

Welcome / Announcements / Land Acknowledgement

As we come to worship in Jesus' name we acknowledge with gratitude and respect the Lkwungen people – the Songhees, Esquimalt and WSÁNEĆ – on whose traditional and unceded territory we gather.

➤ ***Christ be our light***

Call to Worship / Advent Candles

As we prepare for Christ's coming, we remember that Christ modelled love by seeking justice for those on the margins.

We come with a desire to love everyone, even when it's hard.

We light the fourth candle of Advent, a symbol of God's love, which knows no boundaries.

May the light of this candle inspire us to act towards our neighbours near and far in loving and justice-seeking ways.

Holy One, we love because You first loved us. By the power of your Spirit, commit us to love in action in service of our neighbours. Affirm within us a dedication to show your love to the world, in both word and deed. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen

Songs of Advent¹ Love

Sing: Be near me, Lord Jesus; I ask Thee to stay Close by me forever, and love me I pray

These famous and tender lines from "Away in a Manger" capture the love of the church for Christ. The love of God brought the most incredible love story to life: Jesus, came into the world to save us. The love of God incarnate, was lived out among us.

Ever since the manger, the love of God has empowered others to love sacrificially like Jesus. The love of God gives vision to believers to imagine that even the hardest heart can soften and change.

You can probably think of many such stories. One that stands out from history is the story of St. Patrick – now known as the patron saint of Ireland. But he wasn't Irish. And you probably don't think about him at Christmas. When you hear his name you might think of March, St. Patrick's Day, and the colour green.

So, travel back with me over a thousand years to a small village in Scotland way back in the 4th century...

A young teenager is out in the fields, on another beautiful day in the countryside that he loves. Suddenly, violent men storm into the area with torches and swords. These Irish raiders burn down his village. The pillagers loot farms and homes, steal cattle and any riches they can find. And they capture slaves.

Patrick is taken from his family. Bound. Kidnapped. Dragged kicking and screaming to Ireland. He is only 15 years old and he's forced to work as a shepherd. Cut off from his family. Separated from his community. Alone.

So much trauma. Fear. Sadness. Grief. But it was in these circumstances that Patrick found God in those seven long years he was a shepherd of those Irish sheep. Then, at the age of twenty-two, he escaped.

What would you do? Go home to see who is still alive, of course. Find your family and friends. But then what? Get revenge? Fight back?

Despite the terrible circumstances, the love of God found Patrick and reached into his heart. In those lonely years that he was forced to be a shepherd, he learned to hear God's voice in the quiet fields, just like David. He began to understand what the Incarnation really means: to leave everything you love and live among the lost, just like Jesus did.

After he escaped, Patrick went back to Ireland. But not for revenge. He went to share God's love – to preach the gospel to the very people who had enslaved him. And he worked as a missionary among the Irish for the rest of his life.

From the outside looking in, that might sound crazy. And it was: the crazy, incarnational love of God at work that changed an entire nation.

The love of God changes us, surprises us, and moves us to love others in unexpected ways. Let this love fill your heart and boldly move you this Advent season.

St. Patrick's story inspired the famous hymn *Be thou my vision*. This morning we'll sing a rendition of that hymn that is woven together with *Away in a manger*.

➤ ***Away in a manger/Be thou my vision***

*Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart
Naught be all else to me, save that thou art
Thou my best thought in the day and the night
Waking or sleeping, thy presence my light*

*Riches I heed not, nor vain earthly praise
Thou my inheritance, through all my days*

*Thou and thou only, the first in my heart
High King of heaven, my treasure thou art*

*Away in a manger, no crib for a bed
The little Lord Jesus laid down his sweet head
The stars in the bright sky looked down where he lay
The little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay*

*Be near me, Lord Jesus; I ask you to stay
Close by me forever, and love me I pray
Bless all the dear children in your tender care
And fit us for heaven to live with you there*

*High King of heaven, when the battle is done
Grant heaven's joy to me, O bright heaven's Sun
Heart of my own heart, whatever befall
Still be my vision, O ruler of all*

Gathering Prayer / Words of Hope

O God, our Saviour, with Mary, our spirits rejoice in you this day. Your mercy is known from generation to generation. And so, we praise and magnify your holy name with hearts full of gratitude, trusting you will do great things once again through Christ our Lord, born for us, born to be with us.

Holy One, we celebrate the gift of a saviour yet as we sing and celebrate, we are aware of our sin and so we pray...

...before the whole company of heaven, and in the presence of these siblings in Christ, I confess that I have sinned by my own fault, in thought, word, and deed. I pray that God Almighty might have mercy on me, forgive me all my sins, and bring me to everlasting life.

May Almighty God have mercy on you, pardon and deliver you from all your sins and give you time to amend your life. Amen

Before the whole company of heaven, and in the presence of these siblings in Christ, I confess that I have sinned by my own fault, in thought, word, and deed. I pray that God Almighty might have mercy on me, forgive me all my sins, and bring me to everlasting life.

