**Monton Unitarian Church**

**29th November 2020**

**First Advent – Finding Grace in Unexpected Places**

**Welcome – with words by Ellen Fay**

It is the winter season of the year.

Dark and chilly.

Perhaps it is a winter season in your life.

Dark and chilly there, too.

Come in to Christmas here.

Let the light and warmth of Christmas brighten our lives and world.

Let us find in the dark corners of our souls the light of hope,

A vision of the extraordinary in the ordinary.

Let us find rest in the quiet of a holy moment to find promise and renewal.

Let us find the child in each of us, the new hope, the new light, born in us.

Then will Christmas come.

Then will magic return to the world.

**Prayer, by Paul Carnes**

Spirit of Life and Love, in our practiced pessimism it is difficult to be less than cynical about Christmas. We too have followed stars but they never led us to Bethlehem. We have known many wise men whose wisdom faded when tested by our experience. Angel voices for us usually turn out to be singing commercials. Words of peace are used to defend acts of aggression. Herod and Caesar still reign. The world as created is not as we would have it. And yet, and yet….

Somewhere a child just drew its first breath and the parents share in the primal joy of Christmas. A son estranged from his parents has decided to call home and the sound of his voice will bring the hope of reconciliation. Someone has given a gift where there was no expectation of giving or receiving.

God, it’s not your world, it’s ours. Give us the courage to accept it, the grace to embrace it, the will to love it. Enable us, we pray, to appreciate and expand the moments of joy in life, whenever they come. Let them be for us bearers of hope which will enable us to endure any hour of despair, to the end that we, while the gift of life is ours, may help push back the dark with the flame of our faith.

Amen.

**Story – Saint Hong Duc, by Robert Fulgham**

A Sunday afternoon it was, some days before Christmas. With rain, with wind, with cold. Winters-gloom. Things to do list was long and growing like an unresistant mould. Temper: short. Bio-index: negative. Horoscope reading suggested caution. And the Sunday paper suggested dollars, death and destruction as the day’s litany. O tidings of comfort and joy, fa la la la la!

This holy hour of Lordsdaybliss was jarred by a pounding at the door. Now what? Deep sigh. Opening it, resigned to accept whatever bad news lies in wait, I am nonplussed. A rather small person in a cheap Santa Claus mask, carrying a large brown paper bag outthrust; “TRICK OR TREAT!” Santa Mask shouts. What? “TRICK OR TREAT!” Santa Mask hoots again. Tongue-tied, I stare at this apparition. He shakes the bag at me, and dumbly I fish out my wallet and find a dollar to drop into the bag. The mask lifts, and it is an Asian kid with a ten-dollar grin taking up most of his face. “Wanta hear some caroling?” he asks, in singsong English.

I know him now. He belongs to a family settled into the neighbourhood by the Quakers last year. Boat people. Vietnamese, I believe. Refugees. He stopped by at Halloween with his sisters and brothers, and I filled their bags. Hong Duc is about eight. At Halloween he looked like a Wise Man, with a bathrobe on and a dish towel around his head.

“Wanta hear some caroling?”

I nod, envisioning an octet of urchin refugees hiding in the bushes ready to join their leader in uplifted song. “Sure, where’s the choir?”

“I’m it”, says he. And he launched forth with an up-tempo chorus of “Jingle Bells” at full lung power. This was followed by an equally enthusiastic rendering of what I swear sounded like, “Hark, the Hairy Angels Sing.” And finally, a soft-voiced, reverential singing of “Silent Night.” Head back, eyes closed, from the bottom of his heart he poured out the last strains of “Sleep in heavenly peace” into the gathering night.

Wet-eyed, dumbstruck by his performance, I pulled a five-dollar bill out of my wallet and dropped that into the paper bag. In return he produced half a candy cane from his pocket and passed it solemnly to me. Flashing the ten-dollar grin, he turned and ran from the porch, shouted “GOD BLESS YOU,” and “TRICK OR TREAT” and was gone.

Who was that masked kid? Hong Duc, the one-man choir, delivering Christmas door to door.

I confess that I’m usually a little confused about Christmas. It has never made a lot of sense to me. It’s unreal. Ever since I got the word about Santa Claus I’ve been a closet cynic at heart. Singing about riding in a one-horse open sleigh is ludicrous. I’ve never seen one, much less ridden in one. Never roasted chestnuts by an open fire. Wouldn’t know how to if I had one, and I hear they’re no big deal anyway. Wandering Wise Men raise my suspicions, and shepherds who spend their lives hanging about with sheep are a little strange. Never seen an angel, either, and my experience with virgins is really limited. The appearance of a new born king doesn’t interest me; I’d just as soon settle for some other president. Babies and reindeer stink. I’ve been around them both, and I know.

