

## Order of Service for December 6, 2020 - Advent 2

### GATHERING

#### **Gathering Song - 254, Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus**

Come, thou long expected Jesus, born to set thy people free;  
from our fears and sins release us; let us find our rest in thee.  
Israel's strength and consolation, hope of all the earth thou art,  
dear desire of ev'ry nation, joy of ev'ry longing heart.

Born thy people to deliver, born a child, and yet a King;  
born to reign in us forever, now thy gracious kingdom bring.  
By thine own eternal Spirit rule in all our hearts alone;  
by thine all-sufficient merit raise us to thy glorious throne.

*(Hymn lyrics printed under CCLI Licence # 11411292)*

#### **Greeting**

P - The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God,  
and the communion of the Holy Spirit, be with us all.

#### **Kyrie**

P - Gracious and loving God, you provide so much that we can share. Lord, have mercy.

C - Lord, have mercy.

P - Gracious and loving Saviour, you join us in the shadows so we can see. Christ, have mercy.

C - Christ, have mercy.

P - Gracious and loving Spirit, you empower us to shine in your world. Lord, have mercy.

C - Lord, have mercy.

#### **Prayer of the Day**

P - Let us pray. Stir up our hearts, Lord God, to prepare the way for your only Son. By his coming strengthen us to serve you with purified lives; through Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

C - Amen.

### WORD

#### **Hebrew Scriptures**      Isaiah 40:1-11

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

#### **Psalms**      85:1-2, 8-13

LORD, you were favourable to your land;  
you restored the fortunes of Jacob.

You forgave the iniquity of your people;  
you pardoned all their sin.

Let me hear what God the LORD will speak,  
for he will speak peace to his people, to his faithful,  
to those who turn to him in their hearts.

## Christian Scriptures 2nd Peter 3:8-15a

Do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. ... [So,] in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.

## Gospel Acclamation

P - Alleluia. Prepare the way of the Lord.

C - All flesh shall see the salvation of God. Alleluia

## Gospel Reading Mark 1:1-8

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'"

## Sermon

There's a lot going on today. December 6th is a date and a day with a lot of meaning, a lot of significance, a lot of stories.

Obviously, this day is the second Sunday in the church's season of Advent, the season of hope, of anticipation, of preparation. So, to begin our service, we lit a candle of peace, and prayed for peace. Today is a day dedicated to peace. In this crazy, mixed up world, that's an important thing to hold on to.

And then we heard, "Comfort my people, says your God," and "Say to the cities of Judah, 'Here is your God!'"

We prayed the Psalm together, "[The] LORD *will speak*... to his people..., to those who turn to him...."

We were reminded of the promise of "new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home."

And we heard at the very start of Mark's gospel, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

There's plenty to chew on right *there*(!), without anything *else* to think about.

But there *is* more to think about! December 6th is also a day set aside to remember St. Nicholas, the bishop of the ancient town of Myra.

We could spend a fair amount of time talking about how little we actually know about the life of Nicholas. But we could spend a fair amount of time talking about the things we *do* know. And we could spend even *more* time reflecting on how he is so much *more* than the inspiration for the character of Santa Claus, how he is much more interesting, much more challenging, and actually much more dangerous than Santa Claus. He was much more concerned with addressing poverty, and including the outcast, and welcoming the rejected, than he was ever concerned with who's been naughty or nice.

But December 6th is not done with us. Because this date is also the anniversary of the so-called Montreal Massacre, when a male university student walked into classroom of the École Polytechnique in Montreal, separated the men from the women, told the men to leave the room, shouted "You're all just a bunch of feminists" at the women, and then started the killing. By the time it was done, 14 women were dead, 10 women and 4 men were injured, and the shooter was dead by his own hand.

And every year, on the 6th of December we hear the same old argument of those who say this was the act of a single, deranged man, and there's nothing we can do to stop single deranged men with guns from doing this.

And I would suggest that this debate is a bit more intense for us in Nova Scotia this December 6th, because of the tragedy in Portapique last April, and the similar discussions which continue to be held here, and which continue to be held after every similar attack, no matter where they take place.

There's a lot going on today. December 6th is a date and a day with a lot of meaning, a lot of significance, a lot of stories.

