERDS - BUECHNER



Night was coming on. It was cold and I was terribly hungry. I had finished all the bread I had in my sack, and my gut still ached for more. Then I noticed my friend, a shepherd like me, about to throw away a crust he didn't want. So I said, 'Throw the crust to me!' and he did, but it landed between us in the mud. But I grabbed it anyway and stuffed it, mud and all, into my mouth. And as I was eating it, I suddenly saw ... myself. It was as if I was not only a man eating but a man watching the man eating. And I thought, 'This is who I am. I am a man who eats muddy bread.' And I thought, 'The bread is very good.' And I thought, 'Ah, and the mud is very good too.'

So I opened my muddy man's mouth full of muddy bread, and I yelled to my friends, 'By God, it's good, brothers!' And they thought I was a terrible fool, but they saw what I meant. We saw everything that night, everything! And everything WAS good.

Can I make you understand? Have you ever had this happen to you? You have been working hard all day. You're dog-tired so you call it quits for a while. You slump down under a tree or against a rock or something and just sit there in a daze for half an hour or a million years, and all this time your eyes are wide open looking straight ahead someplace, but they're so tired and glassy they don't see a thing. You could be dead for all you know. Then, little by little, you begin to come to ... then your eyes begin to come to ... and all of a sudden you find out you've been looking at something the whole time except it's only now that you really see it—one of the lambs maybe, or the moon scorching a hole through the clouds. It was

there all the time, and you were looking at it all the time, but you didn't see it till just now.

That's how it was this night. Like finally coming to—not things coming out of nowhere that had never been there before, but things just coming into focus that had always been there. And such things we saw! The air wasn't just dark and empty anymore. It was alive.

Brightness everywhere, dipping and wheeling like a flock of birds. And what you always thought was silence stopped being silent and turned into the beating of wings, thousands and thousands of them. Only not just wings, as you came to more, but voices—high, wild, like trumpets. The words I could never remember later, but something like what I'd yelled with my mouth full of bread. 'By God, it's good, brothers! The crust. The mud. Us. The world. Everything. Everything is good!'

I can still see us shepherds ... the squint-eyed one who always complained of sore feet. The little one who could outswear a Roman. The young one who blushed like a girl. We all tore off across that muddy field like drunks at a fair, and drunk we were, crazy drunk on whatever was in the air that night, splashing through a sea of wings and moonlight and the silvery wool of the sheep. Was it night? Was it day? Did our feet touch the ground?

We ran until we came to an Inn. 'Shh, shh, you'll wake up my guests,' said the Innkeeper we met coming in the other direction with his arms full of wood. And when we got to the shed out back, this shed in the middle of all this light and wonder, one of the three foreigners who were there held a finger to his lips and he said, looking at this beautiful baby:

"Hush now. Hush. There he is. You see him? By Almighty God, brothers. Open your eyes. Listen. God is here. Everything is good."

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## NO MORE LYING ABOUT MARY - NANCY ROCKWELL



*We included this one in our Christmas package because the art Nancy includes in her message helps make the whole thing sing. As you read this, be sure to spend some time with the art. Let it speak to you as well, drawing you into the truth of just how amazing, wonderful, rebellious, and powerful Mary is.*

It's Advent, and the same old lies about Mary are slipping over pulpits and out of parish letters, Christmas cards, public prayers, TV holiday movies, and late-night comics' jokes.

The subjugation of Mary, the maligning of her as meek, mild, and mindless, has been harmful to millions of women over many centuries.



Hiding within the wonder of Christmas are a thousand years of doctrinal female subjugation, doctrines that, like tinsel, are dripped all over the season of Christmas. In the midst of the celebration of Wonderful Life, these malicious ideas keep women from feeling empowered, invited to be strong, and urged by God to imagine new ways to live, as Mary of Nazareth did, who mothered God's redemption of the human world.

Luke's is the only gospel in which Mary's story appears, and in his account, there is nothing submissive nor immature about her. According to Luke, the Angel approached her with words of great honor: Hail Mary, full of grace. Many artists paint the Angel kneeling, in recognition of the honor given to her. The Angel is explicit; the honor is for the grace that is distinctly hers. This is a courtship scene. The Angel is wooing her, on bended knee, a suitor – not a constable bringing a decree.

It is Mary's grace that has attracted God's attention. And what is this grace? It is what Luke shows us in her conversation and her actions – courage, boldness, grit, ringing convictions about justice. Not submissive meekness. Grace is not submission. And the power of God is never meek.

Yes, she is startled by the presence of the angel. So were Gideon, Jacob, Jonah, and the shepherds of Bethlehem, to name a few; they who, like Mary, questioned the angel in wonder, doubt, and even resistance. They are noted for their reluctance. Why not she? What sort of greeting is this? she asked. And the Angel obliged her with an explanation. Later, she challenged the Angel: How shall this happen to me, when I have no husband? God chose a spunky woman.





Many women in biblical stories appear in domestic settings. Sarah is in her tent, baking cakes. Rachel is drawing water at the well. Bathsheba is taking a bath. Martha is fussing around in the kitchen. The woman who lost a coin is sweeping the house. But with Mary, there is no evidence of any domestic work on her part. We never find her cooking, cleaning, washing up. The evidence offered us is her love of adventure. What we find her doing, over and over, is traveling, in journeys that involve risks and an element of danger.

Her recitation of the Magnificat is a political manifesto, delivered fairly publicly, in the home of an official temple priest, who is married to her cousin Elizabeth, who is also pregnant, with John the Baptist. In Mary's manifesto, there is evidence of deep thought, strong conviction, and a good deal of political savvy.

