

4th Sunday of Advent

seeking sanctuary (love)

Welcome & Announcements

Advent 4– December 19

Welcome and Announcements:

A warm welcome to everyone who is gathered here in the sanctuary this morning and a warm welcome as well to those of you joining via the live stream and those who will join later today or later in the week.

I know we are all getting ready for Christmas and for some of us this is a very busy time of year. When my days get extremely busy it is extra important for me to take the time to stop and connect to the source of our being – To God – I am so glad you are caring for yourself by spending time in worship.

Let's talk a bit about this busy time and opportunities to pause, pray and worship together.

Christmas Eve –

Online Laura has produced two things for us:

At 10am on the 24 you can access a children's pageant and Laura has also produced a lovely **worship for families** of every shape, size and age category to share together and that will be available at 4pm. That is all online.

On Christmas Eve there will be also be "In person" worship for those who register before Wednesday noon - there are two "in person" worship services 7pm and 8:30pm.

We will be on line only - **Sunday December 26** – at 10am we will share communion - so bring some bread and juice to your computer screen and we commune together. No in person worship that day.

January 2nd we are back to two "in person" worship services. 9:15 and 11 and you will need to register for those worships.

Now to matters of our **Outreach ministry**:

We gave thanks last week for those who organized and contributed to The Socks for the Homeless and the Secret Santa program. This week we give thanks to those who organized and contributed to Egadz bags – things will be packed up and delivered today. Honey is still for sale and so too are calendars.

In the **New Year** we are going to need a bunch of folks to commit to some important ministry work.

Committees need **more hands** to do our work. For example the Outreach Committee and the Worship set up folks need more hands. Congregation care need some new folks and Amy's House needs folks to serve breakfast. We need tech types to help with livestreaming and some sound booth folk.

So, I invite you to carefully consider how you can serve others in the New Year. All these announcements are found in the email sent to you and by searching the website.

Let us continue our Journey through Advent together – let us worship.
As we sing together our opening song. Please remain seated as we sing together...

Sung Opening: Jesus Came Bringing us Hope (MV33)

Call to Worship

We are seeking—
deeper faith,
a place to belong,
the feeling that God is here in this room.

We are seeking—
joy that overflows,
the movement of the Spirit,
a hand to hold, when alone in the dark.

We are seeking—
the freedom to be, the courage to love,
the conviction to act in the face of injustice.

We are seeking, but here in this space,
We are found.

Take a deep breath. This is your sanctuary.
God is here. We are found. Amen.

Candle Lighting Liturgy

A: God's love is like an open door.

B: God's love is the streetlight that guides us home.

A: God's love is a warm bed to fall into.

B: God's love is a table with room for you.

A: God's love is a crackling fireplace.

B: God's love is the sun that streams through the windows.

A: God's love is the roof over our heads and the floor beneath our feet.

B: God's love is a home for you and me, for neighbors and strangers, for family and friends,
for enemies and partners.

A: God's love is a home for all.

B: Today we light the candle of love to remind us of this truth.

A: May it burn brightly in this space and even brighter in our hearts.

B: Amen.

Advent Song: Hope is a Star (VU6)

Call to Confession

Mary's world turned upside down with the visit of an angel.

This is a moment we can relate to, because over the course of the last year and a half, our world has seemed to turn upside down more than once.

When those moments come, we hope to respond with grace; but more often than not, fear can get the best of us. So today we turn to God in prayer, asking for God's guidance and grace in the places and moments we need it most. Let us pray together now...

Prayer of Confession

God of safe spaces, we wish we were more like Mary, who in the face of great change, went and sought help. She did not wait for help to find her; she walked to the shelter she needed. Too often we wait silently for the world to change around us instead of speaking up for the things we need. Forgive us for failing to care for ourselves the way you would care for us. Give us the courage to be more like Mary.

God of safe places, we wish we were more like Elizabeth, who greeted Mary with laughter and contagious joy. How many people have crossed our doorstep and how many times have we failed to see them? Give us the courage of Mary, and the grace of Elizabeth. Gratefully we pray, amen.

Words of Forgiveness

Family of faith, even if we miss the person standing on our doorstep, even if we fail to care for ourselves the way God would care for us, even if we forget and ignore, turn away and shut down, God still loves us. There is nothing we can do to lose God's love.

Rest in this promise:

If we get lost,
we will be found.

If we mess up,
we are forgiven.

If we withhold love,
God is lavish in loving us.

We are claimed. We are loved. We are forgiven.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Hymn: Come Thou Long Expected Jesus (VU2 vs 1,3)

Prayer for Illumination

Holy God, we come to your Scripture today hoping that it will feel a bit like an open door, like Elizabeth welcoming Mary, like coming home.

We want to fall into it.

We want to find sanctuary here.

We want to breathe easier just hearing these words.

And we want to find ourselves laughing because this good news is just too good to keep inside.

So hover close to us now, we pray.

Open the door to our hearts so that we might find sanctuary in your words. Gratefully we pray, amen.

