



# FAIRLAWN

Connect with what matters in life.

## The Longest Night: A Service of Hope and Healing

Fairlawn Avenue United Church  
Thursday, December 21 7:00pm

Rev. Jean Ward

Rev. Dr. Cameron Watts

Eleanor Daley, Director of Music

"This is the solstice, the  
still point of the sun, its  
cusp and midnight, the  
year's threshold and  
unlocking, where the  
past lets go of and  
becomes the future; the  
place of caught breath..."

—Margaret Atwood



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“This is the solstice, the still point of the sun, its cusp and midnight, the year’s threshold and unlocking, where the past lets go of and becomes the future; the place of caught breath...”

–Margaret Atwood

December 21st is Winter Solstice.  
It is the shortest day of the year, and the longest night,  
but it is also the day that ushers in the light.  
Indigenous peoples everywhere observe the Winter Solstice.  
It is the day that the sun is the furthest from the equator.  
Their spiritual foundation lies in the natural world of connection  
and Solstice is a time to honour and acknowledge  
the natural patterns of our universe and existence.  
It is part of the inter-connected cycle of life, death and renewal.  
Solstice is an opportunity to gain perspective.

## Gathering Words

**Prayer Poem** Innkeeper, street vendor, wool weaver: all sleeping.  
Traveler, road watcher, bread baker: all dreaming.  
Carpenter, brick layer, clay potter: all dozing.  
Cold shepherd, star gazer, wise midwife: wide awake.

Young soldier, wise rabbi, landowner: all abed.  
Census staff, messengers, young children: all snoring.  
Important, powerful, the “normal”: they miss it.  
The outcast, the restless, the strange ones: they hear first.

Heartbroken, discarded, pushed away: still awake.  
Broken souls, groaning ones, frightened folk: open eyes.  
Mourning lives, empty chairs, lonely ones: let them see  
Christmas comes first for those who need the hope’s light most.

No tinsel, no label, no price tag: love comes down.  
For the lost, for the sad, for the hurt: love comes down.  
Through the tears, through the dark, through the grief: love comes down.  
Emmanuel, Prince of peace, Savior: Love and Light,  
Meet us here where we wait, wide awake and in need.  
(Rev. Robert Dean – composed December 15, 2022)

Tonight, we gather in darkness and silence  
*asking that both may be a friend to us.*

Asking that in the silence  
 we may find the words with which to speak our truth  
 and in the darkness  
 gain the clarity to see our lives aright.

***Tonight, we gather in darkness and silence  
 asking that both may be a friend to us.***

Asking that in the darkness  
 the light may shine the brighter  
 and in the silence  
 the age-old story ring more true.

***Tonight, we gather in silence and darkness  
 and we are not alone, others are with us  
 and so, we ask that each may be a friend to us  
 and we may prove a friend to all.***

***Tonight, we gather in darkness and silence.***

*Silence.*

Light looked down and saw darkness.

***I will go there said Light.***

*A candle is lit.*

The Word looked down and heard silence.

***I will go there said the Word.***

*A candle is lit.*

Peace looked down and saw anger.

***I will go there said Peace.***

*A candle is lit.*

Friendship looked down and saw loneliness.

***I will go there said Friendship.***

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*A candle is lit.*

Forgiveness looked down and saw regret.

***I will go there said Forgiveness.***

*A candle is lit.*

Love looked down and saw hatred.

***I will go there said Love.***

*A candle is lit.*

So the Lord of Light, the Word of Life, the Prince of Peace,  
the Friend of Outcasts, the Forgiver of Wrongs,  
the King of Love

***came down, and crept in beside us.***

**Carol**

Born in the Night

VU #95

***Born in the night, Mary's Child,  
a long way from your home;  
coming in need, Mary's Child,  
born in a borrowed room.***

***Clear shining light, Mary's Child,  
your face lights up our way;  
light of the world, Mary's Child,  
dawn on our darkened day.***

***Truth of our life, Mary's Child,  
you tell us God is good;  
yes, it is true, Mary's Child,  
shown on your cross of wood.***

***Hope of the world, Mary's Child,  
you're coming soon to reign;  
saviour of all, Mary's Child,  
walk in our streets again.***

Before that stable birth, an angel,  
 appearing in a dream to Joseph,  
 assured him that the child Mary carried in her womb  
 was of God, that he would be the one  
 long promised Emmanuel, God with us.

***God with us  
 not sometimes but all times.  
 God with us  
 not in some circumstances;  
 but in all places and every situation.  
 God with us  
 not only cradled in Bethlehem's manger;  
 but strung up on a Roman cross.  
 God with us  
 even in – especially in – times of abandonment, loneliness,  
 grief, disappointment, defeat, despair, anger, guilt, or fear.***

Let us hear the stories of God with us...

Doubtless, like all of us, he was shaped by his earliest experiences – born on the road, they barely got there in time, the refugee years in Egypt, their return to Nazareth – humdrum and humble, obscure and ordinary – never really at home, until one day the restlessness returned and he set off south to be baptized by John.