None of this jibes with the idea that she is a young teenage girl. The Greek word Luke uses for virgin is an unusual one, a very specific word that means she has not yet born a child. Its precise meaning does not indicate sexual innocence. So let's be clear: the focus is on her uterus. The state of her hymen is not at issue here.

Luke does not assign her a specific age. And to insist she is under sixteen is to ascribe to God a pedophilic attraction to underage women. Such details twist Mary's story and burden Christian women with a sense of selfishness if they postpone childbearing, a psychic demand to put childbearing first in their hearts, for God who seems to want nothing from them but pregnancy.

Mary is unmarried when the Angel comes. The Angel's invitation and her independent decision tell us Mary does not need the permission of clergy – or her parents – to become pregnant. God knows Mary owns her own body. And there is no shame in her decision. Mary is good news for unwed mothers everywhere.

Mary, wanted by God, according to the Angel, for her bold, independent, adventuresome spirit, decides to bear a holy child – for a bold agenda: to bring the mighty

down from their thrones; to scatter the proud in the imagination of their hearts, to fill the hungry with good things and send the rich empty away. This is Mary: well-spoken, wise, gritty.



Traveling alone, like every prophet before her, she sets out on her first journey, to her cousin Elizabeth's house, to declare her agenda. There will be more journeys: to Bethlehem; to Egypt and back; to Jerusalem when Jesus is twelve; to Jerusalem when he is crucified.

She gives birth in a barn, lies down with animals, and welcomes weathered shepherds in the middle of the night. She is determined, not domestic; free, not foolish; holy,



not helpless; strong, not  
submissive. She beckons women  
everywhere to speak out for God's  
justice, which is waiting to be born  
into this world.

*We are all called to be mothers of  
God – for God is always waiting to be  
born.* – Meister Eckart, 13th c.  
German mystic

### **Illustrations:**

1. *Annuciation*, by Fra Angelico.  
Detail. Vanderbilt Divinity School  
Library, Art in the Christian  
Tradition.

2. *Annunciation*, by Dante Gabriel  
Rosetti. Vanderbilt Divinity school  
Library, Art in the Christian  
Tradition.

3. *Angel*, by Edward Burne-Jones.  
Vanderbilt Divinity school Library,  
Art in the Christian Tradition.

4. *Nativity*, by Brian Kershisnik.  
Utah Museum of Fine Arts. Note:  
The stable is crowded with  
sheep/angels, who surround Mary  
and her child.

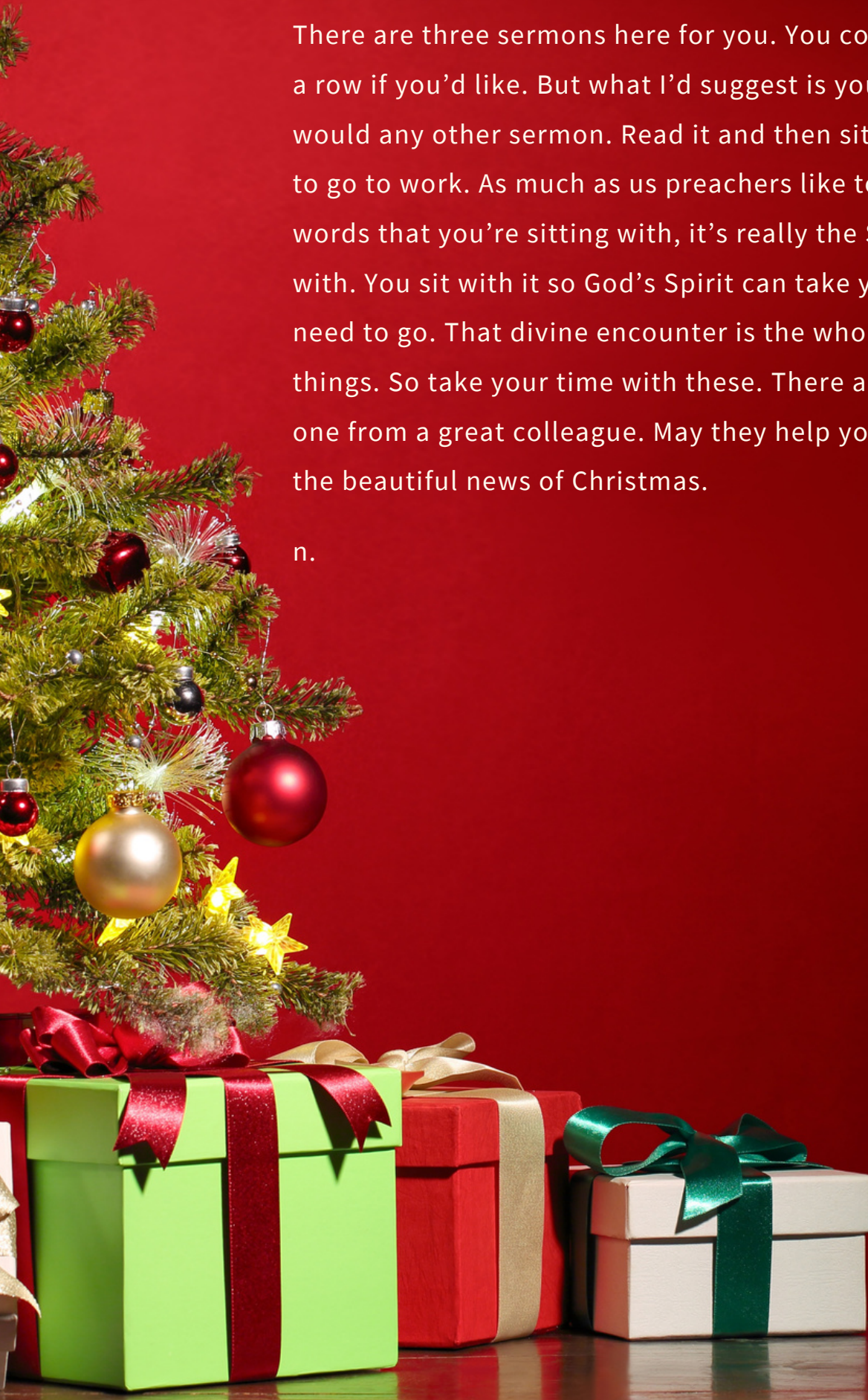
5. *Nativity*, by Taddeo Gaddi, 1325,  
Florence, Italy. Vanderbilt Divinity  
School Library, Art in the Christian  
Tradition.

