

Love Personified at Christmas**Sunday, December 20, 2020 || 4th Sunday of Advent || Pastor Christy Wright***We invite you to light a candle at 9:30 AM and join us in prayer ONLINE or over the PHONE**Audio worship, including music, prayers, and the sermon is available at**<https://georgewhitefieldumc.weebly.com/worship-services>***Audio worship is also available at (978) 990-5000, access code 719365#. Just dial in, enter the access code on your keypad, and you will hear the service begin with music.****Lighting of the Love Candle - By Jeanyne Slettom**

We have lit three candles—for hope, for peace, and for joy. Today we light the fourth candle—the candle of love. With this flame we signify the love of God that surrounds and fills us at all times, and we recognize in a special way this love within the Christmas story. There is no greater power than love. It is stronger than rulers and empires, stronger than grief or despair, stronger even than death. We love, because God loves us.

Let us pray: Loving God, we open ourselves to you this Christmas season. As these candles are lit, light our lives with your imagination. Show us the creative power of hope. Teach us the peace that comes from justice. Fill us with the kind of joy that cannot be contained, but must be shared. Magnify your love within us. Prepare our hearts to be transformed by you, that we may walk in the light of Christ. Amen.

Scripture Reading*Luke 1:39-45*

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judaean 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."

Sermon

As summer approached during my second year of seminary, my friends and I all made separate plans: some would return to their home state to work at summer camps, others would travel and take time off, and still others would head overseas to begin training for their military chaplaincy. It was a difficult good-bye in May, but the joy of reunification in September for the new school year sustained us through it all. When the first day of school finally arrived, I remember we made a plan to meet up in the plaza in front of the school's chapel. As I waited at a park bench, I could feel a sense of anticipation and butterflies in my stomach - we would be reunited once more. And indeed, when we all saw each other, we ran and embraced one another in a big, messy hug full of laughter and joy. We had seen each other through thick and thin; this wasn't just a group of friends. This was a soul connection. This was love.

This morning's reading comes to us from the Gospel of Luke, where we hear the narrative of Mary and Elizabeth's great love for one another as they recognized the Divine in their midst. Prior to our reading, we hear that Mary, a young girl, has become pregnant through the blessing of the Holy Spirit, and she decides to travel to see her relative Elizabeth, a much older mentor who is also pregnant, to share the news. But Mary didn't have to say a word for Elizabeth to know what was happening, for her son, who would later become John the Baptist, leapt within her womb in joy, a divine recognition of the Christ child. Elizabeth blesses Mary through a beautiful prayer of encouragement and wisdom, and Mary responds with what is often referred to as the Magnificat, or Mary's Song, which is the song we shared together last week. Mary offers praise to God for all God has done, and she sings that her soul magnifies God - a beaming source of love and light, made ever more apparent as the Christ child's appearance draws closer. The One who is to come comes with mercy and grace, exalting the lowly and encouraging the wealthy to share their resources for the sake of those without. This is the Christ for whom we've been waiting.

Ultimately, our passage this morning depicts two women mutually encouraging one another in the midst of exciting, unexpected, and perhaps scary blessings. The sheer fact of each of these pregnancies - Mary, who was a young virgin, and Elizabeth, who was advanced in age - is a miracle in itself. But both benefited from the other's ministry, expanding the miracle toward connection and community. As one commentary puts it, "God removes [the women's] isolation and helps them understand themselves more fully as part of something larger than their individual destinies. Together, they are

known more fully and begin to see more clearly than they do as individuals.” You see, these two women are not only linked by their shared pregnancies; they are also linked by the ways in which they act as support systems for one another and to the world through the birth of John the Baptist and the child Jesus Christ.

As we continue through this pandemic, one thing has become clear: It’s not about me or you individually. It’s about the collective *us* and the ways in which our love informs our Christian response to this current moment. I’m reminded of the South African philosophy of *ubuntu*, which means “I am because we are.” It is an understanding in which we recognize our fundamental connections to one another, that we cannot exist isolated from the community. Over the past year, we’ve been present for one another through cards and phone calls, and we’ve been present to the wider community through our gifts and donations. These acts aren’t just good deeds; they’re symbols of God’s great love that we find in Jesus Christ.

This Christmas season, we remember that Jesus Christ is Love Personified, for Love was born at Christmas - Love that is personal, human, and sacredly divine; Love that is innately connected to all humanity in precious ways we will never understand; and Love that will always be present, for we know that nothing can ever separate us from the Love of God through Jesus Christ. So may we remember that Jesus came, once for *all*. May we *all* find our role in creating a community of love, inspired by Jesus who is Love Personified. And may we share this Love with all whom we encounter. Amen.

