

White Gift Service

A Portion of the Worship Service of St. Andrew's United Church

Sunday, December 11, 2016

Advent 3 – Joy

Scripture Readings: Isaiah 28:16-17a

James 3:17-18

Psalm 136:1, 25-26

(by The Rev. Catherine Somerville, The Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman, and Connor Ross)

Reading: Isaiah 28:16-17a

Therefore thus says the Lord GOD,
See, I am laying in Zion a foundation stone,
a tested stone,
a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation:
'One who trusts will not panic.'
And I will make justice the line,
and righteousness the plummet.

Do you feel like a rock? A rock is inanimate and hard; a rock is often cold and immovable; a rock is a symbol of eternity and permanence. Surely you do not feel like a rock, and certainly do not aspire to be a rock – at least not that kind of understanding of a rock that cannot move or change. Yet the image of the rock is an important biblical symbol.

Jesus spoke to Peter (whose name means “rock” in Greek) as being the “rock” on which I will build my church. During the escape from Egypt, Moses struck a rock on Mount Sinai, and water gushed forth when the people of Israel were feeling faint and angry from thirst. In the book of Psalms, we often hear that God is “my rock, my fortress” whereas elsewhere in the prophetic literature God is seen as “the rock of my salvation.” Mary and Joseph travelled over sandy, rocky roads to get to Bethlehem where Jesus was born, and we relate to that journey as we, too, often find ourselves on bush roads that are uneven rocky, and isolated.

So what does a rock tell us about our faith? A rock is a symbol of lasting value, the source of precious ores that we mine from the ground all around Sudbury. A rock is another name for a gem that may be worn as part of jewellery for a special occasion, even to ornately adorn the hats of the Magi who later came to the birthplace of Jesus. A rock can be the base for the building of an Inukshuk to guide our way, or to build the foundation for a house that will encompass our families and loved ones. Remember: Jesus told a parable where the wise man was the one who built his house upon a rock.

A rock is a promise that we are not alone, just as the birth of Jesus gives us the promise of God's presence. Let us see this rock as a reminder that God goes with us, and we are called to both go with and serve others as God's people on this White Gift Sunday. We now invite forward the Wise Ones who will gather our White Gifts from the congregation, donated as part of our outreach this year to people in the downtown core and in schools where children need personal items and school supplies.

People, Look East

*(choir sings verse one as Wise Men enter and collect
white gifts for display at the front)*

People, look east. The time is near of the crowning of the year.
Make your house fair as you are able; trim the hearth and set the table.
People, look east and sing today: Love the guest is on the way.

Reading: James 3:17-18

But the wisdom from above is first pure, then
peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and
good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.
And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for
those who make peace.

Rocks remind us of a firm foundation. How we live our lives is based on what we see as important. We build our lives on the values we uphold, and the truths that we seek to fulfill.

A rock is something that is not easily moved or altered. Many homes are built on rock in Sudbury, and some have rocks that can still be seen in the basement level, for it was easier to build on top of the rock than to blast it away (that is true of other communities in the Canadian Shield – the Howard Johnson hotel in Gravenhurst has a large rock formation in the middle of their lobby area. The hotel was built around the pre-existing rock formation.)

What is important to us, and what do we want to be our lasting testimony to our lives?

Christ reminded us to share who we are and what we have with others. And so today we brought forward gifts and backpacks that will be shared with those on the street, and those in schools who need school supplies and personal essentials. Our gifts are like sharing seeds for feeding the birds in winter, for they show our concern for our neighbours within nature – we are providing the necessities of life amidst the rock formations of our city so that joy may be shared with those creatures in our community.

The Wise Ones will share packets of sunflower seeds with you that shall be for the birds you will feed -- a promise of new life in this season of Advent.

People, Look East

(choir sings verses two and three as seeds are distributed)

Birds, though you long have ceased to build, guard the nest that must be filled.
Even the hour when wings are frozen God for fledging time has chosen.
People, look east and sing today: Love the bird is on the way.

Furrows, be glad; though earth is bare, one more seed is planted there:
give up your strength, the seed to nourish, that in course the flower may flourish.
People, look east and sing today: Love the rose is on the way.

Reading: Psalm 136:1, 25-26

O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good,
for his steadfast love endures for ever.
Who gives food to all flesh,
for his steadfast love endures for ever.
O give thanks to the God of heaven,
for his steadfast love endures for ever.

The Inukshuk, our symbol for Advent, is built from rocks. Not just any rocks, but flat rocks that may be piled one on top of the other, and sturdy rocks that may support the weight of the rocks subsequently placed upon them.

The Inukshuk is a marker to help us find the way. It reminds us that people have come before us, and it also is the promise that those who come after us will not feel abandoned and alone. An Inukshuk provides that sense of comfort and goodness. An Inukshuk makes a sense of community out of barren, isolated places, for ultimately we share in the journey with others.

So we have given our gifts for this White Gift focus as we share with others, so that they may know we are prepared to walk with them on their journey of life. The Wise Ones now will distribute the stones in the baskets at the front so that each one of us may take a stone home as a symbol of the fact we share in the rock of truth that comes from God—we share a piece of the rock of this community. We invite you to reflect on this stone in the days and weeks ahead, just as we have reflected on our stones of “hope,” “peace,” and “joy” during our worship services in Advent, and further, we invite you to write down a prayer or sentence of what is important for you, tape it to your stone, and share it in the offering plate on Christmas Eve. That offering of prayer will be part of our prayers for the evening services on December 24th.

People, Look East

(choir sings verses four and five as the stones are distributed)

Stars, keep the watch. When night is dim one more light the bowl shall brim,
shining beyond the frosty weather, bright as sun and moon together.

People, look east and sing today: Love the star is on the way.

Angels, announce with shouts of mirth Christ who brings new life to earth.

Set every peak and valley humming with the word, the Lord is coming.

People, look east and sing today: Love the Lord is on the way.

We are a people who seek the wisdom that comes from God – the energy that gives life meaning and hope. In Jesus we see the one who embodies God’s wisdom, and who helps ground our lives in truth and in service. Like the Magi of old, may we be open to new ideas, and share the fullness of religious experience and truth, as we continue to seek the goodness that comes from God. Thanks be to God.