

A Journey to Hope: Peace – Luke 1:26-38

Sunday 6 December 2020

Before You Begin

Our hope is that this is a resource that will help us to engage meaningfully with God's word and invite us into a sense of worship, despite being unable to meet face-to-face. Use it in a way that feels comfortable and helpful to you.

A table of contents has been added to give you a sense of what will follow and allow you to move more easily through the worship elements.

Prepare

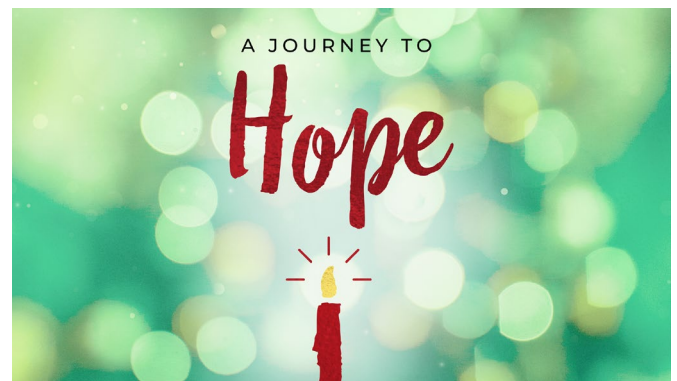
Have your Bible close by and some food and drink prepared for communion. It doesn't have to be bread and grape juice; it could be whatever is available (tea and a biscuit) to use in this symbolic time.

Get into a 'Sacred' Space

Be intentional. Sit somewhere. Have some visual representation of God (perhaps a small cross, your Bible, a symbol or image) or you might play some reflective music. Start with a few moments of silence and deep breathing.

Consider your environment

What will work for you in the space you have? If you have others in your house (housemates/family), consider sharing this time with them, each reading or participating as appropriate. You might simply reflect individually, in your own time and space. Afterwards, you might connect with others through technology to share your reflections, or an encouragement, with them.



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Call to Worship

Caitria Kamarareid

Hi there, welcome to today's worship resource from Ringwood Church of Christ. Whoever you are, wherever you are, however you are feeling today, we are glad that you can join us and share this time of worship with us together.

It's beginning to feel a bit like Christmas! Our Christmas tree is up! We've cracked open the first few boxes on our advent calendar and we wake every morning to our nearby school and preschool blasting Christmas Carols. Advent has even arrived at 13 Bedford Road! There are decorations, an emerging nativity scene and an opportunity to bring a candle that you've written on. You can download one from rngwd.com/candle and can write your hopes for 2021 or a prayer - and decorate it! Then, bring it to the church and peg it up along with others, open right through until Christmas.

I don't know about you, but I can't believe we're here. This time last year my husband and I were students in China looking forward to what was meant to be a short holiday in Australia. Well, a year on and we're still here, after a year of unexpected change. We come into this Christmas tired from a year of adapting to new rules, new patterns, new technology, and many new 'normals'. For me, this year of all years, it is especially comforting to begin to return to the familiar traditions and the age-old story of Christmas.

And yet, while this year has not been what we expected, we have had surprising moments of simple peace. Quiet birthdays that were better than expected, new friends and possibilities we know only through Zoom, time to slow down and reflect, more time to spend with each other. Equally as we approach the Christmas story, we are invited to find this simple peace in the midst of the complexity that Jesus was born into. As we come into this space of worship and connecting with God, perhaps take a moment to ask yourself or someone else what surprising moments of peace you've had this year. We will share a Christmas Carol and read a story that brings us back to the simple stillness and true peace that Jesus brings us.

Song: Silent Night

Silent night holy night
All is calm all is bright
Round yon virgin 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
Heav'nly hosts sing alleluia
Christ the Saviour is born
Christ the Saviour is born

Silent night holy night
Son of God love's pure light
Radiant beams from Thy holy face
With the dawn of redeeming grace
Jesus Lord at Thy birth
Jesus Lord at Thy birth

Silent night holy night
Wondrous star lend thy light
With the angels let us sing
Alleluia to our King
Christ the Saviour is born
Christ the Saviour is born

CCLI Song # 27862
Franz Xaver Gruber | John Freeman Young | Joseph Mohr
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Advent Reflections

Deb and Dave Wilkins

2020 has been a tumultuous year, for many of us it's not been peaceful at all. We've really struggled in lockdown, with isolation and the disruption to our everyday lives. For many of us, our lives have been stripped bare, just like a pre-decorated Christmas tree. And yet, this time has also provided us with an opportunity to really focus on the things that matter most.