Hymn of Meditation - Love Came Down at Christmas, UMH 242

****Special thanks to our Music Director Melissa’s daughter, Brianna, for her wonderful Christmas Medley last week!***

*1. Love came down at Christmas,
Love all lovely, Love divine;
Love was born at Christmas;
Star and angels gave the sign.*

*2. Worship we the Godhead,
Love incarnate, Love divine;
Worship we our Jesus,
But wherewith for sacred sign?*

*3. Love shall be our token;
Love be yours and love be mine;
Love to God and neighbor,
Love for plea and gift and sign.*

In Our Prayers. Thanksgiving for: the gifts that make ministry possible, medical professionals and researchers. Holding in our hearts: those experiencing unemployment, those facing racial injustice and violence and cannot breathe under the weight of oppression, those grieving the loss of loved ones (Heidi and family in the loss of Millie), those experiencing illness or health issues - especially those who are ill with Covid-19 including George, and Sandy’s son and family, and (for Al (and family as they care for him), Dan D. (Vicki’s husband), Kelly R., Lindsey S., the Reim family), those in nursing homes or extended care facilities (Betty, Claire, Priscilla), those caring for others (Carrie G., Crystal, Rachel), the United Methodist Church. *Note that this list will renew each month.*

Benediction/Commission and Blessing

Depart in peace, and take with you the certain knowledge that God is always coming into the world. We will seek God, not in a long ago stable or ancient manger, but in the people we meet and the depths of our own hearts. May the blessing of Christmas make you a blessing to others; may the peace of the season pervade all that you do. We will welcome the challenge of discipleship. We will offer ourselves as God’s ministers. We will go forth in hope, peace, joy, and love.¹

And now, may the peace of the Lord Christ go with you wherever God may send you; may God guide you through the wilderness, protect you through the storm; may God bring you home rejoicing at the wonders God has shown you; may God bring you home rejoicing once again into our doors.²

Community Announcements

- **Pastor Christy’s Sabbath.** Pastor Christy will be taking Sabbath time off from Tuesday, December 22nd until Monday, January 4th. Worship service coverage will be provided by Galen Schad on Sunday, December 27th and by Rev. Megan Stowe on Sunday, January 3rd. Mailings for both services will be sent out prior to Pastor Christy’s vacation, so please hold onto them for each service. Pastoral coverage will be provided by Pastor Stacey Kullgren from the Congregational Church here in town until December 29th. She can be reached at either (508) 867-7078 or (603) 903-5621. Pastor Christy will be available for **emergencies only** from December 30th until January 4th. Please call her cell phone and **leave a message** and she will get back to you as soon as she can.

¹ Jeanyne Sletton

² Book of Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals

- **Christmas Eve Service - Remote Only.** Although it is heartbreaking to not be able to meet together this year for Christmas Eve, we remain distant from one another so that when we can gather, no one will be missing. This year's Christmas Eve service will be hosted by our Bishop and Cabinet as well as talented musicians from across our conference. It will be available online on our website at georgewhitefieldumc.weebly.com/worship-services and over the phone at (978) 990-5000, access code 719365#. Reach out if you need help accessing these services.
- **LAST WEEK FOR Heifer Project.** Once we have a count of how much we raised, we'll include a list of animals/projects we could support, and we'll make decisions in January. Thank you for your support!
- **Giving Envelopes.** We have decided to forego giving envelopes for the year 2021, which will save the church about \$300. We invite you to continue mailing your offerings. Please reach out to Gail Sledziewski if you would like more information. You can mail your gifts to the church at PO Box 576, West Brookfield, MA 01585 or directly to Gail Sledziewski, PO Box 514, West Warren, MA 01092. Additionally, as a reminder, Gail has graciously given of her time over the past couple of years and is looking to step down from her position as Financial Secretary. Please reach out to Pastor Christy if you are interested in taking up this position, which involves receiving and counting offerings, making deposits, tracking giving, and sending reports to our Treasurer. Thank you!
- **Reopening Advisory Board Update.** Due to the continuing rise in cases of Covid-19, we have decided to keep our building closed until further notice. The Board will continue to meet on a monthly basis to reassess the ever-evolving situation. Please reach out to any member of the Trustees or Reopening Advisory Board if you have any questions or would like more information about how we can make indoor worship a possibility.
- **Music Ministry.** Our Music Director, Melissa, would love to connect with you to collaborate on musical offerings this coming season. If you would like to be a part of a singing opportunity, or would like to share your instrumental or dance offerings, reach out to her at mrsqpiano@gmail.com or (508) 246-8508.
- **Is Your Contact Information Up To Date?** Please let Jane Dolan know if your contact information has changed. In case of church cancellation or other circumstances, we would love to be able to get ahold of you.
- **Pastor Christy's Office Hours.** A reminder that Pastor Christy is available on Tuesdays and Wednesdays from 8 AM to 4 PM, Thursdays from 8 AM to 12 noon, and Sundays when we are gathering in-person from 8 AM to 10 AM. If you cannot reach her, and it is an emergency, please leave a message and she will get back to you asap.
- **Offerings** are still being encouraged during this time. Please consider mailing your offering to our church PO Box, so that we are able to continue in ministry through Christ for the transformation of the world. Offerings can be mailed to: George Whitefield United Methodist Church, PO Box 576, West Brookfield, MA 01585