So. What do we *do* with all of this? We can't authentically light a peace candle and pretend that everything is somehow better. It doesn't seem honest to focus exclusively on readings from the Bible, and retreat into a comfortable religious history (even though, if we're *really* honest, the histories contained in the Bible are generally not all that comfortable!). But because the readings today are honest about what the writers saw and experienced and thought, it doesn't seem fair to ignore them, either.

And while it might be instructive, and even enjoyable, to examine Nicholas, the bishop of Myra, we must admit that we are most likely so overwhelmed with images of Santa Claus that any discussion we have is likely to become either too sugary sweet to be healthy, or too cynically Scrooge-ish to be helpful.

We certainly want to remember Geneviève Bergeron, Hélène Colgan, Nathalie Croteau, Barbara Daigneault, Anne-Marie Edward, Maud Haviernick, Maryse Laganière, Maryse Leclair, Anne-Marie Lemay, Sonia Pelletier, Michèle Richard, Annie St-Arneault, Annie Turcotte, and Barbara Klucznik-Widajewicz.

And we also need to remember Heidi Stevenson, Lisa McCully, Heather O'Brien, Kristen Beaton, Sean McLeod, Alanna Jenkins, Greg Blair, Jamie Blair, Jolene Oliver, Aaron Tuck, Emily Tuck, Dawn Madsen, Frank Gulenchyn, Gina Goulet, Corrie Ellison, Tom Bagley, Joey Webber, Lillian Hyslop, Peter Bond, Joy Bond, John Zahl and Elizabeth Thomas.

But how do we *do* all of this? How do we maintain a flame of peace when so much around us, and sometimes *within* us, denies even the *possibility* of peace? How do we hold on to our scriptures, when they won't let us enjoy a sense of hope without also inflicting a large dose of pain at the same time? How do we cling to Nicholas and his example of living justly in an unjust world, when we are constantly bombarded by images and songs which portray St. Nick as that jolly old elf? And how do we address real people in their real pain, without being overwhelmed by it, or giving *in* to the hatred and fear by acting *out* the hatred and fear and causing *more* hatred and fear?

How do we commemorate, how do we go through this day, this December the 6th, when there is *so much* going on?

Personally, my challenge is that I'm pretty good at raising the questions, but not so good at coming up with the answers!

But in my better moments, I think that might be ok. Maybe it's a good thing to admit that we don't have "answers." In the face of so much that is just plain incomprehensible, maybe we start by admitting that *all we have* is questions, *lots and lots* of questions.

Maybe the first thing we do when we are lighting a candle for peace is remember the *un*-peace which infects our world. And then be determined in our lighting of that candle.

Maybe we do this small thing in the face of the bigness of un-peace, to remind ourselves that the only way to change the big un-peace is to engage in small but persistent acts of peace making.

Maybe the first thing we do when we are hearing the words of the Bible is to let them tell us their contradictory stories of hope in the middle of pain, and pain in the middle of hope. Instead of exclusively emphasizing the so-called “positive” stuff, maybe we acknowledge both sides of the coin. Maybe we stop trying to hear simple explanations, and really listen the scripture’s call to admit, and even embrace, the complexity that *is* human life, the complexity that *is* faith, the complexity that *is* walking with this God.

Maybe the first thing we do is admit that we don’t know much about St. Nicholas, the actual person, but at the same time admit that the little we *do* know is enough to confront us with our own desire to only see the jolly old elf. Maybe by confessing our desire for the pretend, we just might be in a better position to let our discomfort tell us something important about ourselves.

Maybe the first thing we do is realize that there are multiple ways of telling the stories of the tragedies of Montreal and Portapique. Maybe we take the fact that all we have is questions, and throw some of them at how those stories are told, so that, when a shooter yells, “You are just a bunch of feminists,” we can stop pretending that it has nothing to do with women’s issues. Maybe we can stop pretending that it is only about a single, deranged man, each and every time, over and over again.

Will admitting the ambiguity and complexity in all of these situations make it easier to cope with December 6th? Will it make life and faith any more comprehensible? Probably not!