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## CHRISTMAS SERMONS

There are three sermons here for you. You could read them all in a row if you'd like. But what I'd suggest is you treat them how you would any other sermon. Read it and then sit with it and allow it to go to work. As much as us preachers like to think that it's our words that you're sitting with, it's really the Spirit you're sitting with. You sit with it so God's Spirit can take you wherever you need to go. That divine encounter is the whole point of these things. So take your time with these. There are two from me and one from a great colleague. May they help you hear and receive the beautiful news of Christmas.

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## A CHRISTMAS SERMON - REV. NICK

### **Merry Christmas!!**

Today we are celebrating Christmas and all the things it brings with it: togetherness, happiness, giving and receiving, awkward family dinners, and of course, everybody's favourite sin, gluttony.

And while those things are all good and delicious ... that's not the reason we're celebrating. Those are just how we've come to dress it up. What we're celebrating is something bigger than those things – something that's transformational, transcendent, and reverent. It's something that makes all this holiday talk about 'joy to the world' and 'peace on earth' more than simply words read in a card, but something that we can take home with us tonight – something that we can feel in our souls and bones, something which leaves us truly different after we behold it, and something we hear about in this Christmas Story and all the music.

And because we've heard and felt that something, we find ourselves once again, or maybe for the very first time, being pulled into it, becoming a part of the story, and we find ourselves here beside this infamous manger, in a smelly barn behind this cheap motel, in this back-water middle of nowhere village called Bethlehem. A lot like the shepherds, the angels and the wise-people, we've all come from different places, we've taken different roads, and we all, no doubt, have different reasons for being here.

Maybe some of us are like the shepherds. You've heard about this good news of great joy, this news about a person who shows us what it means to be human, of this person who will make us whole again, and you've come looking to be put back together.

Maybe others are like the wise-people. You've seen this bright star in the sky, almost as if heaven has begun to pour into earth, and a voice deep within you has compelled you to follow it.

Maybe some of us are like the Innkeeper. You're not quite sure what's going on, but you sense something important is going down, that this night is more sacred than the rest, and you're here to make some room in your life to experience it.

Maybe some of us are like the Angels. You know what's happening, and not being able to hold in the songs of joy, you've come here to worship and be renewed.

Or maybe you're here because your Mom made you come and you're kind of lingering in the back not really sure what you think or feel about it all.

But whoever you are and whatever the reason you've come, we are at this manger and we find ourselves beholding the very place where heaven and earth have come together, where beauty, truth, and wholeness can be found, where we find the One who puts us back together and shows us what it means to be human, who connects us with God, who connects us with others, who connects us with ourselves. We're here finding ourselves looking at the reason for the season, Jesus, this gift God has given us.

And it is a gift.

Realizing that helps make all of this a bit deeper and wider – making it far more than just Jesus' birthday and this nostalgic thing we do. Realizing it's a gift changes this from something we do to something we receive and it's that which makes Christmas transformational, transcendent and reverent, something that we can take with us.

What we talk about when we talk about the gift of Christmas is this thing called ‘the incarnation.’ This ancient idea that somehow in some way, shape, and form God came to earth in Jesus, that God ceased to be a God who was far away, detached, and distant, but a God who poured Herself into our world and lives, a God we could know, touch, see, understand, and experience, a God who is present with us.

It’s a beautiful gift.

It’s the gift of friendship, of partnership, of presence. It’s God saying to each one of us: “I am here with you. I am on your side. You are not alone.”

It’s a gift of affirmation and validation. It’s God saying to us that being human is a good thing and that this world is not a lost cause.

It’s a gift of hope. It’s when God gives a response of hope to the cries we’ve made ...

‘This world is never going to get better.’

*No. This is my world. I’m not done with it yet!*

‘Oh is the darkness ever going to end?!’

*Yes. A new light is shining!*

‘I’m worthless and a nobody.’

*No. You are mine and I love you!*

‘Oh, but I am so alone.’

*I know how you feel. You are not alone!*

**Christmas is telling each of us:  
‘You don’t need to live like it’s  
over, as if the darkness has won.  
A new day is here. God is with us.  
Something new is happening.’**

It's such a beautiful gift, isn't it?

To know we're not alone, to know that we are good, to know that all this is going somewhere?

It lets us have hope for something new. It lets us breathe deeply and find that much-needed peace. It gives us a reason to sing and dance. It lets us know we're loved.

And really, at the end of the day, isn't that what we're all really wanting? That's why it's called good and joyful news. It's news we all need to hear. It's news that transforms how we see ourselves, let alone how we see others and the world around us. It's news that lets us know that everything is going to be okay, even though everything may not be alright, because God is with us.



