

CHRISTMAS EVE COMMUNION SERVICE



Drawing by Celia James

CAMBRIDGE UNITARIAN CHURCH

Emmanuel Road
Cambridge
www.cambridgeunitarian.org

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¶ The service leader invites those gathered to rest together for a while in silence. Following the silence the service leader begins by reading the following words:

In this service tonight, along with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, we recall:

“We are talking about the birth of a child, not the revolutionary act of a strong man, not the breathtaking discovery of a sage, not the pious act of a saint. It really passes all understanding: the birth of a child is to bring the great turning around of all things, is to bring salvation and redemption to the whole human race. What kings, statesmen, philosophers and artists, founders of religions and moral teachers vainly strive for, now comes about through a newborn child.”

(Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “The Turning Around of All Things,” in *The Mystery of Holy Night*, New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996, p. 27).

¶ Those gathered respond with the words printed in bold italics:

Out of a community of diverse heritage and belief,

**we come together to share our hope,
and to create good in the world.**

The teachers of all traditions and times have taught that we are called to mercy, generosity, and mutual care

and that to be good is to serve.

We know that there can be no enduring happiness for humanity so long as suffering and want go unrelieved;

until all may be sheltered, none of us is truly at home.

May the power of our various faiths sustain us in this work, that we may be the hands of holy creativity and justice;

and together build a better world.

Kendyl Gibbons (adapted)

**Love is the doctrine of this church,
the quest of truth is our sacrament,
and service is our prayer.**

To dwell together in peace,

**to seek knowledge in freedom,
to serve others in community,
to the end that all souls shall grow
into harmony with nature,
Thus do we covenant with one another.**

L. Griswold Williams (1893-1942) (adapted)

¶ The service leader then lights the Advent Wreath concluding with the following words to light the fifth, and final candle:

“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1:15). May this light go before us, strong in hope, bright in faithfulness, clear before our struggling steps.

¶ The service leader invites those gathered to say the following responsive reading:

A planet is born, a spark ignites, something completely new comes into being;
we give thanks for the mystery and miracle of life.

A waterfall descends, a rainbow arcs through the sky, the ocean opens to an endless horizon;

we give thanks for the mystery and miracle of beauty.

The stars pierce our hearts, peace envelops us, we are blessed;

we give thanks for the mystery and miracle of wonder.

In the midst of pain, we find our way to hope and restoration;

we give thanks for the mystery and miracle of healing.

In the midst of fear, we do what is right and speak our truth in faith;

we give thanks for the mystery and miracle of courage.

In our aloneness we see someone in greater need and offer ourselves to them;

we give thanks for the mystery and miracle of compassion.

We gather in community, in friendship, and cherish each other;

we give thanks for the mystery and miracle of love.

Amanda Udis-Kessler

Carol: It came upon the midnight clear

It came upon the midnight clear,
That glorious song of old,
From angels bending near the earth,
To touch their harps of gold:
“Peace on the earth, goodwill to men,
From heaven’s all-gracious King.”
The world in solemn stillness lay,
To hear the angels sing.

Still through the cloven skies they come,
With peaceful wings unfurled,
And still their heavenly music floats
O’er all the weary world;
Above its sad and lowly plains,
They bend on hovering wing,
And ever o’er its Babel sounds
The blessed angels sing.

Yet with the woes of sin and strife
The world has suffered long;
Beneath the angel-strain have rolled
Two thousand years of wrong;
And man, at war with man, hears not
The love-song which they bring;
O hush the noise, ye men of strife,
And hear the angels sing!

And ye, beneath life’s crushing load,
Whose forms are bending low,
Who toil along the climbing way
With painful steps and slow,
Look now! for glad and golden hours
come swiftly on the wing.
O rest beside the weary road,
And hear the angels sing!

For lo!, the days are hastening on,
By prophet bards foretold,
When with the ever-circling years
Comes round the age of gold
When peace shall over all the earth
Its ancient splendours fling,
And the whole world give back the song
Which now the angels sing.

Edmund Hamilton Sears (1810–1876)

Readings:

From *The Gospel according to St Matthew 1:18-2:12* (trans. David Bentley Hart)

Now the manner of the birth of Jesus the Anointed was this:

His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph but, before they had been joined, she was discovered to be pregnant from a Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being an upright man and not wishing to make a spectacle of her, resolved to divorce her in private. But look: As he was pondering these matters the Lord's angel appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to receive your wife Mary; for what has been begotten within her is from a Spirit, the Holy one. And she will bear a son, and you shall declare his name to be Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins. All of this has occurred in order that there might be fulfilled what the Lord spoke through the prophet, saying, 'See: The virgin shall conceive in her womb and shall bear a son, and they shall declare his name to be Emmanuel'"—which, being interpreted, means "God with us." And Joseph, having arisen from sleep, did as the Lord's angel had bidden him, and received his wife. But he had no intimacy with her until she bore a son. And he declared his name to be Jesus.