But it will be a bit more honest, and it will be a bit more authentic. And my hope is that, by being more honest and more authentic *about* life’s ambiguity, and our ambiguous place *in* this ambiguous life, we can discover together the presence of the God of Advent.

Because it is only in acknowledging a *lack* of light, that the *presence* of light takes on any importance. It is only by recognizing despair, that hope becomes more than wishful thinking. It is only by admitting our lack of control in the middle of tragic events, that we can be freed to respond with something other than trying to regain control (which we never had anyway), that we can begin to respond with something like love. It is only by embracing our actual experience of the absence of God, that the promise of God’s coming becomes life-giving.

December the 6th is a full day! There’s a lot going on. It has a lot of meaning, a lot of significance, a lot of stories. Yet, in the middle of these stories, not in *spite* of them, not *around* them, but in the *middle* of these stories, is also found a promise: comfort in the middle of ambiguous pain; a word spoken in the middle of ambiguous silence; a vision of a new way of being in which righteousness is at home in the middle of our ambiguous unrighteousness; a proclamation that, even in the middle of our ambiguous *here*, our ambiguous *now*, there is the beginning of good news.

May God bless us all with restless peace as we anticipate God’s coming, even on December 6th.

Amen.

## RESPONSE TO THE WORD

### Hymn of the Day - 264, Prepare the Royal Highway

Prepare the royal highway; the King of kings is near!  
Let ev'ry hill and valley a level road appear!  
Then greet the King of glory, foretold in ancient story. *Refrain*

*Refrain*

Hosanna to the Lord, for he fulfills God's word!

God's people see him coming: your own eternal king!  
Palm branches strew before him! Spread garments! Shout and sing!  
God's promise will not fail you! No more shall doubts assail you! *Refrain*

Then fling the door wide open to greet your promised king!  
Your king, yet e'ry nation its tribute too may bring.  
All lands will bow before him; their voices join your singing. *Refrain*

His is no earthly kingdom; it comes from heav'n above.  
His rule is peace and freedom and justice, truth and love.  
So let your praise be sounding for kindness so abounding. *Refrain*

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### Prayers of the People

A - Trusting the dawning of God's day, we pray for the world God loves, the church God calls, and all according to their needs.

[*Short pause*]

A - God who is present in the ambiguous, we give thanks for the promise of your presence.  
Give us the eyes of faith, to look for reminders that you are indeed walking with us.  
God who comes,

C - Hold us in your promise.

A - God who is present in the complex, our minds search for explanation, for reasons, for understanding. As we celebrate the vastness of creation, remind us that you are also found in the small, the tiny, and even in the insignificant. God who comes,

C - Hold us in your promise.

A - God who is present in the incomprehensible, your love is truly beyond our grasp, beyond our intellect, beyond our ability to take it in. Provide us the reassurance that we do not *need* to comprehend your love for it to be real. God who comes,

C - Hold us in your promise.

A - God who is present in the uncertain, guide your church on this difficult day, in this difficult year, in these difficult times. Grant us the faith we need to serve, the love we need to persevere, the hope we need to rejoice. God who comes,

C - Hold us in your promise.

A - God who is present in the complicated, direct those whose lives are burdened with illness, isolation, broken relationships, poverty, injustice and pain. We especially remember those whom we name before you.

[*Long pause*]

God who comes,

C - Hold us in your promise.

A - God who is present in tangled mess of life, you are in the middle of it all. Inspire our trust, inspire our response, inspire our lives. God who comes,

C - Hold us in your promise.

P - We ask all this in the name of Jesus, our approaching Lord, who taught us to pray,

### **Lord's Prayer**

P - And now we pray as Jesus taught us:

C - 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. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.

## **SENDING**

### **Benediction**

P - May God, for whom nothing is impossible, restore you and bless you.

May Christ, in whom is the dawning of grace, carry you and lead you.

May the Spirit, whose song is gladness,  
fill you with energetic peace and determined hope.

C - Amen

### **Sending Song - 253, He Came Down**

He came down that we may have love; he came down that we may have love;  
he came down that we may have love; hallelujah forevermore.

He came down that we may have light...

He came down that we may have peace...

He came down that we may have joy

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### **Dismissal**

P - Go in peace. Prepare the way of the Lord.

C - Thanks be to God!

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