



*Celebrating  
175 Years*



**January 3, 2021**

Melville United Church

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**Melville United Church  
Sunday, January 3, 2020**

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Presiding today: Ruth Cooke

**Welcome & Announcements**

**Sharing the Light**

**Prelude/Centering Time**

**Call to Worship:**

God calls us into a future that we cannot see.  
We come wondering where God is calling us now.  
God calls us to believe in a future of justice and peace, of generosity and compassion.  
We come wanting to give our hearts to that future.  
God calls us to commit our lives to love and service.  
Let us worship the God who calls us into the unknown.

**Opening Prayer:**

God of majesty and mystery,  
we come to you this day in wonder.  
As the year opens before us, we wonder what it holds in store.  
We wonder where you will lead us,  
how you will call us to follow in the days ahead.  
Your purposes are beyond our comprehension, O God,  
but your presence is always with us.  
So we offer you our trust for the days ahead,  
as we seek to follow in the footsteps of Christ, our newborn King. Amen.

**Hymn: It Came Upon the Midnight Clear VU 44**

**Prayer of Confession:**

God of light and life,  
you have come to us in Christ Jesus to open a path to new life.  
Yet once the New Year has begun,  
we long for things to get back to normal, especially this year.  
We confess that our resolutions for change often don't last long.  
Old habits draw us back to familiar ways.  
It is so hard for us to make a new beginning, O God,  
even with the best of intentions.  
Forgive us, O God,  
and renew our determination to know you more clearly,  
love you more dearly  
and follow you more nearly, day by day.

*(We contemplate in silence...)*

### **Words of Assurance:**

St. Paul declared to us that from now on, we regard no one from a human point of view. If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation. Everything old has passed away; See, everything has become new! So let us regard ourselves from God's point of view. This year we can make a new start, trusting in God's love and mercy.

**Thanks be to God! Amen.**

### **Prayer of Illumination**

#### **Scripture: Jeremiah 31:7-14**

For thus says the LORD:

Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob,  
and raise shouts for the chief of the nations;  
proclaim, give praise, and say,  
"Save, O LORD, your people,  
the remnant of Israel."

See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north,  
and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth,  
among them the blind and the lame,  
those with child and those in labor, together;  
a great company, they shall return here.

With weeping they shall come,  
and with consolations I will lead them back,  
I will let them walk by brooks of water,  
in a straight path in which they shall not stumble;  
for I have become a father to Israel,  
and Ephraim is my firstborn.

Hear the word of the LORD, O nations,  
and declare it in the coastlands far away;  
say, "He who scattered Israel will gather him,  
and will keep him as a shepherd a flock."

For the LORD has ransomed Jacob,  
and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him.  
They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion,  
and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the LORD,  
over the grain, the wine, and the oil,  
and over the young of the flock and the herd;  
their life shall become like a watered garden,  
and they shall never languish again.

Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance,  
and the young men and the old shall be merry.  
I will turn their mourning into joy,  
I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow.  
I will give the priests their fill of fatness,  
and my people shall be satisfied with my bounty,  
says the LORD.

### **Gospel Reading: John 1:1-9**

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. <sup>5</sup>The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

### **Message: “Looking for the Light”**

Would you pray with me and for me, please...

In 2015, many, many people in job interviews would have been asked the very same question, and it's pretty safe to say that every single one of those interviewees would have gotten the answer wrong.

The question was, “Where do you see yourself in five years?”

It's finally over.

2020, the year that nobody foresaw is done with, and we face a brand new year, and it's also safe to say that many if not most of us are feeling a little bewildered and afraid. Many of us are hopeful, yes, now that a vaccine seems to be on the horizon, but the number of people who mistrust and don't understand science is at an all time high, and it's not clear that enough people will consent to being vaccinated to provide herd immunity for those who are unable to be vaccinated.

Despite the widespread protests, discrimination and outright brutality towards Black people and Indigenous people and People of Colour and LGBTQ++ people and people who are not neurotypical and people who have disabilities and people who are poor continues. In fact, this year has seen a very large growth in economic inequality across the globe, as billionaires, who are mostly white, male, and middle aged or older have added substantial wealth to their portfolios, while the people they employ and the people who use their products have sunk further into poverty and suffered disproportionately from COVID.

