

2nd Sunday of Advent

laying the foundation (peace)

Acknowledgement

Welcome & Announcements

Good morning and welcome to worship with McClure United Church. Whether you are here in person or online, we are so grateful you are with us.

It still amazes me that our community is connected and able to worship in this way. It is so beautiful to think of people who are a part of us and are not able to be here in person, are still able to worship with us in real time. It is also amazing to know that we have people joining us from all across Canada – there are some who have moved away, others who have joined because they have some connection to this congregation... and others who have just found us online and have chosen to join.

So welcome to all of you who I can see... and all of you who are represented by these cameras.

And I do want to just say to those of you who are worshipping online, please let us know if there's anything you think we could improve on... if you can't hear or there's a problem with any of the cameras... please let us know. It is so important that this worship time is working for you. All of this is new to us – and we are learning as we go. You can help us in the learning.

So I'm just going to jump right into some announcements this morning.

Blue Christmas

EGADZ

Secret Santa

Tech Support for Livestreaming

WE know that this time of the year can be tough for many folks... if you are moving through the season with a heavy heart – for whatever reason – or if you are just looking for a little peace in the midst of this busy time – you are invited to join us tonight at 7pm for our Blue Christmas service.

This will be in person and livestreamed for those who would like to participate at home. The link to this service was sent to everyone in today's emails and you can also find it on our website and our Facebook page... or you can just subscribe to our YouTube channel and that way you'll have access to all of our videos. **You did need to register for this service and the deadline was Friday noon but I know there is still space – so if you have not registered but would still like to come, you can stop by the table in the lobby after the service and someone will be there to register you.**

Next Sunday would traditionally be our White Gift service but since children are still not joining us in worship, we have decided to not have a full service dedicated to white gift but to still support the Secret Santa program. So we will be collecting new, unwrapped gifts and you can bring those along with you next Sunday or you can put them under the Christmas tree anytime this week when the church is open. I am also looking for one or two people with trucks or larger type vehicles who could help deliver the gifts next Sunday afternoon or Monday morning. If that's something you can do, please let me know.

Last week I told you all about the EGADZ donations... and that information was also sent in today's email... so I'll just remind you that we are collecting hygiene products, toques, mitts and baby supplies.

You can drop your donations off in the labelled bins during office hours between today and the 19th or you can bring them to the church parking lot on December 10th between 10am and noon.

If you'd like to make a financial donation, cheques can be made payable to McClure United Church, please indicate they are for EGADZ.

And now about bake sale?

We will be holding an in-person bake sale on Saturday, December 11th between 10am and 1pm.

If you like to bake, please make some cookies, loaves, candies or squares and bring them to the church on Friday, December 10th between 4 and 6pm.

If you like to eat that baking... or maybe give it to someone who does... come to the multipurpose room between 10am and 1pm on Saturday, December 11th.

Proceeds will go to the church's general revenue fund.

And one last announcement unrelated to Advent and Christmas... we are looking for people to help with our livestreaming. You do not need to be a tech expert... or have any experience with livestreaming. All you need is a basic comfort with computers and the ability to push a button. I will train you and give you all the support you need. If you are planning on coming to worship anyway, why not worship up in the sound booth – where it's really exciting – right Jim and Angie? Jim and Angie have been helping out with this and doing a great job but we need more people to continue with the livestreaming. It is so important that we continue to offer this form of worship for all of our community not able to be here in person. But... like everything else, if we don't have the people to run it... it won't be able to happen. I would really love to have 8 teams of two people to take this on. This way each team would only be responsible for one Sunday every other month. So please consider giving it a try – or at least talking with me about it. And you know how to reach me.

These announcements and so much more were emailed to everyone who is on our email list early this morning. And a reminder that if you are not on our email list and would like to receive weekly announcements, please let the church office know and you will be added.

And now let us ground ourselves in the peace that today offers 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

If life was a home, then we would pray—

may love be the foundation. May God be the cornerstone.

May the Spirit be the windows—ushering light in.

And may hope be the walls—holding us together.

In this hour of worship, let us work toward building that home together.

We may not know the path ahead, but God is here, even now.

Let us give thanks for a foundation of love.

Let us worship Holy God.

Candle Lighting Liturgy

A: As we reflect on the foundation of our faith in our lives, we gather together around the candle of peace.

B: The home we long for is a home that knows peace—

A: peace that rests between us and our grief,
B: peace around our anxiety,
A: peace between us and our self-criticism,
B: peace amidst our relationships,
A: peace at the core of our being,
B: peace hovering through and in our world.
A: The home we long for is a home that knows peace.
B: So today we light the candle of peace—as a reminder and as a prayer.
A: Let it be so. Amen.

