

# CHRISTMAS EVE

## WE GATHER IN THIS SILENT NIGHT

### Words of Invitation:

*One: We come to this storied night of legend and song,  
All: of spectacular stars and angel voices,  
One: of mystery and awe;  
All: that hope may be birthed among us once again,  
One: and love be known between us,  
All: and peace be a night light in our darkness,  
One: as the holy is known among us this night.*

*Responsively*

**Carol: 76 VU, See Amid the Winter's Snow**

*Music: John Goss, 1871*

*Words: Linnea Good, adapted by NLS*

See amid the winter's snow,  
Born for us on earth to know,  
See a tender love appears,  
Promised from eternal years.  
*Hail thou every blessed morn!  
Hail thou song of life reborn!  
Sing in stables far and near,  
Comes the daybreak ringing clear!*

Lo within a manger lies  
Gift of heaven, earth's surprise.  
Mighty weakness, gentle strength,  
Wordless tune of endless length. (*Refrain*)

Child of heaven, Child of earth,  
Is there but one holy birth?  
Love so simple, so unbound  
Can but holy wrap us round? (*Refrain*)

See amid the winter's sleep,  
All the world in slumber deep,  
Springs the dawn across the sky,  
To a new-born's piercing cry! (*Refrain*)

### Prayer:

*Together*

Spirit of life dwelling deeply in darkness and shining intensely in the light of day: where hearts are fearful, may there be courage. Where anxiety is widening, may there be calm. Where impossibilities close every door and window, may we cultivate imagination and encourage resistance. May we awaken to our deepest calling to be the dwelling places of divine love and light, AMEN.

## WE GATHER IN DARKNESS

### Lighting the Candle of Creation

**One:** *In the long story of the universe, we are part of a procession of life which began with a flaring forth some 14 billion years ago. Life continues to emerge and evolve out of that great cosmic light.*  
**All:** **We take our place in the great unfolding of life born of light. As sparks of the divine, we honor our source and we light this candle for the great energy and the long story we call creation.**

### Music for Meditation

## TO KNOW LIGHT IN OUR STORY

**Reading: Luke 2:1-7**

### Lighting the Candle of Possibility

**Response: 35 VU, Beloved Friends, Rejoice**

**Beloved friends, rejoice, with heart and soul and voice!  
Now ye hear of endless bliss: Joy! Joy!  
Every child was born for this  
Love has opened heaven's door and we are blest forevermore.  
Joy is born today! Joy is born today!**

**Reading: The Serenity Prayer**

### Lighting the Candle of Acceptance

**Response: 35 VU. Beloved Friends, Rejoice**

**Beloved friends, rejoice, with heart and soul and voice!  
Wondrous news have we to tell: Peace! Peace!  
Love with us is born to dwell. Born within, it outward grows  
And then to all the world, it flows.  
Love is born today! Love is born today!**

## TO SHARE LIGHT IN OUR NIGHT

### Lighting the Christ Candle

*One: Tonight we celebrate the Christ light that burns within us radiating hope and peace, love and joy.*

**All: Even where we are most deeply afraid, light has come and for this we give thanks and celebrate this most holy night.**

**Song: 82 VU, Living in the Light (3vs)**

*Words and Music: Linnea Good, adapted NLS*

*A light is gleaming, spreading its arms throughout the night  
Living in the light. Come share its gladness,  
Love's radiant light is burning bright. Living in the light.*

When night is round us and every shadow grows,  
 A star is there to light our way.  
 It tells a story of Jesus who came near to say:  
 "Love's light will ever stay." (Refrain)

And Jesus showed us a brighter path to walk  
 He showed us things we hadn't seen.  
 Now we, like Jesus, can help creation shine  
 And this will be the sign. (Refrain)

So let us live in the brightness God has giv'n,  
 And let us rise to see the dawn.  
 We trust a light within, a sparkle and a blaze,  
 Warming all our days. (Refrain)

Offering our Gifts  
 Prayer:

*Together*

May these gifts help us bring light to those who walk in darkness; hope  
 to those who live in despair; peace to those in the midst of conflict; joy to  
 those who have few comforts; and love to those who are lonely, AMEN.

Sharing our Prayers

Carol: Now Is the Season of the Year

*Tune: God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen*

*Words: R. E. Hetherington, November 2007*

Now is the season of the year in which we celebrate  
 The birth of one who taught that love has strength beyond all hate,  
 Who through his life gave all of us example good and great:  
 O tidings of comfort and joy, comfort and joy,  
 O tidings of comfort and joy!