That's what we celebrate tonight. That's why Christmas is a big deal. That's why we're here.

We're here to receive that gift, take it with us, and let it go to work. So may we remember why it is we've all gathered here, may we remember why it is we need something like Christmas, may we experience this gift, this light that is shining into our world and our lives, and may we behold just why we say it is good news of great joy, of why we call this night holy.

And as we see just why it is holy, our question becomes, "What do we do it? Where do we go from here?"



We do the only thing we can when we receive the gift of love:

We take it with us. We pass it on to others. We become the light we've received. We leave the manger as the Wise-People did: by a different road, a different way of life, a way that brings this light into the darkness, that passes on this gift of presence to those who need it, helping everyone experience what Christmas is all about.



So may we behold the light of  
Christ, of God shining into our world  
and lives tonight, and may you take  
it with you. May we become what  
we are beholding, and may we go  
into the world and be with each  
other, giving everyone hope, joy,  
peace, and love.

Amen.



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## A CHRISTMAS SERMON - REV. NICK

### **Merry Christmas!**

Christmas Eve has always been one of my favourite parts of this job.

It's one of my favourites not just because of all the warmth, the joy, and the nostalgia we're all feeling. And it's not just because of the reverence and holiness that's underneath all of that. It's one of my favourite parts of my job because people always have some good Christmas stories. And by Christmas stories, I don't just mean those hilarious stories of family gatherings gone wrong. I mean stories about people encountering what Christmas is really and truly about.

I remember hearing one of these stories from an older guy when I was living in Toronto. He told me how when he was a Mountie in rural New Brunswick back in the 50s,

every Christmas Eve he and his fellow Mounties would go out and deliver toys, turkeys, and food to the less privileged families in the area.

He told me about this one Christmas Eve, the only one he really remembers, he had to go to this house out past the edge of town, out in the middle of nowhere, this home to a single father and four young kids.

Not knowing how exactly to get there, they stopped by a small store to get directions. The store keeper said she knew the family and told them how she was concerned because she hadn't seen them for a couple of weeks, probably because they don't plow the roads where they live and the family would be snowed in. By this time it was 7pm, it was dark and cold, and as they followed the directions the lady had



given them, they discovered that, sure enough, the road had been filled in with snow. Having come this far and not wanting to turn back, the Mounties started walking, trudging along with their sack of food and toys, the snow more than knee-deep in most places, many times almost quitting, many times questioning whether it was worth the effort, many times thinking how much they'd rather be at home.

But every time those thoughts would enter their heads, the man told me, something else would always keep them moving – sometimes the thought of their own kids, sometimes the other person encouraging them onward, sometimes he didn't really know what. "Maybe God," he said. So they kept going, powered by whatever it was that was moving in the wind that night until they finally found the house.

So they went up through the gate, up to the front door, and hearing small voices inside, they knocked. There was this pregnant silence for a bit, as if the knock startled everyone inside, and then, ever so slowly, almost expectantly, the door opened and a six-year-old girl poked her head out.

You can imagine the family's surprise to see, on Christmas Eve, these policemen at their door; but once they saw all the gifts and food and heard the reason for their visit, their expressions went from surprise to amazement and then to joy. "See, Dad!" the oldest kid cried out as they opened the gifts, "Santa did find a way to come!"

The dad, inviting the Mounties back into the kitchen as the kids opened their gifts, fought back tears and hugged them, saying: "Wow. You guys aren't going to believe this, but you're an answer to our prayers."

The father told them how he had just finished explaining to the kids that because of all the snow on the trees and ground Santa wouldn't be able to find the house, and there wouldn't be a Christmas dinner either. But the oldest kid would not have any of it, saying: "No! It's Christmas, all we need to do is pray." The dad explained how the boy insisted that they all kneel down and pray that Christmas would happen, and how his heart broke while he prayed, knowing that Christmas doesn't just show up and that the boy's prayer would be worthless. "And we had hardly said, 'Amen'," he told the Mounties, "when you guys knocked at the door."

And so, after playing with the kids a bit more, putting away the food, and hugging them all, the man told me how he and his partner headed home. "But, that walk back to the car?" he said "It wasn't as hard a walk as before. Maybe because of

the trail we left, but I think it had something to do with Christmas and what it's all about."

I always think of that story this time of year. Not just because it's about Christmas, but because it's *about* Christmas.

The story helps frame why we're all here tonight. And I don't mean in just a historical, once-a-long-time-ago kind of way. A lot of Christmas Eves you'll come to church and you'll hear a sermon about exactly that – about something that happened – about how, a long long time ago, in a manger in Bethlehem, God, once thought to be far away, distant, and detached, in some way, shape, or form, moved to be close, near, and within us, showing us we are loved and inviting us into a new life and new role.

And that's true! That's beautiful. That big message of Christmas is always good to hear. It gets at this thing we call the incarnation – this liberating and radical with-ness of God.

But there's more to Christmas than just that. What that old man's story does is help frame Christmas on a much more personal level – one that's less way back then, and more here and now. And I don't know about you guys, but that's something I'm finding myself needing and longing for – I need something to hit me here.

I mean, it's been a crazy year, hasn't it? SO much has made our lives and world a bit darker and harder. As we reflect on it all and get ready for a new year ahead, maybe we need that side of Christmas that's a bit more here and now ... maybe we need to hold that man's story right alongside the Nativity story.

So what does that story have to say to us here today?

It reminds us that we don't celebrate Christmas just because it *happened*, we celebrate it because Christmas *happens*. We're not celebrating something that only happened once, but something that does happen, to me, to you, to us, right here, right now.