Now, Jesus having been born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days when Herod was king, look: Magians arrived in Jerusalem from Eastern parts, saying, "Where is the newborn King of the Judaeans? For we saw his star at its rising, and came to make obeisance to him." And, hearing this, King Herod was perturbed, and so was all of Jerusalem along with him; And, having assembled all of the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Anointed is to be born. And they said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judaea, for so it has been written by the prophet: 'And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, are by no means least among the leaders of Judah. For from you will come forth a leader who will shepherd my people Israel.'"

Then Herod, secretly summoning the Magians, ascertained from them the exact time of the star's appearance. And, sending them to Bethlehem, said, "Go and inquire very precisely after the child; and when you find him send word to me, so that I too may come and make my obeisance to him." And, obeying the king, they departed. And look: The star, which they saw at its rising, preceded them until it came to the place where the child was and stood still above it. And, seeing the star, they were exultantly joyful. And, entering the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary and, falling down, made obeisance to him; and, opening their treasure caskets, they proffered him gifts: gold and frankincense and myrrh. Having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, however, they departed for their own country by another path.

A Child in Starlight by Elmer Diktonius

*There is a child,
A new-born child —
A rosy, new-born child.*

*The child whimpers —
All children do.
And the mother takes the child to her breast.
Then it is quiet.
So is every child.*

*The roof is not over tight —
Not all roofs are.
And the star puts
Its silver muzzle through the chink,
And steals up to the little one's head.
Stars like children.*

*And the mother looks up at the star
And understands —
All mothers understand.
And presses her frightened baby
To her breast —
But the child sucks quietly in starlight:
All children suck in starlight.*

*It knows nothing yet about the cross:
No child does.*

Music

From The Gospel according to St Luke 2:1-20 (trans. David Bentley Hart)

Now it happened that in those days an edict went out from Caesar Augustus that all the inhabited world should be enrolled in a census. This, the first enrolment, took place when Quirinius was governing Syria. And all went to be enrolled, each to his own city. And so Joseph went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, to Judaea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, since he was from the house and lineage of David, To be enrolled with Mary, who was betrothed to him, and who was pregnant. And while they were there it came about that the days of her bearing reached their term, And she gave birth to her son, her firstborn, and she wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the lodge. And there were shepherds in the countryside there, dwelling out in the fields and keeping guard in the night over their flock. And an angel of the Lord stood before

them and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were afraid, greatly afraid. And the angel said to them, "Do not fear; for see: I bring to you good tidings of a great joy, which will be for all the people, Because today, in David's city, a saviour was born to you who is the Anointed Lord. And this is a sign for you: You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." And suddenly there appeared with the angel a throng of the heavenly army, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest places and peace on earth among men of good will." And it happened that, as the angels departed from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this story that has unfolded, which the Lord has made known to us." And hastening they went and found both Joseph and Mary, and the baby lying in the manger as well; And seeing them they revealed what they had been told concerning this little child. And everyone who heard was amazed at the things reported to them by the angels. But Mary kept all these things in her heart, pondering them. And the shepherds went back glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as they had been told.

The Lamb Baaed Gently by Juan Ramón Jiménez

*The lamb baaed gently.
The tender donkey showed its joy
in lusty bray.
The dog barked playfully
almost talking to the stars.*

*I could not sleep, I went outdoors
and saw heavenly tracks upon the ground
all flower-decked
like a sky
turned upside down.*

*A warm and fragrant mist
hovered over the grove,
the moon was sinking low
in a soft golden west
of divine orbit.*

*My breast beat without a pause,
as if my heart had wined . . .*

*I opened wide the stable door to see
if He were there.*

He was!

Carol: O little town of Bethlehem

O little town of Bethlehem,
How still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
The silent stars go by;
Yet in thy dark streets shineth
The everlasting light;
The hopes and fears of all the years
Are met in thee tonight

O morning stars together
Proclaim the holy birth.
And praises sing to God the King
And peace throughout the earth:
For Christ is born of Mary—
And gathered all above,
While mortals sleep, the angels keep
Their watch of wondering love

How silently, how silently,
The Wondrous gift is given!
So God imparts to human hearts
The peace and joy of heaven.
No ear may hear his coming;
But in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive him, still
The dear Christ enters in.

Phillips Brooks (1835–1893)

¶ The service leader then reads the following prayer:

O God, Spirit of Life, we come to this, your table, to celebrate your presence all around us, to share of all the fruits of the earth, to share hope by the work of our hands, to reap the harvest of wisdom we know can be found in the human heart. Fill our emptiness where we hunger, empty our surfeit where we overflow and may we, by grace, be your servants, seeking justice and peace for every child on earth. But we know, despite our many achievements, that we are yet frail; limited creatures bound to history and place, subject always to flesh and the earth. So let us speak now to one another of our common struggle to be whole:

O God, Spirit of Life, search me and know my heart! Try me, and know my thoughts, see if there be any mistaken ways in me and guide me in the path of everlasting wisdom.