May Almighty God have mercy on you, pardon and deliver you from all your sins and give you time to amend your life. **Amen**

The Good News is that our sins are forgiven, and we are a new creation – now have the courage and love to forgive others.

➤ *Love has come* (seated)

110 (PCUSA)

Prayer for Understanding

Open our ears, O God, to hear your voice speaking to us through the scriptures. Open our hearts to recognize your presence with us and know your direction for us. May we say with Mary, “Let it be with me according to your Word.” Amen

Scripture: **Micah 5:2-5a** [OT 865]

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.

Therefore, he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel. And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; and he shall be the one of peace.

Hebrews 10:5-10 [NT 224]

Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, *“Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. Then I said, See, God, I have come to do your will, O God (in the scroll of the book it is written of me).”*

When he said above, *“You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings”* (these are offered according to the law), then he added, *“See, I have come to do your will.”* He abolishes the first in order to establish the second. And it is by God’s will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

Luke 1:39-55 [NT 57]

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.

When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother

of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”

And Mary said, *“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. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”*

This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God!**

Message

One year – a long time ago when we still used worship bulletins – I remember that during Advent we had these bulletin covers with the Advent candle words on them matched with a word for what Sabbath teaches us. First we had HOPE paired with CEASE; then PEACE and REST. Next was JOY with EMBRACE and the word for today, LOVE, was joined with FEAST. Have you ever heard of a Love Feast? It is an archaic, but lovely, tradition.

Listen to this account of the spontaneous revival of the ancient Christian *Agapé* or Love Feast that occurred in 1727 among a group of believers called the Unity of Brethren or Moravians. With food and drink, conversation between siblings of faith, and the singing of hymns, a transformation occurs within a divided and quarreling community of faith.¹ The people are renewed by the Love Feast, becoming united and spirit filled

Suddenly, during their time of worship together, every man and woman, at one and the same time, is thrilled by a force which none can understand. It is a force that binds them together in a Christian fellowship that no earthly power can break. It is like another Pentecost – in that moment the people learn to love – to love each other, and to love Christ. They are overjoyed and filled with confidence for their life in Christ. They talk in small groups about their amazing experience and the great blessing they have received. The host’s reaction to the intense and prolonged conversation of the worshippers is to provide lunch so that they can stay undisturbed together – a meal which they eat together in love.²

¹ A. J. Lewis, *Zinzendorf the Ecumenical Pioneer*, (London: SCM Press, 1962), 60.

² J. E. Hutton, *A Short History of the Moravian Church*, (London: Moravian Publication Office, 1895), 131-32.

Both Jewish and pagan cultures in the time of Jesus held common meals to be of significance. Roman families would honour the dead by eating and drinking at the tomb in remembrance – perhaps this is the birth of our memorial teas. In the Jewish tradition the Sabbath meal was celebrated – a formal fellowship meal of devout friends. And think about the ministry of Jesus – he eats with everyone, everywhere he goes – denying distinctions, discriminations, and hierarchies that divide people. After the death and resurrection of Jesus, early Christians ate together, sharing food freely and joyfully – it says so in Acts, chapter 2 and Paul comments on abuses and excesses of such meals in his letters to the Corinthians.

There is no getting away from food – at any time of the year, in any century, in any culture – feasting is part of who we are as human creatures and the meaning we attach to sharing food is significant. In ancient times the communal meals among Christians came to be known as *Agapé* which means love – an opportunity for the believers to demonstrate and grow in Christian love as distinct from merely human friendship or romantic love.

Another aspect of *Agapé* was the practice of charity that was promoted in the meal. Participants were expected to ensure that there was food left over to provide for the needy and the widows. "...Christians included in the *Agapé* the singing of hymns and psalms and devoted time to preaching, teaching and the exercise of other spiritual gifts for the edification of the community of believers."³

The idea was to assemble for this shared Love Feast and during the gathering to commemorate the Lord's living presence. This commemoration ceremony within the Love Feast has become our celebration of the Lord's Supper – Holy Communion – Eucharist which we will observe again on Tuesday at our 4pm Christmas Eve service. The closest thing we have now to what was once called a Love Feast is our hospitality time after worship once a month, our Apple Tree lunches, our Community Dinners when we cook and eat together, and occasional events like the recent Christmas lunch at Four Mile. But those miss key worship elements associated with the Love Feast, especially singing.

Once source identified the Moravian Love Feast as a service of song at which a simple meal was served such as sweet dinner buns and steaming coffee laced with sugar and cream. As is so often true, the clearest expression of a community of faith's theology is found in the hymns that it sings.