Book: Jed and Roy McCoy

Andrew McDonough



It was late at night and all the sheep were in their beds and fast asleep. But wide awake, glaring at each other across the flock, were the brothers Jed and Roy McCoy.

If you asked Jed what the problem was, he would say, "That ratbag Roy keeps rustling my sheep. Why, just the other day, 25 years ago, he stole my prize ewe. I didn't see him but the wolf footprints were a dead give-away. Only Roy would be sneaky enough

to wear wolf footprint shoes to cover his tracks. So fair's fair, I put my brand on some of his sheep ... and put rocks in his wool bale."

If you asked Roy what the problem was, he would say, "That swamp snake Jed keeps frizzling my sheep. Why, just the other day, 22 years, 3 months and 4 days ago, he frizzled my best ram. I knew it was Jed. Who else would sneak out in a thunderstorm and frizzle a ram to make it look like it was struck by lightning? So fair's fair, I snapped his staff in two ... and put a scorpion in his bed (I couldn't find a snake)."



Once a year, at the big feast, the feuding brothers would put aside their differences, sit at the dinner table and exchange gifts. But the next night things would be back to normal, Jed and Roy McCoy glaring at each other across the sheep.



One night, an angel suddenly appeared. "Surprise!" said the angel. "I have good news! In Bethlehem a baby has been born who will bring peace on earth!" Peace on earth! Jed and Roy were so excited they ran all the way to Bethlehem. There, in a manger, they found the baby. They were filled with joy. Wow! Peace on earth! Then Jed and Roy looked at each other across the manger. Peace on earth? What will this baby have to do to bring peace on earth? The brothers ran home rejoicing.

Funny thing, from that day on, Jed never mentioned stolen ewes, or Roy frizzled rams. And at night, Jed and Roy McCoy no longer glared at each other across the flock. Instead, one would sleep while the other looked after the sheep.

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Bible Reading: Luke 1:26-38 (NIV)

If you are with others perhaps take turns to read different sections

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you."

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favour with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He

will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail."

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.

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Song: Living Hope

How great the chasm that lay between us
How high the mountain I could not climb
In desperation I turned to heaven
And spoke Your name into the night
Then through the darkness Your loving-kindness
Tore through the shadows of my soul
The work is finished the end is written
Jesus Christ my living hope

Who could imagine so great a mercy
What heart could fathom such boundless grace
The God of ages stepped down from glory
To wear my sin and bear my shame
The cross has spoken I am forgiven
The King of kings calls me His own
Beautiful Savior I'm Yours forever
Jesus Christ my living hope

Hallelujah praise the One who set me free
Hallelujah death has lost its grip on me
You have broken every chain
There's salvation in Your name
Jesus Christ my living hope

Then came the morning that sealed the promise
Your buried body began to breathe
Out of the silence the Roaring Lion

Declared the grave has no claim on me
Jesus Yours is the victory whoa

Jesus Christ my living hope
Oh God You are my living hope

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Message

Craig Brown

There are many words to describe 2020 but 'peaceful' wouldn't be one of them.

We started in a summer of flames and ash. A summer where rumours emerged of a virus from Wuhan. By April, we were working from home; sport had been postponed and we were restricted in how and who we could socialise with; weddings, funerals and church services were via Zoom. Everything was via Zoom it seemed. And just as the light came in, a much more severe wave hit Melbourne and we locked down again.

Peace? Not so much.

Around the globe, many of the Global Mission Partners (GMP) family experienced similar things, without the safety nets we had here in Australia. In Indonesia, the government placed business recovery above health and – to date – the fatality rate in Indonesia is 16th in the world, with cases still rising. India and the Philippines locked down quickly and with even harsher restrictions than Melbourne. But with cramped living conditions in places like Mumbai and Manila, the virus ran amok.

Increased domestic violence, missed medical appointments and the breakdown of the 'informal economy' of selling produce in markets, meant that many people in Zimbabwe, Bangladesh and South Sudan had to choose between possible infection and putting food on the table. There, homes were often not peaceful or safe. Students missed a year's education, as the internet in many developing countries couldn't support remote learning. Women's equality and democratic freedoms all went backwards.

Peace? Not so much.

Even as Thailand emerged from their well-managed response to the virus, they have seen pro-democracy protests met with water cannons in Bangkok.