¶ A short time of silence follows.

¶ The service leader says the following words:

In sharing this broken bread, we acknowledge our dependence on the graceful bounty of the earth; our unity with all people who, like us, receive their daily bread in gratitude and humility (break the bread).

In sharing this juice from the fruit of the vine, we acknowledge that we are part of the vine of life, with its branches and tendrils in every nook and cranny of the good earth, its root in the mysterious source of all that is (pour the wine).

¶ The bread & wine are now shared silently.

¶ The service leader then reads the following meditation:

O God, Spirit of Life, in this season of grace, we seek faith, hope, love. Let our meditations be centred in the stillness within. Let our prayers reach out to the encompassing holiness of being. Let us find the sacred place where our inward hearts and the whole world's longing are one.

Time catches us up. The urgency we feel in the swift rush of our lives, and the fateful weight we feel in the awesome events of the world, disturb and distract us. So we set this time apart, to be mindful in our meditations and at one in our prayers.

Sacred is the event that redeems our faith, and gives us the confidence to go on. In our mixed courage and fear, like shepherds catching the strains of angelic song, may we keep faith, always, and leave behind all fearful and faithless ways.

Sacred is the event that redeems our hope, and gives us the vision of a better world to be. In our mixed wisdom of folly, like three kings following a bright and steady star, may we hope, always, and leave behind all despairing and hopeless ways.

Sacred is the event that redeems our love, and gives us hearts ready to reach out to the friend and the stranger, to those whom we love and to the world's

despised. In our mixed longing for love and proud independence, like a holy family—each of us a fragile vessel of life, yet drawn together by the strongest bonds on earth—may we love, always, and ourselves be reborn this evening. Amen.

George Kimmich Beach

¶ The service leader then invites those who wish to say together the prayer Jesus taught us:

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come.
Your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And do not bring us to the time of trial,
but rescue us from the evil one.**

¶ The service leader invites those gathered to say the following prayer by Thich Nhat Hanh:

**Let us be at peace with our bodies and our minds. Let us
return to ourselves and become wholly ourselves.**

**Let us be aware of the source of being, common to us all and
to all living things.**

**Evoking the presence of the Great Compassion, let us fill our
hearts with our own compassion—towards ourselves and
towards all living beings.**

**Let us pray that we ourselves cease to be the cause of suffering
to each other.**

**With humility, with awareness of the existence of life, and
of the sufferings that are going on around us, let us practise
the establishment of peace in our hearts and on earth.**

¶ The service leader continues with the following words:

The inner spirit makes us feel that behind every appearance of diversity there is an interdependent unity of all things. Let us, therefore, preach the universal and everlasting gospel of boundless, universal love for the entire human race, without exception, and for each one in particular.

George de Benneville (1703-1793) (adapted)

And, in the end, it will not matter how much we have, rather how much we have given. It will not matter how much we know, but rather how much we love. And it will not matter how much we profess to believe, but rather how deeply we live the few enduring truths we claim as ultimate. All the rest is discipline.

John Morgan

¶ Those gathered then say responsively the following words:

This making of a whole self takes such a very long time: pieces are not sequential, nor our supplies.

**We work here, then there, hold up tattered fabric to the light.
Sew past dark, intent. Use all our thread.**

Sleeves may come before length; buttons, before a rounded neck.

We sew at what most needs us, and as it asks, sew again.

The self is not one thing, once made, unaltered. Not midnight task alone, not after other work.

**It is everything we come upon, make ours: all this fitting of
what-once-was and has-become.**

Nancy Shaffer

Carol: Silent Night

Silent night, holy night,
All is calm, all is bright.
Round yon virgin mother and child.
Holy infant so tender and mild,
Sleep in heavenly peace.
Sleep in heavenly peace.

Silent night, holy night,
Shepherds quake at the sight,
Glories stream from heaven afar,
Heavenly hosts sing "Alleluia!";
Christ the Saviour is born.
Christ the Saviour is born.

Silent night, holy night,
Son of God, love's pure light
Radiant beams from thy holy face,
With the dawn of redeeming grace,
Jesus, Lord, at thy birth.
Jesus, Lord, at thy birth.

Josef Mohr (1792–1848)

¶ The service leader concludes the service by saying:

May the spirit of Jesus be born in our hearts this day, that the truths of which he spoke may direct us, and the love that he displayed possess us.

A. Powell Davies (1902–1957)

Go in peace, speak the truth, give thanks each day.
Respect the earth and her creatures, for they are alive like you.
Care for your body; it is a wondrous gift.
Live simply. Be of service.
Be guided by your faith and not your fear.
Go lightly on your path. Walk in a sacred manner.

Amen.

Gary Kowalski