This story opens up for us the subversive, profound, and beautiful truth of Christmas, one which speaks about the world we live in and the kind of God we have: that God didn't just move once, but God still moves today, turning up in places She shouldn't, in forms She shouldn't, to people She shouldn't, turning up in houses in the middle of nowhere, in our proverbial closets, in the hospital rooms and psych wards, in the deepest and darkest valleys, to the faithless and faithful, to the broken, battered, and tossed out, and to the ones who seem to have it made.

This is what we celebrate at Christmas: that we have a wild God, a boundary-crossing God, a Living and present God, a God who, out of love, moves in and throughout this world, repairing, restoring, redeeming, stitching our lives and world back together, holding it together in love.

And if *that's* what Christmas celebrates ... wow, well, that changes *everything!*

It changes this world and our lives from ones where it seems the darkness and our demons are winning, to one where there is always room for hope because God could knock on our door at any moment;

it changes our world and lives to ones where it seems like there's no reason to even get out of bed, to one where there's always a reason to sing and dance with joy;

it changes our world and lives from ones full of chaos, noise, and division, to ones full of peace and rest;

it changes them from one where hate seems to be tearing everything apart, to one where love holds it together.

Everything changes when we see the Light beginning to shine.

We gather here tonight to celebrate Christmas because we know it speaks a beautiful truth about us and this world, a truth we need to hear: that something more, that something bigger than ourselves, something bigger than our darkness is still moving in this world, is still knocking on our doors when we least expect it and need it the most, bringing us light, drawing us together, holding us together, giving us hope, joy, peace, and love.



So, knowing Christmas does happen, knowing Christmas comes to us, may we hear the knock on our doors, may we see the Light that is shining, may our surprise turn to joy, and may we behold it, may we believe it; may the next chapter of our stories be written with hope, may we be transformed by it and rejoice that God is still here.

Amen.

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# FOR LOVE'S SAKE - THE RT. REV. MARIANN EDGAR BUDDE

## **Merry Christmas.**

Our spiritual ancestors who lived, as we do, in the Northern Hemisphere determined that we would celebrate Jesus' birth in December. Surely among their reasons was the symbolic power of light shining in the darkest season. "For the light shines in darkness," as it is written, "and darkness has not overcome it." Our ancestors told stories about his birth, and eventually wrote them down, in order to help all who would come after them better understand who Jesus was and why he came: He was, and is still, God-with-us. He came, and comes to us still, for love's sake. "Love came down at Christmas," as the carol goes. "Love incarnate. Love divine. For love's sake."

Christmas, to quote my colleague Bishop Rob Wright, is "the celebration of God's genius, love

wrapped in flesh to accomplish a dream." In Him, Scripture teaches, the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. He came, full of grace and truth. In Him, we have received grace upon grace, not for any merit of our own, only for love's sake.

And while the Word made flesh is God's genius, Christmas itself – all this, and all we wrap around it according to family and cultural traditions – is an entirely human creation. Surely you've wondered, as I have, why we do what we do at Christmas?

On this holy night, I'd like to offer the most hopeful, inspired answers I have found, out of the conviction that our lives find their meaning in the biggest stories we can imagine. "If the biggest story we can imagine," writes Rachel Held Evans, "is about God's loving and redemptive work in the world, then our lives will be shaped by that

epic. If the biggest story is something else, like nationalism, or ‘follow your bliss’ or ‘he who dies with most toys wins,’ then our lives will be shaped by those narratives instead.” (Rachel Held Evans, *Inspired: Slaying Giants, Walking on Water, and Loving the Bible Again*, Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition p.218)

But it’s Christmas Eve, friends, and we’re here in this beautiful Cathedral – why not strive to place ourselves in the most wondrous story of all?

So here we go:

“Celebrating Christmas” – now I am quoting the great African American theologian and mystic Howard Thurman – “affirms our solidarity with the whole human race in its long struggle to become more humane and to reveal the divinity in which all humanity shares.”

He goes on: “When we build our creche, decorate the evergreen, hold our romantic tryst under the mistletoe, prepare the festive meal, share our gifts as a celebration of the primacy and the universality of love, take time to remember in many ways those who have touched us in the midst of the traffic of the commonplace, and sing the ancient carols to honor the birth of Jesus – when we do these things we become witnesses and instruments of God’s love and care.”

You and I are witnesses and instruments of God’s love and care. When we do what we can; when we, like Jesus, show love for love’s sake, in some small way we are putting human flesh on God’s love – sometimes in full awareness of what we’re doing; more often with no awareness at all. “To the strong and the weak,” Thurman says, “to the happy and the sorrowful . . . to the believer and unbeliever, to the Christian and non-Christian there is

the ever-present hope that tidings of great joy will find their way into the heart.” (Howard Thurman, *The Mood of Christmas and Other Celebrations* (Harper and Row, 2011 edition) xii.)

Before you leave tonight, name for yourself some way in which you are or have been an instrument of hope’s fulfillment for someone else. Allow yourself to feel God’s gratitude, that you show up, for love’s sake.

I also believe that when we celebrate Christmas, we open ourselves to the possibility that God has something to say to us here and now, that God has a gift to offer us, in the specificity of our existence. As I prepared for this moment, I wondered what that gift might be for each one of you gathered here and listening via technology. I have no idea what that gift might be, to be honest, but I believe that it’s here for you, and all you need do is receive it, whatever it is.