Scripture: Luke 1:39-55

Reading from the Gospel according to Luke:

Luke 1:39-56

³⁹In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴²and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." ⁴⁶And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, ⁴⁷and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, ⁴⁸for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; ⁴⁹for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. ⁵⁰His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. ⁵¹He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. ⁵²He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; ⁵³he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. ⁵⁴He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, ⁵⁵according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever." ⁵⁶And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.

May God bless to our understanding and our living these words of Holy

Reflection

Sermon for Sunday
December 19, 2021

Luke 1:39-55

Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you O God, our strength, and our Redeemer. Amen.

I brought in some Christmas Wrapping paper on Tuesday morning to wrap our annual McClure United Church gift to Holy Spirit Roman Catholic Parish. Traditionally we have taken chocolates and a Poinsettia over as a gift but because the youth are not doing its Poinsettia sale I purchased on your behalf a small box of chocolates and a box of honey instead. I took the Christmas paper, the small box of chocolates the box of honey into the Music room to wrap it all up. When I returned to the office Carol Claypool, the office volunteer on Tuesday, noted that it sure didn't take very long for me to wrap everything.

Some of you might not know this but when I was younger I was in training to be one of Santa's elves. You see I was raised by three adults my mother, my father and my grandmother. My grandmother lived with my parents. My Grandmother had eight children and my mother was the youngest. All of Grandma's children had children except for her eldest son who was killed in WWII. It was my grandmother's mission, at Christmas time, to buy a small present for each and every member of her family. This meant, 7 presents for her kids, seven presents for their partners and one present for each grandchild of which there were 18. Early in December, I became my grandmother's elf assistant. Together we would get on the city bus and travel to Adelman's, Woolworths or Sears. Grandma would chose special little things, purchase them and I would carry them for her. When we got home after a long afternoon of shopping - out would come the wrapping paper. She and I would wrap every gift together - each family had their own shopping bag full of little goodies for Christmas. Like I said when I was little I was in training to be one of Santa's elves.

My grandmother was a beautiful woman she was generous, kind and thoughtful. She was English and drank tea from a China cup and when I was with her I felt like the most special grandchild on the planet. When things got tough in my young life - the safest place on the planet was in my grandmother's bedroom, sitting on her purple

satin bedspread with her in the chair next to me knitting. It didn't matter what things were like at school or how unreasonable my parents were being - spending time with my grandmother made everything better. Looking back now my grandmother was my sanctuary.

I wonder if Mary had a grandmother in her life? If she did, I wonder why she did not turn to her in her time of need? Perhaps her grandmother was not generous, kind and thoughtful. Then again - perhaps Mary's grandmother was no longer living. What about Mary's parents? We know they were alive - for they had made arrangements for her and Joseph to marry. Why did Mary not turn to them in her time of need? Perhaps they could not be Mary's sanctuary in the storm of her life because unlike Grandparents, whose main job seems to be to lavish love upon their grandchildren, perhaps Mary's parents - tasked with the hard work of raising her - to be a good and upstanding woman - were too disappointed in her to be her sanctuary. In Mary's day being pregnant with out a husband was a very big deal. Perhaps her parents were grieving their good little girl – asking them selves what they had done wrong – worried about what the neighbours would think, perhaps they were more judgement then understanding - instead of asking how do we love her still they were asking **can** we love her still.

Mary knew where to go in her time of need – she knew where to go to find sanctuary. She made the not so easy journey (we learned in Bible study a couple years ago that Mary traveled approx. 80KM) to see her cousin Elizabeth. ///

Our scripture reading today drops us into the middle of an intimate encounter between two extraordinary women: There is the older, once-barren Elizabeth and her newly expectant young cousin Mary. As Luke tells it, God is at work through the lives of both women and their words express nothing but joy.

Our reading begins with Elizabeth, touched by the Holy Spirit, cries out in delight, offering words of praise: "Blessed are you among women! And blessed is the fruit of thy womb!"

Mary responds in the form of a song, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name." You may recognize these words as the opening of what is called the Magnificat, Mary's song of praise. //Her beautiful words are surprising and yet familiar, for though her pregnancy is without precedent; her words place her in a long tradition of strong Biblical women.

As Mary sings the Magnificat, we hear echoes of the songs of other faithful women, like Miriam, Deborah and Hannah. Biblical scholar Phyllis Trible notes that this is a sign of how "deeply imbedded is Mary's story in the traditions of her people."

Mary goes on to tell of all the great and glorious things God has done. God *has brought down the powerful and lifted up the lowly; God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.*

The Magnificat is a one of the most beautiful passage of scripture, and what catches my attention is that Mary is able to sing it, not in the presents of angels - nor at home with parents - or alone in her room but when she has arrived in that place of sanctuary. It is in that place of sanctuary that she is first able to sort through what it means to be having a baby – it is in this place of sanctuary that she comes to terms with being pregnant and all that this might mean.

Mary comes to Elizabeth having lost three things. Her past, her present and her future.

Mary has lost her past. She is no longer a little girl but rather she is now a mother and no ordinary mother. The child she carries will change the world and she knows this. Gone are the carefree days of childhood, of daydreaming, games and innocence.