Advent Song: Hope is a Star (VU6)

Call to Confession

In our scripture passage for today, Zechariah, a new father, speaks to his newborn son, John the Baptist, for the very first time. I want you to imagine yourself in his shoes . . . What would you say to a newborn sleeping in your arms? What would you want them to know on their very first day? What would feel important?

I imagine that all of you would speak words of love.

It's impossible not to speak words of love when you're holding a baby, and yet as we grow up, that skill tends to become harder for us to practice. So let us return to our foundation—to words of love, starting with love for ourselves. Let us pray the prayer of confession together.

Prayer of Confession

Holy God, when John was Born, Zechariah leaned down and whispered words of love into his ear. We know that you do the same for us, day in and day out, yet we fail to hear it.

We forget that in the beginning we were made good. We doubt that we could possibly be enough.

We hustle for our self-worth and wear ourselves out aiming for perfection. We deflect words of praise.

We hide behind shiny first impressions.

Forgive us. Trusting our worth is the hardest job. Open our ears as you open our hearts,

so that we might rest on the foundation of goodness you have laid for us. Gratefully we pray, amen.

Words of Forgiveness

Family of faith, no matter how old we get, God continues to say to us:

"You are loved; you are forgiven." That is the foundation of our lives.

That is the truth upon which we build our home. So breathe deeply. There is grace and peace here. Join me in proclaiming this good news:

We are loved. We are forgiven. We are claimed. This is our foundation. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Hymn: Turning of the World (Rainbow Songbook)

Prayer for Illumination

God, who speaks a good news language— we admit, listening has never been our greatest gift. We are easily distracted, our minds run a million miles a minute. We doubt your faith in us and take the easy way out when it comes to hope. So today we bow our heads and ask for help.

Settle our hearts.

Quiet our minds.

Steady our breathing.

Help us to rest in you.

Help us to listen for your good news. Gratefully we pray, amen.

Scripture: Luke 1:57-80¹

Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. Her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.

On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. But his mother said, 'No; he is to be called John.' They said to her, 'None of your relatives has this name.' Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. He asked for a writing-tablet and wrote, 'His name is John.' And all of them were amazed. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. Fear came over all their neighbours, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. All who heard them pondered them and said, 'What then will this child become?' For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.

Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy:

'Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,

for he has looked favourably on his people and redeemed them.

He has raised up a mighty saviour for us

in the house of his servant David,

as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,

that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.

Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,

and has remembered his holy covenant,

the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,

to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,

might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness

before him all our days.

And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;

for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,

to give knowledge of salvation to his people

by the forgiveness of their sins.

By the tender mercy of our God,

the dawn from on high will break upon us,

to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.'

The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.

Reflection

Last week I ended the reflection time by sharing a piece of visual art called *Awake to Wonder*, connecting the scripture passage with our theme for last week... homesick.

Today I'm going to begin with an image. (*show image*)

This image is called *Berakah* and the artist's name is Hannah Garrity.

And this is what Hannah wrote about this image:

In this image, Zechariah holds his baby boy. He speaks a blessing, a *berakah*.¹ For his neighbors, he answers the question, "What then will this child become?" (v. 66). The intimate love of a father with his newborn son is captured in this pose. Patterns of water pour over John's little shirt. Zechariah sees what his son will become and begins to speak his future into being from the start. As dawn breaks over Zechariah's shoulder, his prophecy foretells God coming into the world—of light dawning in weary spaces.

Zechariah relents. God has made Her statement. He could not speak until he de-centered himself from the story. He gives the name that Elizabeth has been called to give. Zechariah's willingness to hear the call is the action in this moment. Traditionally, he would give his first born son his own name. His neighbors are shocked by the name he chooses to give, by the prophecy, by his being able to speak again.

By removing his own personal and family legacy from the picture, he is truly able to give way to the greater narrative that God is calling him to participate in.

This is an incredible moment of humility.

As I created this image, I asked God's help in identifying where I can step out of the way to forward Her vision for this weary world. She knows. Her work is greater than my legacy.

Now when I read this, the phrase that jumped out at me... and has been swirling around in my mind and heart... is this "I asked for God's help in identifying where I can step out of the way to forward her vision for this weary world."

Partly it jumped out at me because I can identify with weary.

These past couple of years have taken a toll on many of us. The most common response I hear to the question "how're you doing?" is... tired... or exhausted... and I've definitely heard the word weary more than once.

Even in youth group.