In my experience, the gift of God’s love at Christmas comes in and through ordinary things, as small as a gesture, a word, a grace given, a quiet miracle we could easily miss if we aren’t paying attention. That’s the other message our ancestors wanted us to take from the stories of Jesus’ birth: our God works quietly, in and through human beings, in those amazing moments when an ordinary life shines with extraordinary brightness, when our hearts are warmed by gentle gifts of forgiveness and peace.

This gift from God, by design, is a fleeting experience. It gives us a moment, not a lifetime, of clarity; a moment, not a lifetime, of joy or the capacity to bring joy to another. And as with any other post-Christmas let down, we can be disappointed by the fact that whatever God offers this Christmas doesn’t last long enough to really change things. Surely we all wonder why the light doesn’t stick around and overcome darkness once and for all.



Yet the purpose of God's gift at Christmas seems not to change the world from the outside, as much as we long for that. Christ comes to change us, slowly, over time, so that we might live according to the glimpses of love we have known. The gift is no less real for its fleeting beauty, although we do have the perfect alibi of deniability if we don't want to acknowledge the gift for what it is.

Years ago at Christmastime, I visited a beloved mentor who was slowly losing her cognitive abilities to Alzheimer's disease. In the twenty minutes or so that we spoke, I understood almost nothing of what she said. I wasn't even sure if she knew who I was. Then, as I began to take my leave, her eyes, for a moment, regained their familiar sparkle. She looked deeply into mine and told me that she loved me. She then charged me to live my life in a very specific way that, in light of past conversations, only she and I would understand. Then, just

as quickly, her confusion and senseless ramblings returned. I left wondering what on earth had just happened. Did she actually say what I heard? It was amazing – a moment of true light and authentic love. Then it was gone, and I had a choice: would I live as if that Christ moment between us had happened or not?

Which brings me to my final word to you this night, friends, and you already know what it is: should we place our lives in this wondrous story, there are social implications. How could there not be? The story begins with an emperor who could move people around at will. A young couple, forced to obey the emperor's edict, set out on a long journey in the last month of the woman's pregnancy. She was denied a place in human community in her hour of greatest need and needed to lay her child in an animal trough. Shortly after the child's birth, the holy family would be forced to flee again, seeking refuge from violence in another country.

Those who passed on to us their wonder at Christ's birth wanted us to know that Jesus is no stranger to struggle and sorrow. They wanted us to know, as they did, both the gift and responsibility of tending to light shining in darkness. For we are the ones now – and I'm speaking in particular to those of us who are Christ-followers – we are the ones to keep the light of faith shining, the gift of hope alive, the message of love credible, and that is no small task.

Some years are easier than others. In the hardest years, the task becomes all the more important. Let me leave you with the words of Alfred Delp, a Jesuit priest who gave his life in the German resistance of World War II: "Light your candles quietly, such candles as you possess, wherever you are." That we do matters more than we will ever know.

God's loving and redemptive work in the world rests with us, as we take our place in the most wonderful, mysterious, important story we can imagine. I invite you to welcome Christ tonight, God-with-you. Then join me tonight in promising for the first or thousandth time to live as if this story, this amazing story, is our story; so that together we might leave this place as witnesses and instruments of God's love, for love's sake.

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## PRAYERS

God, This Christmas, you come as a Saviour to the lost.  
We gather here, we who have lost heart,  
lost hope, lost patience, lost time.  
We have lost innocence, we are losing the race,  
we feel like lost souls.

This Christmas, we want to be finding you –  
finding you in the silence of the gray morning  
and in the sweet smile of a child;  
finding you in the dark starry sky  
and in the warm handshake of a friend;  
finding you in the familiar Christmas narrative  
and in the story of a stranger;  
finding you in our own hearts  
and in the face of our enemies.

Immanuel, God with us,  
we wait for your presence this Christmas;  
help us to give with generous hearts  
and receive with thankfulness.  
Give us patience in the face of irritation  
and kindness in the face of anger;  
fill us with contentment and peace  
and remove all jealousy from us.  
May our celebration of your birth  
give honour to you in all we say and do  
and may we enter the New Year  
refreshed and recommitted to your service.  
Amen

— Carol Penner

We come to your manger, each of us, in the stillness of this night,  
Here we know our profound powerlessness,  
and here you are –  
a fragile powerless newborn,  
yet the newborn child in whom we recognize the ruler of the universe.

We hear your newborn cry, the cry we have been waiting for –  
"Make room! Make room for me!"

Fragile God, born in the night –  
Meet us here at your manger.  
Meet us as a newborn child meets new parents,  
come to change our lives forever.  
Meet us as the newborn  
who insists that we make room for you,  
who requires that we reorder our lives to pay attention to you,  
who demands that we be re-centered on the very center of life.

Fragile God, born in the night –  
You come as a tiny light in a vast darkness  
yet that fragile and flickering light  
changes the darkness completely.

Fragile God,  
meet us here in the lighting of our small lights,  
that we may know your awesome power making room among us  
as the light that shines in the darkness,  
the fragile light that the darkness cannot overpower.

Fragile God, there is room in our inn.  
Be born in our night.  
Amen.

— Dr. Susan M. Elliott

**Prayer of Confession:**

Gracious God,  
we would like to be among those who saw the coming of the Christ Child,  
those who dropped all that they were doing  
and traveled to worship the coming of God's love into this world.  
We would like to be those who cared for God in infant vulnerability;  
who tickled and cuddled and comforted the growing child,  
that he might know love and safety.

And yet, merciful God,  
we must recognize all the times we are more like Herod.  
Whenever we, in our actions or in our inactions,  
find our own need for control more compelling  
than the needs of others for health and safety.  
Whenever we cling to the security of our privilege,  
rather than standing up for the rights of the oppressed.  
Whenever we are complicit in the harming of innocents  
for the sake of profit, or power,  
or because we fear to know, and to change,  
the injustices of this world.