Sonshine Phone Calls and Cards List

If you know of anyone who could be added to our Sonshine list, let Pastor Christy know.

Betty Hubbard
47 E Main St.
West Brookfield, MA 01585

Priscilla Toppin
47 E Main St.
West Brookfield, MA 01585

Kelly Rice
98 Lake Shore Drive
West Brookfield, MA 01585

Claire Wirf
(508) 791-8131
(mornings)
383 Mill Street
Worcester, MA 01602

Barbara Frazier
88 Masonic Home Rd.
Charlton, MA 01507

A Companion Guide

The Upper Room Daily Devotionals

Monday, December 21st through Saturday December 26th || Written by Pastor Christy Wright

We invite you to light a candle at 9:30 AM daily and join us in prayer

If you do not have a copy of the newest Upper Room Daily Devotionals, let Pastor Christy know & she will send you one.

Monday, December 21st, 2020

Read Romans 12:1-8

“For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ.”

One of the most difficult parts of this pandemic has been that we haven't been able to share in Holy Communion as we normally would. Before Covid, we would feast together in our sanctuary, partaking of the homemade bread from Jackie's kitchen, which represents the body, and drinking deeply in the cup of salvation. As I reflect on the elements that make up Holy Communion, I can't help but notice that bread itself is a symbol of God's creative power in bringing all things together in love. Just as bread is made up of many different unrelated parts like flour, water, salt, and yeast, so too we as a community are made up of many different people from different backgrounds and with different life experiences. We also have a diversity of passions and purposes in life, just as the salt adds flavor to the bread and the yeast helps it to rise. Around the sacred table of Communion, just as the bread becomes one nourishing loaf, as a community we too become one through the power of the Holy Spirit. Though we are unable to partake in Communion while we are apart, each meal has the potential to become sacred as we remember in gratitude Jesus' love and hold one another in our hearts.

Let Us Pray Together

God of unity and diversity, just as bread is brought together to form something that sustains us, You have brought us together as a community. You have provided us with the Holy Spirit, who creates connections between all of us that are not easily broken. Remind us of the love we share, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Tuesday, December 22nd, 2020

Read Psalm 62:1-12

“For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from God.”

One of my favorite spiritual practices is meditation, which is simply sitting in silence and allowing thoughts to float by, but not getting caught up in them. This is definitely easier said than done, but I've found a technique that seems to work well: reciting scripture. I invite you to try this with me. Find a comfortable position, either sitting upright with your feet planted flat on the floor, or if you are laying down, take note of the way your body feels. Slowly inhale, and focus on this phrase: “For God alone...” Then slowly exhale, and focus on this phrase: “my soul waits.” Repeat for several minutes, and you may find yourself falling into a state of gentle peace, or you may find yourself falling sleep - it happens! Or, potentially, you may find that your mind wanders - and that's okay! It takes practice, but just starting with five minutes a day has made all the difference. As we wait on God, the stillness of our bodies makes us more able to receive what God has for us. Especially in this busy time of year, in a year like no other, it can be so difficult to still our bodies. So I invite you to join in this journey of meditation, for we never know what God has for us until we take the time to listen and be still, knowing that God is God.

Let Us Pray Together

God of dynamic stillness, You invite us into new experiences of meditation and peace as we seek You in new ways. Through Your great love, we're able to spend time with You and learn different modes of spirituality. Teach us to embrace the myriad of ways to connect with You and help us to share Your love with all whom we encounter. Amen.

Wednesday, December 23rd, 2020

Read Isaiah 43:14-21

“I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?”