I'm not sure if you are all aware but the youth group has continued to meet over the past couple of years... first on Zoom, and then in person... and then back to zoom... and they've been meeting in person now since September.

Now let me just say that the youth have never really been overly energetic on Sunday

morning... but it's been different these past few months. what I'm witnessing is not just a lack of sleep or fatigue from all the extracurriculars - its - heavier than that. It's the weariness that comes, I think, with all the uncertainty, the fear, the isolation, separation. I think it's called covid fatigue.

But the world was weary long before covid came into the picture. It might be hard to remember what we thought about - what weighed on us prior to covid... but there were a number of things.

And all of those things didn't go away when covid arrived - covid just became another layer on top of it all.

So if you also identify with "weary" ... you're not alone.

But... when I read it again, the words "where can I step out of the way to forward God's vision" were the ones that came at me.

What do you mean step out of the way?

What about all of my concerns and questions and uncertainties?

If I don't stand there waving them at God... how will God know what I need? Or what I think I should do?

This reminds me of the beginning of any 12 step program -

Coming to believe that there is a power greater than ourselves and that the only way into a life of recovery is by letting go... surrendering to God.

And what is amazing to me is that alcoholics and addicts of all kinds... come to these steps feeling lost and broken... and desperate. And even though their history and all evidence points to an inability to live without feeding their addiction - they begin to step out of the way and trust that with the support of their 12 step group and the belief in a higher power - they can live lives that they never imaged possible.

And the other amazing thing about addicts in recovery - is that it doesn't take most of them very long to begin to see their lives as blessed, rather than cursed. You'll often hear things like "I'm grateful for 1 day sober". The fact that they've made a mess of their lives or that their lives are just messed up... doesn't keep them from feeling blessed and expressing their gratitude.

And I wonder if that right there partly explains why the world is weary. We don't feel blessed. Or if we can acknowledge the blessings in our lives - we fear we will lose them... or they will be taken away.

Do you see yourself as a blessing?

Like really... a blessing?! A beautiful, beloved, child of God full of possibility? With an abundance of gifts... a heart full of love... just waiting be shared?

And if you are struggling with that? If you've forgotten about your blessedness... who are the people in your life that can remind you?

Maybe it would be helpful for us to go back in our minds and remember the people, the experiences, the words that laid the foundation of our faith – which is deeply connected to blessing.

One of the real gifts of being present with families as they are planning their loved ones funeral service... is the remembering. Everyone is thinking about and sharing stories of the times they felt loved, cared for... blessed... by the person who has died. It is truly beautiful and touching to witness.

And we don't need to wait until someone has died to remember.

The strongest foundations are the ones built on blessing. On these foundations, when the weariness of life seeps in – blessing absorbs it and fills in the cracks left behind.

The scripture reading this morning is about the miraculous birth of John the Baptist. Miraculous because, as the story goes, Elizabeth and Zechariah were very old and had been unable to conceive... when God chose them to have a son who would prepare the way for the Messiah.

Also miraculous because Zechariah was able to speak after naming his son. When the angel had come to him to say that God was giving them a baby, Zechariah doubted. I imagine he laughed in the angel's face. And because of that doubt he was no longer able to speak... until he named John.

And when his voice returned, so did his imagination – his vision for the future.

Following the naming he offers deep praise for God's tender mercy and casts a hopeful vision for his child. He sang blessings into John's being. This laid the foundation for John's life and John would go on to prepare the way for Jesus who laid the foundation for peace.

God's blessings broke through Zechariah's doubt and when Zechariah decided to step out of the way – everything became possible.

So what are some ways that you might practice surrender so that you are able to live from that place of blessing?

What would it take for you to be able to step out of the way to forward God's vision?

Do you need to have a clear understanding of God's vision first?

"I'd step out of the way if I knew where God was leading me... if I knew what was going to happen next."

"What if I step out of the way and God guides me down a path I don't really want to go?"

“is it really wise to step out of the way when there’s so much uncertainty – and risk?”

I think if we wait for clarity from God... we might be waiting awhile – at least for me clarity doesn’t come when I’m sitting around waiting for it to happen. Clarity comes when I move towards something that I’m pretty sure I’m being nudged to do – without a whole lot of questioning and second-guessing... and just pay attention and wait for the next little nudge.

And all of this has to happen on a foundation of blessing. If I believe I am blessed and that I meant to be a blessing... if I believe blessings are abundant – well, possibilities are endless.

But if I approach anything believing that I don’t have enough – time, energy, worth... I’m firmly blocking God’s vision for my life.

And what is true for us individually... is also true for us as a community of faith.