Loving God,  
we confess our sins against you and one another,  
and pray that you will fill us with your light,  
that we may live our lives as true disciples in your name,  
without counting the cost.  
In the name of Christ,  
the one who showed us the way, we pray. Amen.

**Assurance of Pardon:**

God's light is present in this world.  
Present in the Christ child, born to lead us out of darkness.  
Present in the star, in all that guides us to love.  
God's light is in the world, and the darkness did not overcome it.  
God's grace is in the world, and our missteps will not overcome it.  
We are loved, we are forgiven. Alleluia! Amen.

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## CHRISTMAS REFLECTIONS FROM OUR COMMUNITY

**Unexpectedly, I received a bag of goodies** from the church delivered to me by Darlene Abraham. What a surprise! In the bag were two magazines – *Advent 2020 Church@Home* and *Advent@Home 2020* – and a card with Larry’s painting on it. I am feeling so loved by the church community. It is so beyond my expectations that I would be thought of by them. Haha I am not invisible!

From reading the first page, “Countdown to Christmas,” I got to understand deeper what Advent is about. I feel like I am at the beginner level of my Christian journey; so much of God’s wisdom is waiting for me to learn and to explore. I want to be an adventurer into the wilderness.

The church asked us to submit photos of our Advent wreath at home. I want to do that, but before doing that I need to have a reflection on my church journey – what I have learned since my first step into the sanctuary of RDLUC on September 16, 2018, my very first experience of Sunday worship in a church. After going through my journal, I saw a different me. I have become more joyful, more loving, more at peace. These three elements have brought me HOPE: I saw hope yesterday, I see hope today, and I will see hope tomorrow. Never lose hope is one of my mottos now.

I am sharing four pictures to showcase my gain of joy, peace, love and hope from RDLUC. Enjoy!

– Jen Hung



**I am sure COVID-19** has been a real challenge for everyone and we all had to find our own ways to cope.

For me, I use what I call “brain strength”!! On the days when I am fatigued with it all and wonder how much longer it will continue, I force myself to sit down and think about all the blessings in my life. They include my children, grandchildren, friends, extended family, being a member of Red Deer Lake United Church, and many other blessings. We all know that we should do this but with our busy lives, I believe we don’t do it often enough and take so much for granted!

One of the real highlights for me, besides seeing my family, is the deliveries from RDLUC!! I know it takes so much work to organize the deliveries, make the food, sew the masks, fill all the bags for delivery and to those who deliver them. The food is such a treat for me and I really enjoy it. Thanks to all the volunteers involved in any way with the thoughtful and kind gesture. I truly believe we are so fortunate to be part of the RDLUC family. Many thanks to all the staff and other volunteers who have found so many ways to reach out to us during COVID-19! Your efforts are greatly appreciated.

– Carol Watson





# A CHRISTMAS POEM

By Helen Steiner Rice

*submitted by Ann Brown*

I have a list of folks I know, all written in a book  
And every year when Christmas comes, I go and take a look,  
And that is when I realize that these names are a part  
Not of the book they are written in, but really of my heart.

For each name stands for someone who has crossed my path sometime,  
And in the meeting they've become the rhythm in each rhyme  
And while it sounds fantastic for me to make this claim,  
I really feel that I'm composed of each remembered name.

So never think my Christmas cards are just a mere routine  
Of names upon a Christmas list, forgotten in between,  
For when I send a Christmas card that is addressed to you,  
It is because you're on the list that I'm indebted to.

And every year when Christmas comes, I realize anew,  
The best gifts life can offer is meeting folks like you.  
And may the spirit of Christmas that forever endures  
Leave its richest blessings in the hearts of you and yours.



**These difficult times are challenging for me** because I live on my own and I'm such an extrovert. I need to see people regularly and feel their warm hugs. Normally, I do 'keep fit' classes every Monday and Wednesday and I adore going dancing on Friday evenings. Because everything is now cancelled and because I don't have a car, it would be easy to feel lonely and bleak.

But I'm not a bleak person. I may not have a computer, but I'm so fortunate to have a warm comfortable home, a telephone, and lots to look through on my bookshelves! There are many shining lights in my life, first and foremost my beautiful caring family. My lovely niece regularly delivers my groceries, and my extended family and I keep in constant touch. There's also my wonderful church that sends me monthly deliveries of delicious food and reading material to keep me in the know about church events. I feel my church both remembers and loves me. How I look forward to those deliveries—and to the great, socially-distanced visits I always have with the much-loved couple who deliver to me!