Not he alone, but sages all, the same great truth declare,  
 That if we work in harmony and have the will to dare,  
 Then we can make this earth a home, and all of life more fair:  
 O tidings of comfort and joy, comfort and joy,  
 O tidings of comfort and joy!

It is a time to celebrate that all have equal worth  
 And to resolve to live in peace with all who share the earth,  
 For if with love we share our lives, a new hope comes to birth:  
 O tidings of comfort and joy, comfort and joy,  
 O tidings of comfort and joy!

Candle Lighting

*During the singing of the carol, please receive light from your neighbour by  
 tipping your unlit candle into their upright lit candle.*

Blessing

Carol: 67 VU, Silent Night

*Music: Franz Xavier Gruber*

*Words: Joseph Mohr, 1818 (vs. 1 & 2) updated*

*Words: Gretta Vosper, Scott Kearn (vs. 3 & 4)*

Silent night! Holy night! all is calm, all is bright  
 See young Mary - 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,  
 Hope and light in each birth, hope and light in each birth.

Silent night! Holy night! all is calm, all is bright.  
 In our hearts, there is hope for the earth,  
 For the world, there is hope in each birth.  
 Live in heavenly peace; live in heavenly peace.

Silent night! Holy night! Moon and stars cast their light.  
 Soft the glow in the valleys and streams.  
 Softer still in the hope of each dream.  
 Sleep in heavenly peace; sleep in heavenly peace.

*A Service for Christmas Eve*

*Prepared by Rev. Dr. Nancy L. Steeves*

*Ministry Team*

*Southminster-Steinhauer United Church*

*Edmonton, Alberta*

## CHRISTMAS PRAYERS .... 7PM

**We gather in the darkness of this holy night seeking to know sacredness in stables and starry skies ... seeking to leave behind all that keeps us on our hillsides resisting the song of angels.**

**In the echo of the old story, we come with our Christmas longings that no powerful nation should occupy another; that no government would unfairly tax the poor or uproot them; that no single parent should experience disgrace; that no one would hesitate to accept responsibility without understanding all that will be required of them; that no door will be shut on those in need of shelter; that shepherds and sheep, soldiers and shopkeepers would no longer need to be afraid; that armaments and tanks would not be found in the streets of Bethlehem or Baghdad or Kabul; that wise men and women would appear in Washington and Ottawa; in London and Moscow; in Kinshasa and Khartoum; that children would sleep safely and securely in beds rather than feed boxes; that we would open our ears to the messenger's songs; open our eyes to all that we have seen and heard; open our hearts to the love that waits to be born in us.**

**We celebrate the humble and profound life of Jesus of Nazareth ... for the vulnerability of his birth, the values he lived and the radical vision he planted among us. We would defer to messiahs who would fix the world; banish evil ... messiahs who would conquer those we have chosen to name our enemies ... we have waited for messiahs who would tell us what to do ... but they have not come. Instead we celebrate the birth of one who showed us how to save what we love so much ... who showed us how to live in unity and peace.**

**May we find wisdom in the stars and in the stable tonight ... may we find the courage to make the peace that would cause angels and earthlings to sing again. As those born of light and ever seeking it, we pray that it may be so.**

## **Lighting the Candle of Possibility**

**Reading: Luke 2:1-7**

**I invite you to cast your imagination back to a time and place of which you have no memory ... you are living in a world which is mostly water ... it is warm and dark ... food and shelter is freely provided ... but somehow it becomes more and more crowded until you are actually too big for your world ... and you find yourself entering a narrow, dark tunnel and moving toward light. Eventually you enter another world where you experience new things: brightness, coldness, dryness, noise and shapes. And you meet hunger for the first time. By your entrance into this light, your life changes forever and the world you now enter is also changed by your arrival.**

**Whether you arrive in a manger, a birthing suite, a delivery room or your parent's home, you arrive from a habitat of darkness into light ... you arrive through the womb to the world. And you come as a spark of an ancient and divine light to be a new light. You arrive with unimaginable possibility ... even for the most intuitive or most intelligent embryo, surely life on earth begins as something completely unexpected and entirely unimaginable.**

**When we hold a newly arrived life in our arms, we hold unspeakable potential ... irrespective of a child's capacity, or limitations or circumstances; the world is altered by the appearance of each particular light. This particular arrangement of DNA has never been here before in this particular form. We each arrive with the light of deep potential ... the light of possibility ... not to accomplish great and wonderful things by the measure of history (although some will) ... but by the particularity of own particular essence adding our unique bit of light to our little world ... simply by being who we are.**

**With each of our births, creation sang its theme song ... "let there be light" ... and with our first birth cry ... there was light ... and it was good ... We emerge to make of ourselves a light ... to shine in our little corner of the universe ... to burn with love until like a flame, life both consumes us and transforms us.**