Singing about things I’ve never seen or done or wanted, dreaming of a white Christmas I’ve never known. Christmas isn’t very real. And yet, and yet – I’m too old to believe in it and too young to give up on it. Too cynical to get into it and too needy to stay out of it.

Trick or treat! After I shut the door came near hysteria – laughter and tears and that funny feeling you get when you know that once again Christmas has come to you. Right down the chimney of my midwinter hovel comes Saint Hong Duc. He is confused about the details, like me, but he is very clear about the spirit of the season. It’s an excuse to let go and celebrate – to throw yourself into Holiday with all you have, wherever you are. “I’m it,” says he. Where’s Christmas, I ask myself. I’m it, comes the echo. I’m it. Head back, eyes closed, voice raised in whatever song I can muster the courage to sing.

God, it is said, once sent a child upon a starry night, that the world might know hope and joy. I am not sure that I quite believe that, or that I believe in all the baggage heaped upon that story during two thousand years. But I am sure that I believe in Hong Duc, the one-man Christmas choir, shouting “Trick or treat!” door to door. I don’t know who or what sent him. But I know I am tricked through the whimsical mischief of fate into joining the choir that sings of joy and hope. Through a child, I have been treated to Christmas.

**Reading – Christmas lives…, by Richard A Kellaway**

Christmas lives in those adults who in the midst of the annual stampede for goods remember that caring is the greatest gift, who through the tinsel and the trappings can still be patient enough to share the simple delights of the season, and who can teach the children to value one over the other.

Christmas lives in those who carry the burden of some great disappointment or some secret sorrow – and yet struggle to radiate a little cheer to those whose afflictions may be even greater.

Christmas lives in those who are bound by preoccupation and fear of involvement, who yet are working to learn how to share themselves.

Christmas lives in the persons of great learning who understand that knowledge is not all, and that, without involvement and action, there is little hope that learning will bring good to the family of humanity.

Christmas lives in those who, possessing all, sense that power and wealth mean little unless they are used to serve – for unto those to whom much is given, from them much will be expected.

Christmas lives in those, who living in a powerful and prosperous nation, remember that Jesus did not come to bless the complacency of the powerful or the selfishness of the prosperous – but to set people free.

Christmas lives in those in the slums and ghettos of the world, afflicted by poverty, who, in spite of their misery, dare to expect that the future for their children may somehow be better.

Christmas lives in those who in distant lands suffer daily under the affliction of wars which they do not understand, and devastation which threatens all humanity, and yet dare to believe that this senselessness will pass, and to hope that their children will *live*, simply stay alive, to grow up into a world of peace.

Christmas lives in those who, while others pray for peace and work for war, have the courage and patience to thirst after righteousness and to commit themselves to the great task of creating a world of peace and justice for the whole family of humanity. On a tablet in a small English church are inscribed words of praise for a man, “Whose singular praise it is to have done the best things in the worst of times and hoped them in the most calamitous.” So it is that out of darkness we burst into light. So it is that despair is overcome by the radiance of joy. May Christmas come alive within you, within me, within us all, each and every one.

**Prayer, by David Blanchard**

Spirit of Life and Love, we are looking for something this Christmas, but we are not quite sure just what it is. It’s more than gifts, more than laughter, more than the few moments of happiness and good cheer this season bestows upon us. We are thankful for those moments, but we are looking for something more.

Maybe it is peace of mind we are looking for, or that sense of calm that comes with understanding, with revelation; the ability to cope with the complexities of life, or the strength to face the frustrations with greater assurance and less fear.

Maybe we are searching for a more acceptable way to live in this ever-changing world – or for something to lean on. We do need support – we do need to believe in something – we do need to be inspired. We need to find something – some ideal, some promise to believe in.

So let this Christmas tide breathe upon us a special sense of love and friendship; let the values which are of the mind and heart of the grown-up Jesus be part of our thinking. Let the Christmas message shine through.

Maybe someday we will know precisely what it is we are looking for, but in the meantime, supply us with generous amounts of fortitude and calmness and assurance to deal adequately with the everyday, until the time comes when we will know for sure what it is we are looking for.

Amen.

