

CALL TO WORSHIP

The people yearn for the return of the light
Maranatha
Come Lord Jesus
they shout
But then dawns that turning point of the year
the return of the sun
the return of light
the sun dawns
the daylight lengthens
a star bursts forth
the angels gleam
those in darkness have seen great light
a stable glows
Come, let us worship!
Come, let us raise our voices in praise!

GOSPEL

Luke 2: 22-24

²² When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, Mary and Joseph brought Jesus up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord ²³ (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord"), ²⁴ and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons."

REFLECTION *Holy to the Lord*

Over and over again over the Sundays of Advent and Christmas we watched and listened as Allison gathered the children together and began her story saying, "Everything is changed."

She spoke of the time needed to get ready to enter into the mystery of Christmas. She held up figures from the early narratives of Jesus' Birth. She told us how they pointed the way to Bethlehem and to the great mystery of Jesus' birth. She lit Advent Candles... and finally, she lit the Christ Candle.

As I pondered this morning's scriptures in preparation for this service, I decided I would offer you an opportunity to consider on this first Sunday of Christmas whether and how you sense that things are changed for you as a person of faith; and, whether there an intention you might 'present to God,' as we stand on the cusp of 2017. In what ways might you personally designate this newborn year as "Holy to the Lord?"

Take a moment and listen quietly within... is some small change you might lean into as we enter this New Year?

How might God be calling you to live more fully... more faithfully as you stand on the cusp of this new year.

The 5th installment of Allison's *Godly Play* Christmas story told on Christmas Day began with these words, "Look! ...The mystery of Christmas. The baby is born, and everything is changed!"

Do you sense that something is shifted, changed or changing within or around you over this past year?

GOSPEL

Luke 2: 25-30

²⁵ Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. ²⁶ It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, ²⁸ Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, ²⁹ "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; ³⁰ for my eyes have seen your salvation, ³¹ which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, ³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."

REFLECTION *The Holy Spirit Rested on Him*

If we don't read between the lines, this passage makes the journey of Simeon sound straightforward and sure--if long! The Holy Spirit rests on him. The Holy Spirit reveals to him that he will see the Lord's Messiah.

The Holy Spirit Guides him to the temple. Simeon is portrayed as a man deeply connected to God through prayer and the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

What is your experience of the Holy Spirit?

United Church Leader, Carol Grace Scott writes of a faith journey that has taken her through, out, beyond, and back into church.

Her experience, I think reflects that of many who struggle to live into a faith that is honest, curious, and deeply connected

with the sacred and with others. In her poem entitled: "The Map-less Quest." She writes:

*For so many years
You have been travelling along.
Knowing the path, the roadways,
For they had been charted long ago
On the faith maps of your ancestors-*

*Then one day you lose your way.
What happens then, when you fall off the map?
When the map no longer records your journey?
How do you know which way to turn?
Your GPS wasn't programmed for this new territory!*

*What happens when you find
You've not only fallen off the map-
You've fallen off the firmament
... into Space
...A space so mysterious
You don't know how to chart your way.*

*Do you pull out what you remember
Of old prophecies, math, and science-
Endeavouring to measure the distance
Between stars and galaxies-
Not certain if you are floating or falling?*

*All you have to rely on
is inside of yourself-
Your brain working overtime
Until you get a brain cramp-
Your heart beating with anxiety and trepidation.*

*The distress and the loneliness are too great
Until you begin to notice
A glowing, a warmth,
Radiating out from your centre,
Lighting your way-*

*Intuition sparking
Your heart, your brain,
Encouraging you to look around-
To find signposts, land marks,
Even in this strange new territory.*

*And as you do,
You notice other sparks of light
Rising, drifting, bounding around near you.
Your propel yourself to them, reaching out-
Connecting, merging, yet separate.*

*Together you have found – co-created-
A new community of Light-Beings.
All have brought old road maps, stories, songs
into this new space of recreation
Together you begin to chart a new journey,
Relying more deeply than ever before
On the divine spark within
To guide you with compassion,
into a blazing, ever-evolving
Force of Love. **

Scott speaks to the times when we find ourselves in unfamiliar territory where our former ways of knowing, believing, deciding, and moving forward seem no longer adequate—times when we are lost and our old maps no longer serve us. She urges us to attune ourselves to that place of deep truth and light, that we might sense where sparks of new life are igniting within... and to watch for the signposts and landmarks rising up in this new place. She urges us to look around us for the sparks that are flying... and to together kindle flames of love, hope, purpose, love, joy and connection in a changed spiritual and personal landscape. Perhaps it is true, that when we come to the end of ourselves... it is then that we come to the beginning of or knowledge of that which is both deep with and beyond ourselves.

I wonder, where do you see sparks of light... signs of hope within the spiritual landscapes of your life, or the world around you as we enter 2017?

GOSPEL

Luke 2: 31-40

³³ And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. ³⁴ Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed ³⁵ so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too." ³⁶ There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, ³⁷ then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. ³⁸ At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. ³⁹ When they had finished

everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. ⁴⁰ The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

REFLECTION *Simeon Blessed Them*

So many hopes and dreams are pinned upon this small infant - named Emmanuel, God is With Us. Yet is this not true, in some measure, of every child born into this world? Is not the Divine Breath, the Divine Spirit, breathed into each and every one of us as we take in our first life-sustaining breath? Are not the hopes and dreams of every passing generation glimpsed in the eyes of each new born child?

Indeed, each and every one will challenge and change us in some way. Each child born will make his or her contribution to the unfolding and unsettling of the ways of the world.

But this Bethlehem child, it seems, took a second breath—and with it, a double dose of Spirit—so that those who come to know him experience in him the very presence of God.

Old Simeon, it seems, senses this right away. He holds this tiny Messiah in his ancient trembling hands, tears tracking his aged face, and declares his hopes and dreams for himself, for Israel, for all the world....fulfilled.

Then in the midst of joyous pronouncement, Simeon, with the wisdom of old age, speaks out warning about both the heartache and the hope which will accompany the gift of this child. He raises holy hands and voice offering blessing to Mary and Joseph, helping prepare them for the unknown journey that lay ahead for them all.

We, as a people of faith, continue to carry these traditions forward. We bring our children to this sacred space to be held in blessing. We touch them with holy waters and pronounce them children of God. We mark them, anoint them, with the sign of Christ, and then we declare them Christ's own. We do these things-- hearts brimming with hopes and dreams. We do these things with words of faith, and silently also... we hold up our fears for the difficult times which will surely come.

Like Simeon, we here bless the parents who will accompany and nurture the child, and more...we offer our love and support for their journey.

We are blessed with the presence of children here in whose eyes we see light and hope for the future. We are blessed by

the presence of a host of loving parents, in whose gentle faith-filled guidance we find ourselves often in awe.

And we, like Simeon, are invited to see God's good future in their eyes, and to bless each one with our love, our prayers, and our support. Together we nurture them... our children... in faith, in hope, in community, and in joy.

Like the Christ child, whose birth we celebrate in this season, each one of these children truly are the gifts of God for the people of God--not only now, not only for us, but for all the world.

I wonder... is there some small thing you might offer as an intention in the coming year....something that might provide sparks of life and signs hope for those who are touched by your life?

Scott, Carol Grace, **Awakened by Ashes**, *The Map-less Quest*, Echoe Press, Renfrew, On, 2013, pg. 72-74.