**And it is not only when we are fresh and new ... when we are yet another holy birth ... that life calls us forth to be a spark of divine light but as each day is new, as each breath is new, we are again invited to be a light of possibility.**

**And so we light this candle to honor the holiness of birth ... to honour each beginning and life's beginnings again ... and to commit ourselves to the radiance of possibility we each embody ... to reflect the true potential of our own particular humanity with each new day, with each new breath.**

*A Reflection by Nancy L. Steeves  
Southminster-Steinhauer United Church  
December, 2010*

## Lighting the Candle of Acceptance

### Reading: Serenity Prayer

There is a prayer that everyone who has ever participated in a 12-step program knows by heart ... It has come to be called the serenity prayer ... It is not entirely clear who wrote this prayer although it has often been attributed to Reinhold Niebuhr, a German theologian, who taught at Union Theological Seminary in the 1930's and 40's ...

This is one of many versions of that prayer ...

God, grant us the serenity  
to accept the things we cannot change,  
the courage to change the things we can and  
the wisdom to know the difference ...  
the patience for the things that take time,  
appreciation for all that we have  
and tolerance for those with different struggles ...  
the freedom to live beyond the limitations of our past ways,  
the ability to feel loved and to feel love for each other  
and the strength to get up and try again  
even when we feel it is hopeless.

Nearly everything I have learned about serenity, I have learned from those whose wick is growing short but whose wisdom flares brightly. A dozen years ago, I had the privilege of coming to be in ministry with a congregation of mostly seniors and many very elderly seniors ... in a neighborhood undergoing great transition in northeast Edmonton. I have vivid memories of one woman who would meet me at the door most Sunday mornings, stomp her cane on the floor in front of me and with the best straight face would say to me: well, you did it again ... you made me think! She would break into a wide smile and tell me something she was pondering. And then she would back down a long set of stairs, holding onto the rail with one hand and draping her cane over her other arm she would smile up at me as I stood on the landing watching her and in total sincerity she would say: Isn't life grand?! From my perch, her life looked more difficult to me than grand ... but from her vantage point ... having survived much ... having raised 5 children ... have seen generations go and generations come ... her pronouncement was ... isn't life grand?!

Her spirit captures what I came to know among this community who taught me that serenity isn't freedom from poverty, abuse, tragedy or difficulties ... serenity is found by making peace with life's storms ... I found myself in the company of those who had experienced many losses in life ... who had no illusions about security ... or about progress ... or had any sense of entitlement ... or any expectations that life would be fair ... who had lived through many unspeakable things ... who had outlived spouses and children ... and who embodied the wisdom of the serenity prayer ... who had learned to accept the things we cannot change, the courage to change the things we can and the wisdom to know the difference ...

It requires the great light of discernment ... of wisdom and experience ... to know that there are some things in life to which we should never become adjusted: inequity, violence, hunger, homelessness, preventable diseases and death, discrimination, to name but a few ... There are some things which can never be accommodated ... and resistance was the only way to be faithful ...

And there are some realities in this life with which we must learn to make peace ... to accept the nature of life and life's limits ... to accept that the nature of life is such that change is inevitable, that death is inevitable ... that life isn't immortal but love is ...

**Even in the story that gives us this season, we see this serenity come to life in Mary ... we hear her sing a song of acceptance ... a song born of struggle ... a song that perhaps grew out of her time with her elderly cousin, Elizabeth ... I imagine her learning something like the serenity prayer from Elizabeth who has lived hard enough and long enough to embody, as my former parishioners did, the great light of acceptance ...**

**Somewhere in the midst of Mary's knowing that this was not the time she would choose to bring a child into the world ... that she was not ready to be a parent ... that sometimes we get to choose the path but more often life appoints the path for us ... that Mary, like Elizabeth, grew to accept that a child was on its way and life asked her to open her body and her heart to this new being. Somewhere in the strength of the community and wisdom Mary found with her cousin, she could emerge from their sacred time together to sing her great song of praise ... her song of acceptance born of struggle.**

**Whether age or disease is drawing the horizon closer, those who light is soon to go out often have much to teach us about the great wisdom of acceptance ... when to resist and when resistance is to push the river.**

**And so we light this candle to honor the holiness of experience ... to honor the flame of the wise ones who call us into the light of acceptance. We light this candle as a sign of our commitment to discern the places where life invites us into the work of acceptance ... to open to what is ... what will be ... and to be at peace.**

*A Reflection by Nancy L. Steeves  
Southminster-Steinhauer United Church  
December 2010*