This has been true through all our history and is shown in the passage read from the Gospel of Luke this morning. Mary's Song, known for centuries by its Latin name *The Magnificat*, is a typical hymn of praise based on Old Testament references. It is a psalm

³ Stephen C. Compton, "The Recovery of Fellowship," *The Christian Ministry*, v. 14 (Nov. 1983): 23.

that speaks of God's promised social justice in the messianic age for which the world is still waiting in hope.

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior... the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. ...he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

The story is of Mary's visit to Elizabeth to rejoice in one another's pregnancy. Each woman needs the support of the other. They realize how blessed they are – blessed to be bearing God's miraculous gifts to humanity. Their story has an air of immediacy and intimacy about it. You can feel the force that draws them together and you have no doubt that any meal they share could be considered a Love Feast. Because they are aware of the Holy Spirit in their lives they are filled to overflowing with joyful song – the need to come together in fellowship – to offer prayers of thanksgiving and proclaim their experience of God to all who might listen. These women are caught up in *Agapé*.

Their story conveys the faith of the church – that in Jesus, God who loves the world, comes to bring all that is into a living relationship with its divine creator, now and for all eternity. This relationship extends to every human activity and institution as well as to each individual. There can be no social justice where people are not free or where they are deprived of a fair share of the world's resources. The Incarnation and the Resurrection have but that one purpose: the redemption of the world through faith in Jesus Christ.

Each time we gather as a community of faith we are gathering for a kind of Love Feast. Our worship is a feast – a sacred banquet – a delightful occurrence – a holy experience in the presence of God.

The revival of the ancient *Agapé* practice among the Brethren in the 1700's was to promote something more than merely friendship or social gathering. They wanted to reclaim the opportunity to express what God is really like – to talk freely and easily about the Kingdom of God – to ensure that rich and poor ate together – to share their spiritual journey.⁴

In the coming days many of us will enjoy a feast of one kind or another. When we remember that we gather because of the Christ Child – because of Jesus our teacher – because of the one who saves us on the cross – then we gather for a feast that is about love, celebrating the gift of God with us.

May our time of worship together invite us to be thrilled by a force which none can understand – a force that binds us together in a Christian relationship that no earthly

⁴ Compton, 22.

power can break. May we learn to love – to love Jesus and each other, so that we are overjoyed and filled with confidence for our life in Christ. And may we talk with one another about our amazing experience and the great blessings we have received. Whenever we gather may our time together be a Love Feast – an *Agapé* meal at which we unite in love. **Amen**

➤ *My soul gives glory to my God*

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Offering and Prayer

We make our offering this day with hearts full of love, filled with the hope and joy this season brings. Give knowing God's love will spread far and wide through what we offer in Jesus' name.

➤ *Praise God from whom all blessings flow*

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God of Life and Love, receive our gifts this day as tokens of our love for you and signs of our willingness to share that love in the world around us. Bless our lives as well as our gifts, so that we may be a blessing to others for the sake of the Christ Child, our Saviour and our friend. Amen

Pastoral Prayers and the Lord's Prayer

God of Zechariah and Elizabeth and John, God of Mary and Joseph and Jesus, the Christ, through all generations you have been faithful to us. Thank you for all the faithful saints we have known in our lives. Their trust in you gives us hope whenever our own faith wavers. May we be faithful in this generation as others have been before us, so that our ministry and mission in Jesus' name will be renewed, engaging the world in refreshing, respectful ways.

We pray today for those struggling with loss and discouragement – for those who have lost someone dear – for those who cannot find meaningful work – and all for whom challenge and change make the future uncertain...

Embrace them and us with your compassion and strength to persevere.

We pray for those for who are facing sickness and death – those who have given up on themselves and on the goodness of others. We remember those who face conflict in their homes or their homelands – who wonder or fear what tomorrow may bring. We pray for the creation that has suffered from fire, storm and earthquake this year, and for the lives disrupted by drought and despair...

Embrace with your comfort and courage all those who suffer

Holy One, as we move towards a new year, let us have a strong sense of your presence when celebrating Christ's birth. With the tenderness of your Spirit, lighten our burdens – show us new possibilities for our own lives and for the ministries we take up in Jesus' name, for we find confidence in this prayer we offer together **...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 debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen**

The Texts Behind the Tunes²: In the ancient context: **Isaiah 35**

❖ **Isaiah 35:1-7** [OT 662]

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God.

Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, *'Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you.'*

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a watering hole, the grass shall become luxuriant reeds and rushes.

❖ *Lo, how a Rose e'er blooming*

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Blessing

Into the broken world as we make our weary way, just when the night becomes it's darkest and we cannot see our path, just then is when the angels rush in... bringing a light of hope and joy, bringing a light of peace and love, bringing into our darkness, the light of Christ. May the love of God bless you, the grace of Jesus fill you, and the enthusiasm of the Spirit be born within you again as we await with joy the day of the Lord's coming.

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