Something very exciting happened this past week: the first Covid vaccine in the world was administered in the UK! And a few days later, it began to be distributed and administered here in the US. Regardless of how you feel about the vaccine, I think we can all agree that this is something new and exciting, a potential end to all we've experienced this year. It cannot be denied that God's hand was present with the researchers and all those who worked so diligently to make this vaccine a possibility. God is a God of wisdom, of ingenuity, of innovation, and of the future - and we are so blessed to be partaking in this historic moment together. Of course, this isn't a done deal; it will still be many months, and potentially a year or two before we can “get back to normal,” not having to wear masks or be concerned about where and how we travel. But this is still a new thing, a light on the horizon signaling that goodness is on its way. It is like seeing the dawn after a long, difficult night. God is here, doing a new thing. Can you see it?

Let Us Pray Together

God of new things, You inspire us to look toward You for signs of life and changing times, and You have met us here in this moment with hope beyond hope. We know that we are still a ways away from things getting “back to normal,” but we're grateful for all that has transpired. Remind us of Your faithfulness to us, as we seek to be faithful to You. Amen.

Thursday, December 24th, 2020**Read John 1:15-18****“From his fullness we have all received grace upon grace.”**

On this Christmas Eve unlike any other, we are probably spending Christmas differently than we have before. We may be reducing the size of our gatherings, or we may be spending the holiday by ourselves. Either way, we find hope in knowing and remembering Jesus' promise that we will never be alone, that we would always have an Advocate with us who will connect us to God's great love and grace. Indeed, as we prepare our hearts and homes for Jesus' arrival this Christmas, we are receiving grace upon grace. Even though this year has been difficult, we know that in Jesus' coming, we are taking part in the sacred story of Good News - that life comes from death, that abundance comes from scarcity, that darkness leads to light. And we also share this Good News with all those we encounter when we extend grace, love, and peace. How can you communicate God's love today? It might be dropping off cookies for a neighbor, or it might be making a phone call to a friend you've lost touch with. Through our actions and kind words, may we experience the grace upon grace through Jesus Christ, who promised that we'd never be alone.

Let Us Pray Together

God of grace and love, despite the difficulties of this year, You have provided us with all we need on our faith journey. You've gifted us with the Advocate, the Holy Spirit who is with us always, guiding us and inspiring us to share the Good News. Remind us of Your presence always, that we might extend a hand of grace and love to all we meet. Amen.

On Christmas Eve at 4:00 PM, we invite you to join us in worship over the phone at (978) 990-5000, access code 719365#, on our website at georgewhitefieldumc.weebly.com/worship-services, or on our Facebook page for a Christmas Eve service, generously provided by our Bishop, Cabinet, and musicians from around the conference.

Friday, December 25th, 2020**Read Luke 2:1-7****“And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.”**

This morning as we gather on Christmas day, let us remember the Christmas story as we continue our reading and meditate on the joy and peace found within: *In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see - I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those God favors!”* (Luke 2:8-14) May we find great joy and peace this morning, through Jesus Christ our Lord on earth!

Let Us Pray Together

God of Christmastide joy, You have brought forth Your Son Jesus Christ through Mary's faithfulness and Joseph's devotion. Your great love has come down to earth this day, and we rejoice, for we know that Jesus' love is greater than anything we could ever know. May we share this joy and love as we celebrate this morning, through Jesus Christ. Amen.

Saturday, December 26th, 2020**Read Matthew 14:28-33****“Why did you doubt?”**

As I reflect over this past year, I recall many instances when I simply couldn't figure out where God was, in the midst of all we've been through. But as I survey the past several months with a bit of distance, I now recognize that God was *always* with us, even when God was silent. I'm reminded of a poem written by a Jewish prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp: *I believe in the sun, even when it's not shining. I believe in love, even when I can't feel it. I believe in God, even when God is silent.* These incredible words speak to doubt with a firm foundation in faith. In this morning's scripture passage, we hear of Peter, whose doubt almost got the better of him - but Jesus took hold of him and pulled him up from the depths. Jesus then asks a wise question: “Why did you doubt?” As we look forward to a new year, may we also take a step back and find all of the ways God was with us in 2020. May we recognize that we need not doubt, for God's love overwhelms all worries and fears, and we are invited to live fully into the love and faith of Jesus Christ.

Let Us Pray Together

God of faithfulness and presence, You are with us always, even when our doubts get the better of us. We can rest assured of Your guiding and saving hand, for You have walked with us from the beginning of time. Remind us that You have never left our side, nor will You ever, as we continue on our journey through the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.