**Reflection – finding grace in unexpected places**

I don’t know about anyone else, but I really struggle with Christmas – as a human being, and as a worship leader. For the worship leader there’s the perennial issue of trying to toe the line between offering new thoughts, readings, activities and experiences, and yet providing the comfort that comes from the ritual of the well-known and well-worn carols and the familiar readings – finding fresh ways of ‘doing what we’ve always done’! As a human being, it’s a rough time as it’s the anniversary of my father’s death, and balancing the grief that always comes to visit with the wish to give my children an exciting, joyful, magical Christmas while still keeping things ethical and not too consumeristic is another tight-rope I try (and don’t always succeed) to walk.

This year, for exceedingly obvious reasons, has some significant additional problems – we are still grappling with how to offer as much and as wide a variety of spiritual comfort and fellowship as we can, in the middle of a pandemic. And there’s such an incredible need for that comfort and fellowship at the moment – over the last seven, eight months many of us have been feeling incredibly isolated, lonely, frustrated, scared, angry. Our emotional selves aren’t made for maintaining this sort of level of anxiety and pressure for this length of time – and I include myself in that! It’s been a tough year.

But then I realised that, among the other ‘lessons’ of Christmas, there’s one custom-made for us right there. It’s recognising the blessing of finding grace in unexpected places.

Thinking of the Christmas story, so many times, grace, or blessing, was found where people wouldn’t have expected it. Mary found the grace of strength in the face of potential disapproval and rejection. Joseph found the grace of acceptance when he could have been tempted by rejection and high-handedness. Together, they were given the grace of compassion and welcome by an inn-keeper, who himself found that grace in the middle of busy-ness and pressure. The shepherds found grace in the inspiration to seek out the magic of a new-born child, and gave grace with the gift of their presence and support. The magi brought the grace of wisdom and knowledge – and the grace of protection from danger by not betraying Mary and Joseph to King Herod.

The Christmas story is focused on a poor family, in hard circumstances, facing an uncertain future – and yet there is grace, given and received. Blessings offered when none were expected. Hope found, when everything felt hopeless.

We will all have moments like that in our lives – when we can’t see a way forward or a way out, or we feel that the darkness is crowding so tight we can’t breathe – and then when we have just about given up all hope, a tiny glimmer of light, a small gesture, a helping hand, comes out of the blue. And while it may not fix everything, or indeed change much of our circumstances at all, somehow it makes life that little bit easier, makes our souls that little bit lighter, and the world that little bit brighter. Robert Fulghum had Saint Hong Duc – who brought him unbridled joy and hilarity at a completely unexpected moment. A young child who, without truly understanding what the rules are, and what game he was playing (trick or treat carols!), brought a gift of grace, of pure joy and unadulterated Christmas spirit into the life of another (and, one would imagine, the lives of the other folks on that street as he worked his way along!). Take a moment – have a trawl through your memories, and remember some of those moments of grace appearing in unexpected places in your life.

Feels good, doesn’t it?

The blessings of grace that can come our way when we least expect it. But don’t forget the other side – the side that gives those moments of grace. Whatever our situations, whatever darkness surrounds us, or problems await us, we have the power to bring a spark of grace into other people’s lives too – Richard Kellaway reminded us in his reading just how Christmas lives on.

*Christmas lives in those adults who in the midst of the annual stampede for goods remember that caring is the greatest gift, who through the tinsel and the trappings can still be patient enough to share the simple delights of the season, and who can teach the children to value one over the other.*

*Christmas lives in those who carry the burden of some great disappointment or some secret sorrow – and yet struggle to radiate a little cheer to those whose afflictions may be even greater.*

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*Christmas lives in the persons of great learning who understand that knowledge is not all, and that, without involvement and action, there is little hope that learning will bring good to the family of humanity.*

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*Christmas lives in those in the slums and ghettos of the world, afflicted by poverty, who, in spite of their misery, dare to expect that the future for their children may somehow be better.*

*….. So it is that out of darkness we burst into light. So it is that despair is overcome by the radiance of joy. May Christmas come alive within you, within me, within us all, each and every one.*

This Christmas, may you find ways to bring unexpected grace into other people’s lives. And may you be alive to the many gifts of grace that will find you in unexpected places.

**Blessing – by Sarah York**

We receive fragments of holiness,

glimpses of eternity,

brief moments of insight.

Let us gather them up for the precious gifts that they are,

and, renewed by their grace, move boldly into the unknown.