In November, after Melbourne emerged from our long lockdown, we watched the USA descend into a divisive, disruptive and turbulent election.

Peace? Not so much.

But what has struck me during this time has been the ability of many, here in Australia and in places like India, Fiji and Vietnam, to adapt to these disruptive changes and still preach the gospel, still pray, still disciple and heal their communities.

Still teach, still perform their work as doctors, nurses and carers.

I know our pastors in Fiji have been able to do the work of the church in the middle of a pandemic because they have the peace of God and the peace that comes from deep human connection.

At GMP, we have worked hard at being a constant for our partners, in terms of support for them as people, maintaining financial support through our generous supporters, and using technology to encourage and listen to our partners.

For peace is most appreciated and experienced in the middle of chaos, isn't it? In the middle of disruption. This is when we value it. This is when we need it most and miss it most. And when I say 'peace', I'm not talking about the absence of noise; the muting on Zoom; the gentle sway of a hammock at a winery ... no, I am talking about that stillness inside of us, that sense of calm despite difficult external conditions.

The peace that singer and actor Ben Platt describes in his song, *Temporary Love* as:

*When the world around is caving in
And the winds, well, they keep on changing
Take my hand and let it spin
We'll hold still*

We, in this lead up to Christmas, which is so often bereft of peace, need something or someone upon whom we can depend to make our spinning worlds *hold still*.

In the midst of turbulence, we need to cultivate or receive peace in order to function, let alone to be our best selves.

This well-known passage from **Luke 1:26-38** is one that has peace at its centre. It's well known, so sometimes we take it for granted or we take Mary's situation for granted. It has become so much a part of the Christmas story that we forget that there is a young, vulnerable, 14-year-old girl at the centre of this story.

A girl who is poor – so lacks economic peace.

A girl who is young – so lacks the peace that comes with experience.

A girl who in a male-dominated culture has no voice and no status – so lacks the peace that comes from feeling protected.

A girl who hears the voice of God calling her to perform an impossibility – and so lacks the peace of anonymity.

She cannot hide her pregnancy. She will be found out, most likely considered an adulteress and at best be rejected by her fiancée and community and, at worst, be stoned to death for adultery and blasphemy.

Yet, from Luke's telling which focuses on Mary – itself a dramatic recognition of the equality of the sexes – we see a young woman who has peace. How? Given what she lacks in her society and her position in it, how does Mary exhibit peace? How can we?

I want to briefly dwell on a few points here – maybe they are applicable to you, maybe not, as we enter into this season which can often be disruptive.

First, Mary does not hide her feelings. In 1:29, Luke records Mary's response: *Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.* Let's be a bit obvious here – being addressed by angels was not normal behaviour in the first century! And certainly not with a message that a young woman would bear the Son of God. In 1:34, she acknowledges her own doubt: *How will this be, since I am a virgin?*

How are you feeling, right now? Take a moment and acknowledge those feelings.

Second, Mary's feelings are acknowledged by an external source. Peace comes not just from feeling 'peaceful', it can also come by someone drawing alongside you and saying, 'these feelings of shock are completely understandable'. Gabriel's words of *Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God* are both comforting and empowering.

We need assurance to have peace. Who can you trust to sit down with and speak honestly about your feelings? Peace comes not from becoming a 'project' to our friends and family but from being heard and having an acceptance of what we're feeling.

Like Mary, we need truth-tellers in our lives who affirm our goodness and worth in God's sight.

Let Gabriel's words ring out over you now: *Do not be afraid, you have found favour with God.*

But there is another external source who will grow Mary's peace: Elizabeth. Old, barren and stereotyped, Elizabeth too has experienced a miraculous conception and will be the close companion that will share the journey with Mary and nurture peace through her own witness to the goodness of God. We need people like this in our lives; if you have one, hold on to them.

Third, we need to cultivate an inner peace by embracing the truth. This can be difficult – we may have a messy past, a frantic present, an unknown future. We often skip to the end of this passage,

to Mary's inspirational words: *I am the Lord's servant ... May it be to me as you have said*, forgetting that they are deeply attached to the truth Gabriel speaks: *For nothing is impossible with God*. Gabriel's words lay the foundation for the inner peace that Mary can exhibit here. Yes, her situation is difficult but her God can smooth the ways; yes, her way of life will forever be changed but she can draw on the clarity of this moment to nurture peace – as the Prince of Peace grows in her womb.