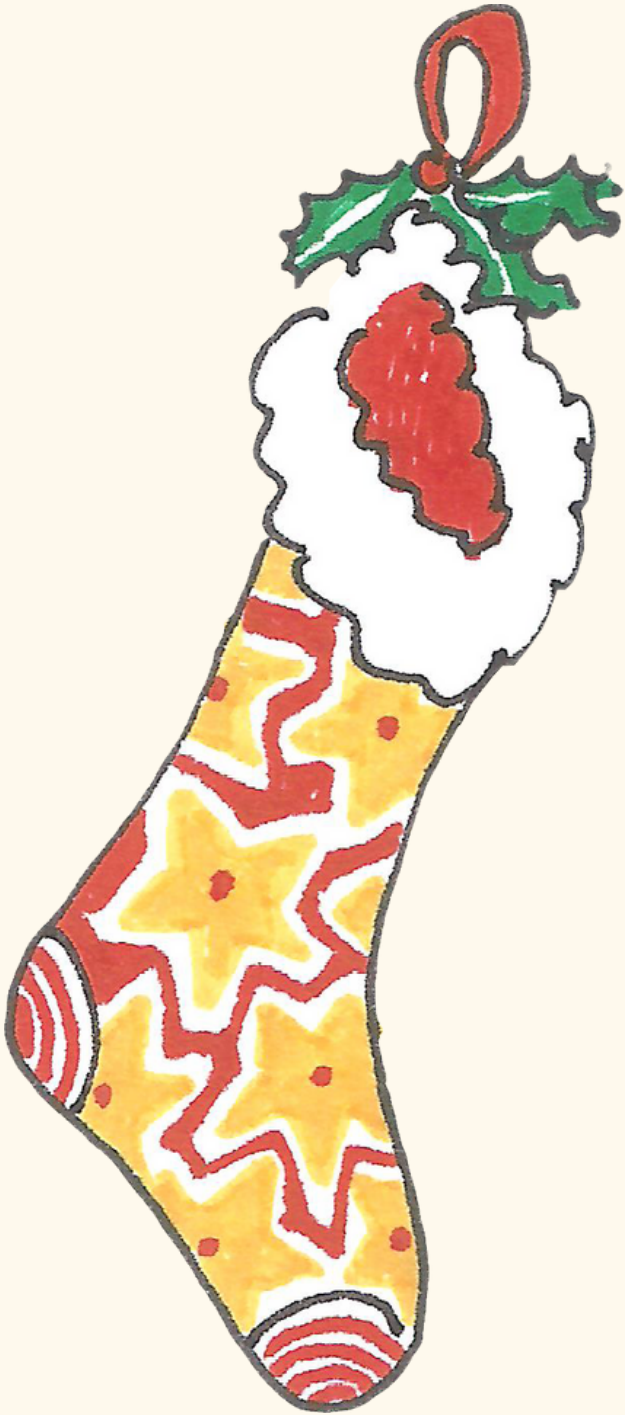
Christmas will not be the same this year. Especially at Christmastime I so enjoy being in my festively-decorated church. But my daughter and son-in-law, who don't live far from Calgary, have said they wouldn't hear of me being on my own at Christmas, and have invited me to stay with them. Those who are near and dear remain near and dear, even if we all have to follow different rules for a while.

And once this is all over, I know I won't have forgotten how to dance!

– Eileen Tillett



**I wish to thank my RDLUC family** for the many kind gestures of care, care packages and support while in hospital and ill at home. This means such a lot to me.



My special memories of Christmas include having two sets of stockings on Christmas Day, which I found very strange, but delightful and I loved it . . . one set at home with my parents and another at my grandparents later in the day when we went there for Christmas dinner. We often walked there, which took an hour or so.

My grandfather was a United Church Minister in Calgary and he holds a very special place in my heart. He spent countless hours shopping to ensure that the children had special items in their Christmas stockings. He taught me a lot about the true meaning of Christmas.

I recall my grandmother's mustard pickle relish was always on the Christmas dinner menu and tasted so delicious. Unfortunately, this relish recipe was lost when she passed away.

These are some of my most special Christmas memories which I cherish.

- Susan Oliver



**This is a story from a long time ago.** It was when the church was still at the other location across the road and there was only a tiny little chapel in the middle of the prairies. It was Christmas Eve and as tradition states, it was time for the kids Christmas pageant. All of us were ready in our costumes with our lines memorized and ready to strut our stuff in the front of the church and pour our hearts and souls into the Christmas pageant. The excitement in the air was high as it was already Christmas Eve and Christmas was almost here!

The play started off well, all was going as expected. Then suddenly the power went out in the church. We were in complete darkness except for the emergency light – one light bulb – at the back of the church, shining over all of us. Someone said that we only had about 20 minutes before that light would go out too. So, the play went on, all of us doing our parts, all of us worried that the lights would go out at any time. As we neared the end of the pageant, we all started to relax. We had made it to the end and we still had the emergency light going. Just as the play ended, the power came back on and we all rejoiced. It was a miracle that we had made it. It was a miracle that the emergency light was enough for us to continue to do our pageant. It was a miracle that the lights came back on when we needed them to be able to leave safely. What a holy night! What a wonderful memory . . .

continued on next page . . .

And then there was that other time when I was the parent leader of the pageant. As all the kids filed out onto the stage, we realized that the doll for baby Jesus was still downstairs. I ran all the way down and grabbed it and got back up. Mary and Joseph were already on the stage. I could not go up and

take the doll, so when everyone was busy getting settled, I lobbed baby Jesus to Mary who caught him and put him in the cradle. Oh, the fun of Christmas pageants! Peace, Joy and Love from my family to the Church family!

– Michelle Den Hoed



### DO YOU HAVE A STORY TO SHARE?

A memory? A poem?  
A photograph? A pandemic story?  
We would love to share it  
in the next issue of this magazine.

Please send your submission to [info@reddeerlakeuc.com](mailto:info@reddeerlakeuc.com)  
or call us at (403) 256-3181.









**We are  
Red Deer Lake United Church.**

We are an inclusive and affirming community of faith – people of all ages, perspectives, and stories, who gather to connect with God, each other, and ourselves, and find in Jesus a new way of being human and alive in the world.

**you're welcome, wanted, and accepted.  
join us on the journey.**

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Bill Holman

**CHURCH OFFICE HOURS:**

Monday 9am - noon  
Tuesday 9am - noon  
Wednesday 9am - noon  
Thursday 9am - noon

*The church office will be closed  
beginning December 24.  
The office will reopen on January 4.*