Lockdowns have been especially hard on those with mental health issues or physical disabilities. Christmas Day saw a bombing in Nashville, Tennessee, where the bomber put some effort into ensuring that no one was hurt except him. While he may or may not have had a particular grudge against AT&T, the news reports I've read lead me to believe that this is more likely a case of suicide than any kind of terrorism.

Alongside this is an apparent rise in intolerance. Just in the last week or so, YouTube has for some reason begun recommending channels that I've not seen before, where people who fight for justice are called “SJWs” for short. It means “Social Justice Warrior,” and in the world of the discontented white posters, it's not a complimentary word. Apparently, SJWs are mostly female, fat, and lesbian. According to a few posters, even the male SJWs are female, fat, and lesbian.

On the other side, I haven't noticed a whole lot of compassion for those who voted for Trump, not because he was Trump, but because they genuinely fear that a world where resources are shared equitably will lead to a dramatic rise in those who don't want to work or contribute to society.

There is little tolerance for differing viewpoints. For my own mental health, I've had to insulate myself a bit by unfollowing or unfriending those whose political views differ greatly from mine, but I realize that this too is problematic, cutting off lines of communication and the chance of mutual understanding. And I've even had to ignore or unfollow some fellow SJWs, as their posts indicate that they often see those who don't agree with them as stupid or less than human.

Personally, I haven't had what I'd consider to be my best year, either. While it's definitely a long way from my worst, I've lost two friends, one to a sudden and unexpected death just before COVID became big news, and one to an irreconcilable disagreement. I will grieve both of these losses for a very long time.

In September, Mom and I were in a car accident that resulted in the write off of my Dodge Journey, a broken thumb and possibly other injuries for Mom, and a financial setback that has thrown me off the rails for a bit. The damage was admittedly minor compared to what it could have been, and we are blessed with good health care and credit that was good enough to get us an almost new vehicle at a price we could afford, but it will take a little while for full recovery.

I'm sure that many of you have your own stories to tell, your own losses to grieve. I presided at more memorial services in 2020 than I have in all the time since I started my ministry journey over twenty years ago.

And to end it all off, the news stories on my feed are about some pastors and churches getting charged with flaunting public health restrictions over the Christmas season, while YouTube is flush with services from pastors and churches urging their flock to stay home and stay safe.

No, 2020 has not been what I consider a "good" year.

And so we enter 2021 looking for light. Desperate for a saviour.

Come, COVID vaccine! Save us! World Health Organization, Dr. Tam, Dr. Fauci, save us! Joe Biden, Justin Trudeau, Doug Ford, Pope Francis! Save us!

God, save us! Jesus, save us!

Like the Israelites of old we cry, "Save, O Lord, your people!"

We need someone powerful, persuasive, with connections both economic and political to overcome our problems.

A million dollars for each of us would help a bit too, while you're at it, God!

And we have the promise that God spoke through the prophet Jeremiah that God will gather us, and comfort us. Our mourning will be turned to joy, our sorrow will turn to gladness.

But when I read the Bible, and see how God has acted throughout history, I become very aware that the help God sends usually doesn't come in ways that we expect or want.

The Israelites escaping from Egypt wanted to reach the land of milk and honey, but they had to wander in the desert for forty years before they trusted in God enough to find it.

The Jews of Jesus's time wanted a military leader who would overthrow the Roman Emperors. They got a baby in a manger who grew up to be an itinerant preacher.

They didn't see it. We still don't see it.

I particularly love these words of John. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... And the Word became flesh and lived among us..."

There are those who call the Bible "The Word of God." I am not one of them. The Word of God is Jesus Christ.

The Word become human flesh. And not a great warrior, sprung full grown from his father's forehead, but a tiny baby, born to a teenage girl and a man of some skill but no special status, born on the street or in a barn, soon to become an exile and a refugee.

Even as he is born, the wise see the portents, not in the sun, brightly shining, nor in the moon, the brightest light in the night sky, but in a single star, barely distinguishable from countless other stars, a tiny pinpoint of light that was often obscured by moonlight or clouds.

Such is the action of God.

A single candle, banishing the shadows of night, bearing witness to the truth that as long as a single candle burns, the darkness can never be complete.