Mary has lost her present. She no longer assume she is betrothed to Joseph. Joseph could chose to dismiss her quietly or publically. If publically, she could be stoned to death. Then there are all the uncertainties of being pregnant and without support. Not only is being pregnant physically risky for a woman of her age and in her time but there were no social services for her to rely on if she is abandoned by Joseph or her family. How would she feed herself - let a lone a baby?

Mary's future is gone too. What ever was planned is changed for ever. Would there be a wedding with the security that would bring – maybe there would be a wedding after the birth – but it would be a small affair with just the Rabbi. Would Joseph begrudgingly take her into his household. Instead of being welcomed and celebrated would she spend the rest of her life on the edge, tolerated, relegated to the least, sat farthest from the table of honour. Would she be alone.

Mary has lost everything! But she comes to be with Elizabeth and with Elizabeth she finds Sanctuary.

How powerful is sanctuary that one can lose everything and still sing a song of joy.

What is so beautiful about this story that Elizabeth does not feel that being Sanctuary for Mary is a burden rather she sees it as a tremendous blessing – so much so that life leaps for joy within her.

Friends we, the members of McClure United Church have done our best to be Elizabeth, to be sanctuary for others.

We have been so blessed to offer the power of sanctuary as we have welcomed and supported refugee families. Helping them to find a new home in Canada.

We have been so blessed to offer the power of sanctuary as we have welcomed and done our best to make room for those searching for their sexual identify.

We have been so blessed to offer the power of sanctuary as we have welcomed and made room for the grieving, the mentally ill, the lonely, and the lost.

We have been so blessed to offer the power of sanctuary as we have welcomed and made room for the searchers, the doubters and the curious.

The church – our church is sanctuary - and we do not always get it right - but we continue to grow into what it means to be sanctuary for all. There is so much more work to do and so much more joy waiting to leap in us. ///

As a child I knew were to go. My grandmother's room on the slippery purple surface of her bed with the soothing - tick tick - of her knitting needles in my ears.

Today I celebrate Elizabeth the one who showed us the way to be sanctuary to the hurting ones. I celebrate Elizabeth who provided the space for healing to happen, who made space for joy through profound love. May we as a church and we as individuals live as Elizabeth did – as ones pregnant with sanctuary. For there are so many Mary's out there – even some in here.

Amen.

Call to Offering

Elizabeth offers her home. She offers her arms. She offers her joy. She offers her affirmation and confidence. Elizabeth offers everything she has when Mary shows up at her door, and it just feels holy, doesn't it? Part of our call as people of faith is to give when and where we can. So today we are invited to be a little more like Elizabeth. Today we are invited to give generously, trusting that God will take these gifts and build a better world here. Let us give with joyful hearts. Your financial gifts can be made through PAR or online through our website, by e-transfer or by leaving your donation in the offering plates at the sanctuary entrance. We continue to symbolize the bringing forward of our offerings – by building this little home – a crèche like structure – the first wall is hope, the second is peace, last week we added joy and today we add the roof of love. May this be symbol of the home we are building for all God's people.

Offering Hymn: Love is the Touch (MV89 vs 1,2)

Prayer of Dedication

Good and gracious God, we give our gifts for the seekers.

We give our gifts for those who need sanctuary. We give our gifts for those who build sanctuaries. We give our gifts for those who have lost sanctuary, and for those who find sanctuary all over the place. Use our gifts to bring us closer to home. With joy and hope in our hearts we pray, amen.

Prayers of the People

Holy God, our prayers are often one lovely act of seeking.

We bow our heads, we close our eyes, and we seek— we seek you, we seek belonging, we seek sanctuary. And what is lovely is that we know, deep in our bones, that if we knock, we will find you.

So today we pause our seeking to simply give you thanks.

Thank you for the Elizabeths in our lives—the ones who have been there when we needed them most, the ones who have blessed us with joy, allowing our happiness to take

up space, the ones who have opened the door for us and ushered us in.

And thank you not only for the Elizabeths in our lives, but for the strangers who have cared for us, for those older and wiser ones who paved the way before us, and for individuals who are of no formal relation, but who love us like family. Our lives are undoubtedly better because of them.

Gracious God, we also pray for those without an Elizabeth in their life. We pray for those who do not have a hand to hold in the dark, who do not have a front porch to show up on, or even a porch to call their own.

We pray for those in life transitions who carry fear and anxiety alone

Wrap your arms around those individuals. Circle back, again and again, dwelling tenderly in the wounds of their hearts until healing might be found. Open our eyes so that we might see the need in our own backyard.

Thank you for being our safe place. Thank you for always welcoming us home. Now with joy in our hearts, we pray the words you taught us to pray, saying... **Our Father and Mother...**

Hymn: Away in a Manger (VU69)

Benediction

Friends our advent journey is almost complete:

the gifts of hope, peace, joy and love are with us always.

As we go into the world today, we take these gifts with us, treasures to hold in our hearts and to offer one another and the world.

May the grace of Jesus, the babe of Bethlehem, the love of our God and the companionship of the Holy Spirit move with us this day and every day.

Sung Blessing: I am Walking the Path of Hope (MV 221)