Covid did not get in the way of our commitment to renewal. Remember way back when – when we made the commitment to explore paths of renewal - to creatively look at ways we can “be the church” in our community... well, we haven’t forgotten that.

Over the past few months we have had to be creative... and we’ve learned so much – and reached many people.

So we didn’t exactly step out of the way – covid pushed us out of the way – but I believe we have been more open to God’s vision for us.

And now as we begin to gather again and things return to what is familiar – I hope we don’t lose sight of that vision.

We are a community with an abundance of blessings. So many blessings. And yet it is tempting... and so easy... to forget that. to slip into thinking we don’t have enough and that we need to just take care of ourselves and do the best we can with our limited resources.

The resources that really matter are not limited.

Not if we build ourselves up around the foundation of blessing.

Not if we open the door to this home, step out of the way and let God’s vision move us forward.

We are so blessed.

I want to close by reading a poem for you. This poem is by Reverend Sarah Speed and is based on the scripture reading for today:

If I could give you words for the very beginning—
for the stretches and the yawns, and the opening of eyes,
for the first hiccups, and the first smiles, and the first purse of your lips,
I would say, “Oh, dear child, how you are loved.”
But the thing about love is you can’t stop there,
so I would go on to say,
“You are strong, stronger than you think.
And you are not alone—
look at these parents who adore you
and these doctors and nurses fighting for you.
And you are enough, already enough.

You haven’t done anything yet.
You’ve just been here, breathing, sleeping,
and already, you are enough.

And then I might say,
“This world is a mess, but it is your home,
and you can make it better,
so always try to make it better.

And maybe most important of all:
there is a love that is bigger than my understanding,
that moves through this world,
and I call that love God.
And that love is here, here in this room,
and that love knows your name by heart.”

Those are the words I would say to you
as you stretch and yawn and open your eyes
on the very first morning of your very first day.
Let that be your foundation, like Zechariah did for John.
Let love be your beginning.

Call to Offering

Zechariah gave one of the greatest gifts he could give to his son.

He gave him a foundation of love—words of purpose, pride, love, and belonging.

So, in turn, remembering that joyful day, we try to make a similar impact by giving what we can. And we pray that the gifts we give now—our time, our money, our talents—will be infused by the Spirit to make a more purposeful world of love and belonging that we can be proud of.

Today we symbolized the bring forward of our offerings – in the building of a small home – in the making of a crèche like structure – the first wall in our little home is hope the second is of peace. Let this be the foundation of a better world.

Offering Hymn: Make Me a Channel of Your Peace (VU684)

Prayer of Dedication

Holy God, you are our home. You and your goodness are the place we return to, the place we long to lay our head. So today as we offer you our gifts, we pray that you would take our offering and turn it into ministry. Use our gifts to transform the world we live in to better reflect the home you have envisioned for us—a home of peace, a home built on the foundation of love. Gratefully we pray, amen.

Prayer of the People

God of days gone by, and God of the here and now—we understand the story of Zechariah.

We know what it's like to be speechless. We know what it's like to be awestruck.

We know what it's like to change plans and leave everyone whispering.

What we don't always know is what the next right step is. We crave your voice in our ear guiding our steps, revealing the way.

So today, God, we pause to give you thanks for the things that leave us speechless for children's laughter, for the moments when the doctor says the scan is clear, for the family that runs to meet us at the airport and welcomes us home, for stunning sunsets and fresh air, for music and warm blankets, for every small miracle and concentrated beauty in our life-

we are awestruck.

We are speechless.

We are so deeply grateful.

In between whispers of deep gratitude, are people who are speechless for other reasons.

We are speechless because of the suffering and despair, grief and loss, violence and injustice in our world.

With every young addicted and on the street, we lose our breath.

With every threat of violence, we lose our words.

With every updated report on climate change, we lose our peace.

And the cycle goes on and on and on.

Creator God, who breathed life into us, move between us and our despair.

Give us a voice to speak gratitude in the face of beauty, *and* justice in the face of destruction.

Give us words to heal where there is hurt and to invite where there is isolation.

We offer now the prayers of our own hearts too deep for words in a time of silence....

There are so many things that leave us speechless, O God, but we never lose your words of love and hope. So today we pray the prayer your son taught us to pray, saying...

Our Father and Mother

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

Hymn: Put Peace Into Each Other's Hand (MV173)

Benediction

Go from here knowing you are blessed
And may you lay a foundation of blessing,
Build a home of love...
And swing the door wide open...
Inviting God's vision to come and stay.

May you go in peace,
Knowing the peace of Christ is always with you.

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

TAKE VIDEO/PHOTO FOR THE CHRISTMAS CONCERT