**Psalm 148**

1Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord from the heavens; praise him in the heights!

2Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his host!

3Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars!

4Praise him, you highest heavens, and you waters above the heavens!

5Let them praise the name of the Lord, for he commanded and they were created.

6He established them forever and ever; he fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed.

7Praise the Lord from the earth, you sea monsters and all deeps,

8fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind fulfilling his command!

9Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars!

10Wild animals and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds!

11Kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all rulers of the earth!

12Young men and women alike, old and young together!

13Let them praise the name of the Lord, for his name alone is exalted; his glory is above earth and heaven.

14He has raised up a horn for his people, praise for all his faithful, for the people of Israel who are close to him. Praise the Lord!

**Colossians 3:12-17**

12As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. 13Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. 14Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. 15And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. 16Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. 17And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

“O, the Stories We Tell”

The Rev. Lisa J. Durkee

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, oh Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

One of my favorite scenes in the movie called “The Nativity Story,” which several of us watched together last week, is not part of the familiar elements of the Gospel stories of Jesus’ birth. It happens before anything very monumental occurs, as the scene is set for us to know the characters in more intimate ways than most of us have understood before now. Sitting in the warmth of a darkened room, a woman is surrounded by young children who are eager to hear the stories she tells. It is obvious from their response to her storytelling that they have all heard the story many times before. They finish her sentences as she tells them about God, who loves them. She is telling the story we can read in First Kings, Chapter 19, and hearing it in this new way is delightful as we can imagine Elijah listening for the voice of God:

“Then God said, “Go out, and stand on the mountain before the Lord.” And behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind tore into the mountains and broke the rocks in pieces before the Lord [And here the children all join in with their youthful voices], “*but* the Lord *was* not in the wind;” and after the wind an earthquake, *but* the Lord *was* not in the earthquake; **12**and after the earthquake a fire, *but* the Lord *was* not in the fire; and after the fire [[e](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1%20Kings+19&version=NKJV#fen-NKJV-9400e)]a still small voice.”

Watching this scene again this year, I found myself thinking about the stories we tell our children; about the stories we tell frequently enough that our children can tell them with us. Christmas Eve is like this, I think, as we share in our service of lessons and carols with the Gospels of Luke and Matthew reminding us of the presence of shepherds and angels, wisemen and stars. This humble birth story leads into the story of a life that has changed our lives, no matter what we believe. In believing in the good news of God’s love for us, people throughout the history of the past millennia have been moved to change and to grow; to love more deeply and more outwardly. Some have been moved to share their understanding of these stories in song, as well. These songs are part of the season for many of us, and it occurred to me that as much as we may wish we told the stories more frequently, we *do* sing the good news. On this frequently “low attendance” Sunday, let’s revel together in the words of some of our favorite hymns, with brief history and commentary provided by pastors from the United Church of Canada.

Joy to the world! The Lord is come Let earth receive her King!  
Let every heart prepare Him room And heaven and nature sing

Joy to the world! The Savior reigns Let men their songs employ  
While fields and floods Rocks, hills and plains Repeat the sounding joy

No more let sins and sorrows grow nor thorns infest the ground;  
he comes to make his blessings flow far as the curse is found.

He rules the world with truth and grace And makes the nations prove   
And glories of His righteousness And wonders of His love

*“In 1865, the famous preacher and abolitionist Phillip Brooks rode on horseback from Jerusalem to Bethlehem and participated in the Church of the Nativity's Christmas Eve celebration. In response to his experience there, he wrote the now-famous carol “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” which was first performed by the children’s choir of his church a few years later. Unlike many Christmas carols, the lyrics of this reflective and hopeful song are set in the present tense rather than the past. The author’s experience of wonder and awe are palpable and cover the seemingly great distance between the birth of Christ then and our experience of it now.”*

O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie!  
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by;  
yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light.  
The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.

For Christ is born of Mary, and, gathered all above  
while mortals sleep, the angels keep their watch of wond’ring love.  
O morning stars, together proclaim the holy birth,  
and praises sing to God the King and peace to all the earth.

How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is giv’n!  
So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heav’n.  
No ear may hear his coming, but in this world of sin,  
where meek souls will receive him, still the dear Christ enters in.

O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray,  
cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today.  
We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell;  
O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Immanuel!

*“Written by Massachusetts Unitarian minister Edmund Sears, this pastoral-sounding carol carries a much deeper meaning than simply retelling the birth of Jesus. Sears hoped to offer an uplifting message amid the great poverty he was witness to and to remind people that God, in the form of a child, had entered a world sorely in need of love and peace. Richard Storrs Willis’ tune, CAROL, paired with the words only a year later, gave the carol its lasting appeal and one of its two most common tunes, the other being NOËL.”*

*“A very fine movie made in 1992,* A Midnight Clear*, tells the story of American and German soldiers laying aside their weapons on Christmas Eve of 1944. The story ends tragically, as miscommunication causes hostilities to resume. Yet, the powerful third verse of the carol, with its invitation to hush the noise of battle in order to hear God’s “love song” to the earth and all people, is a strong one. This carol speaks gently, yet powerfully, God’s word of peace amid strife and weariness.”*

It came upon the midnight clear, that glorious song of old,  
from angels bending near the earth to touch their harps of gold:  
"Peace on the earth, good will to men, from heaven's all-gracious King."  
The world in solemn stillness lay, to hear the angels sing.

Still through the cloven skies they come with peaceful wings unfurled,  
and still their heavenly music floats o'er all the weary world;  
above its sad and lowly plains, they bend on hovering wing,  
and ever o'er its Babel sounds the blessed angels sing.

And ye, beneath life's crushing load, whose forms are bending low,  
who toil along the climbing way with painful steps and slow,  
look now! for glad and golden hours come swiftly on the wing.  
O rest beside the weary road, and hear the angels sing!

For lo! the days are hastening on, by prophet seen of old,  
when with the ever-circling years shall come the time foretold  
when peace shall over all the earth its ancient splendors fling,  
and the whole world send back the song which now the angels sing.

And so, let us tell the stories of God’s living presence in our lives and by our words and our deeds make God’s presence known to all whom we encounter. For it is in this way that God’s story of love is told. Amen.