*Take a moment now and imagine the presence of Jesus filling you.
What does that feel like for you?
Cultivate and grow that over the next few days.*

Let us remember that as we approach Christmas we are on a journey. To make it to the next stage of the journey – no matter what is facing you – remember that Jesus comes to give us peace. Not a trouble-free, uncomplicated and predictable existence but among the turbulence and noise, He gives us His peace to hold on to and still this world.

Let us value peace and cultivate peace in these troubled times. Let us journey to peace.

Special Offering: COCOA and Christmas Bowl

Caitria Kamarareid

As Craig has reminded us, this year has been a uniquely turbulent year for so many. This year my husband and I moved back to Australia after living in China for a few years, and as COVID-19 hit we saw keenly the extent of the difference in capacity to deal with a pandemic here, in China where we came from and Sierra Leone, John's home. We did everything that we could to keep my husband here because we knew it was where he would be most safe. But others don't have the same choices. Many we knew had to make impossible decisions between community safety and feeding their family.

At Christmas, we join so many around the world to celebrate a common gift: the ultimate gift of love, hope and peace that the world received in the birth of a baby. This celebration extends across centuries and equally across borders and unites us in its commonality. It urges us to step out of our individual/family/community bubbles and see that God's love is for the whole world. For me, it reminds me again of our common humanity, that this inequality can't be fair. It pushes me to respond to how I can repair what I can to what is broken.

As a church, each year we support both COCOA (Churches of Christ Overseas Aid) and the Christmas Bowl appeal. Details for how to give this year are on the Christmas page on our church website (rngwd.com/christmas) or you can contact the church office.



Communion

Have some food and drink prepared for this time

If you're able, join us at 11am Sunday through Zoom to share in communion together at rngwd.com/communion or via Facebook live rngwd.com/fbv

If you are unable to join us, then please use the following reflection to take communion in your own way today and after, consider who you can call to have a chat as you would on a Sunday morning after a church service.

Welcome to this time of Communion. Today our Advent theme is Peace.

Mary's openness and receptivity to the message that she is to be the mother of Jesus is surprising! I am sure she had her times of struggle and times of doubt but her unquestioning 'yes' to God is inspiring. It would seem Mary was someone who was at peace because she was able to live from a place of surrender and trust in God when life unfolded in unexpected ways.

Life doesn't always turn out as we expected. Our lives have been turned upside down this year by the unexpected event of a global pandemic. We have a similar opportunity to respond from a place of trust and openness to God rather than a place of fear and anxiety.

Joseph Campbell said: "We must be willing to let go of the life we planned so as to have the life that is waiting for us."

How easy it is to plan our own lives and run with our own agendas? **Mary's prayer** suggests the sort of stance we might practice to live lives more fully surrendered to God.

You must seek to be a blank slate.
 You must desire to remain unwritten on.
 No choosing of this or that.
 Not "I am good because."
 Nor "I am not good because."

Neither excitement nor boredom.

Remaining Nothing,
An unchosen virgin,
And unchoosing too, just empty.
No story line by which to start the day.
No identity enhancers nor losses
To make yourself valuable or not.

Nothing interesting, nothing uninteresting,
Neither against, nor for something.
Nothing to recall from yesterday.
Nothing to look forward to today.

Just me, naked, exposed,
No self to fix, change, or find,
Nothing to judge right or wrong,
Important or unimportant,
Worthy or unworthy,
I stand and wait,
neither powerful nor powerless,

For You to name me,
For You to look upon my face,
For You to write my script,
For You to give the kiss,
In your time and your way.

You always do.
And it is always so much better.

Prayer for Communion.

So at this table of grace
we take the bread and wine.
May they be a constant presence
of the Spirit of life, and love,
healing, renewing and making us whole.
The One who surrendered his life for our sake,
is present to us in the bread.
The One who calls us by name and makes
us whole meets us in the wine.
So may we also live of surrender, openness and trust
That we may be gathered with all people into the eternal peace and love of God. Amen.

Please eat and drink in remembrance of him

Prayer After Communion

May we go in Peace
To love and serve the world
And may our waiting be in hope,
Each day lived in faith
And the love of Christmas be moving towards us all,

Amen

Connect cards online

Click this link or enter it into your web browser rngwd.com/connect.

We love to know that you have been able to connect through worship today. Please click on the link (or enter it into your web browser) to our online connect cards letting us know which ways you have been able to worship, and if you want to let us know how we can praying with you.
Thank you!