That baby grew up to be a preacher and teacher and healer. At the start, his movement was small: first, just himself, then a few fishermen, then a growing ragtag band of men and women who followed him from town to town.

He did not defeat the Roman Empire, but suffered, at its hands and at the hands of his own people, an agonizing and shameful death.

But the candle had been lit, and the light carried on. A few more followers here, carrying on his message of love. A few thousand there.

Yet what were these numbers compared to the millions living at the time?

But the task of the light is not to worry about numbers. The task of the light and those who bear it is to love, and as we love, the light grows.

And as long as a single candle burns, there is no darkness.

We live in difficult times, but at times like these, we are not called to look for a saviour. We already have one.

It is at times like these that we are called instead to hold up the small, seemingly insignificant candle that is our love, and join with others and cry out, like Cindy Loo Who in Horton Hears a Who, "We are here! We are here! We are here!" We are not called to look for the light, for we are bearers of the Light.

I'm going to get myself a tee shirt that has the letters "SJW" printed on it, hopefully in rainbow colours. And underneath, I may put the phrase, "Because I Love."

I'm going to get vaccinated as soon as I'm able. I'm going to wear my mask even after I'm vaccinated, until reliable public health sources tell me it's not needed. I'm going to obey public health ordinances and attend church online for as long as it's necessary. I will not scream about "my rights" being violated, because I follow someone who never said a single word about "rights," but who talked a great deal about responsibility. I will love my neighbours as myself as well as I am able.

It's not a very big candle, but it's the only one I've got. And if I hold it up, and if you hold yours up, and if others see and join in, then hatred and fear and selfishness don't stand a chance.

Let's stop looking for something we've already got, and instead hold it up with determination and commitment, and show to a hurting world the power of true love.

Amen.

### **Hymn/Ministry of Music: A Light is Gleaming VU 82**

Sung by Rev. David Cooke

### **Prayers of the People:**

God of all time and space, as we gather in prayer,  
we recognize that our lives are but small details  
in the vast expanse of your universe.

So we thank you for attending to the details of our lives.

We thank you for the year just past,  
for walking through the hard days and uncertainties with us,  
and for the gifts of encouragement and friendship that cheered us.

We give thanks for accomplishments in ministry and mission,  
for generosity offered to those in need, and for new possibilities explored in online worship,  
education and outreach.

As your spirit guides us into the future, our hearts kneel before you, O God;

**Receive our humble prayers.**

The year just ending has held so many sorrows and challenges for so many.

We remember dear ones who have died  
and pray for those who look ahead in loneliness or sadness...

We pray for those who have faced challenges in health,  
in their families or at work...

Support each one who needs you close by.  
Our hearts kneel before you, O God;  
**Receive our humble prayers.**

God of light and love,  
As we face the year ahead, we are aware that much around us is still uncertain.  
We seek your strength and guidance in each challenge we will face.  
Draw near to each one who must confront illness, loss or changing circumstances.

Guide those for whom new opportunities appear and choices must be made...  
Our hearts kneel before you, O God;  
**Receive our humble prayers.**

God of community and commitment,  
We pray for wisdom and courage in the year ahead.  
Strengthen us as a congregation to be a committed witness to your love.  
Help us reach out to our community in creative ways,  
and make us effective citizens in these challenging times.  
Guide leaders in our nation and in nations around the world  
so that justice and peace may prevail,  
resources to meet health and hunger needs be shared,  
and understanding and respect grow among divided peoples.

Receive our humble prayers and encourage us onward  
in the name of Jesus our Christ who taught us to pray, saying...

**Prayer of Jesus:**

Our Father, who art in heaven,  
hallowed be thy name;  
thy kingdom come;  
thy will be done;  
on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread.  
And forgive us our trespasses,  
as we forgive those who trespass against us.  
And lead us not into temptation;  
but deliver us from evil.  
For thine is the kingdom,  
the power and the glory,  
for ever and ever.  
Amen.

**\*Hymn: "I Am the Light of the World" VU 87**

**\*Blessing/Sending Forth**

Go into the world refreshed in the hope of the Christ Child,  
Awake, alert, attuned to the Spirit's presence,  
ready to join God's work of blessing for all. Amen.

**\*Parting Song: Go Now in Peace, Guided by the Light MV 211**