Then, after his wilderness testing and trial, back to wander the villages of Galilee.

Not much to show for those years. His last week says it all – borrowed donkey, borrowed room, borrowed tomb.

No place to call his own, dependent on others – some welcoming and friendly, others curious, even suspicious, some outright hostile. Rich, poor, powerful, insignificant, self-righteous or sinful – it didn't matter.

Once, when someone said they'd go with him, he laughed and said: "Foxes go home to their dens, and birds to their roosts; but I don't know where I'll lay my head tonight."

From village to village he wandered. One day, on the eve of the Sabbath he arrived in Nazareth and in the morning, as was his custom, he went to the synagogue – the meeting place.

### **Luke 4:16b-21 and Matthew 13:54-58**

So, for a time, he made the lakeshore village of Capernaum his base. It was there that he made friends with some of the fishermen, and, after healing a man in the synagogue one Sabbath morning went and ate at Simon Peter's house. There, too, he looked up one day as a hole

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appeared in the roof above him and four friends lowered a paralyzed man down into the room, full of those who'd gathered to hear him teach. He forgave the man's sins and told him to get up, and take his bed roll with him. That caused quite a stir – forgiving sins! All these things roused the suspicions of the Pharisees – those who kept the religious law with the utmost stringency and strictness, and demanded that others do the same. They said he was mad, crazy, demon possessed. Others disagreed. Wherever he went, whatever he did or said, even at the mention of his name arguments broke out.

### **John 10:19-21**

News spread to his family, reports of healings and teachings. They couldn't believe their ears, he was an embarrassment, a danger to himself and others – a danger to them. They came to take him back to Nazareth.

### **Matthew 12:46-50**

But Jesus refused to stop there were no limits to his reaching out to people. He even befriended the compromised and hated tax collectors.

### **Mark 2:13-17**

A short boat row west along the lake from Capernaum the hills form a natural amphitheatre. Early one morning, he asked his fishermen friends to row him there. Seeing them leave, a large crowd followed along the shoreline – more than 5,000 of them. There he taught them, all through the long day, while they listened in rapt wonder. Then he fed them, he fed them all with five barley loaves and two dried fish gifts from a young boy. The crowd loved it. The next Sabbath back in the synagogue in Capernaum he tried to explain the significance of what he'd done.

### **John 6:58-61, 66-68**

**Carol**

All Poor Ones and Humble

VU #68 (verse 1)

***All poor ones and humble, and all those who stumble,  
come hastening, and feel not afraid;  
for Jesus, our treasure, with love past all measure,  
in lowly poor manger was laid.  
Though wise men who found him laid rich gifts around him,  
yet oxen they gave him their hay,  
and Jesus in beauty accepted their duty; contented in manger he lay.  
Then hast we to show him the praises we owe him;  
our service he ne'er can despise;***

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***whose love still is able to show us that stable,  
where softly in manger he lies.***

It wasn't just fishermen, tax collectors, outcasts Jesus tried to befriend. He never said no to an invitation or to a meal – why would he? Even some of the Pharisees asked him to grace their gatherings – though not always with the best of motives.

Suspicious ran deep. Prejudices even deeper.

### **Luke 7:36-41, 44b-48**

But it wasn't always such a cold and hostile gathering. There were times and places and people with whom he could let down his guard. Relaxed moments of genuine intimacy, and deepened relationship. Journeying to Jerusalem they came to the village of Bethany.

### **Luke 10:38b-42**

The two sisters – so different, yet so alike in their love of him – had a brother, Lazarus. The friendship he offered Jesus was the best of all. And, as their friendship grew this became clear to everyone. Whenever Jesus visited Jerusalem, he spent the nights with them in Bethany.

One day, back to Galilee, a messenger, sent by the sisters found him, and said "Lord, he whom you love is ill." Lazarus ill, seriously ill, with a sickness unto death. How could he go? To return to Jerusalem was to court disaster, to put himself at risk. How could he not go? These were people he loved, the people who had given him their love, the one he loved most of all.

### **John 11:17, 20-36**

No one knew better than Jesus, the risks one takes when one loves another and allows another to love them back. But, it wasn't all tears and sadness. He welcomed times of laughter, knew simple pleasures, found moments of delight, took joy where he could find it. No better place than in the company of children.

### **Mark 10:13 -16**

No stranger to humour – in the stories he told, the lessons he tried to get across, in the middle of an argument – sometimes subtle wordplays, sometimes broad, almost slapstick. Always with a purpose.

### **Luke 9:46-48**

**Carol**

All Poor Ones and Humble

VU #68 (verse 1)

*All poor ones and humble, and all those who stumble,  
 come hastening, and feel not afraid;  
 for Jesus, our treasure, with love past all measure,  
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 and Jesus in beauty accepted their duty; contented in manger he lay.  
 Then hast we to show him the praises we owe him;  
 our service he ne'er can despise;  
 whose love still is able to show us that stable,  
 where softly in manger he lies.*

These are by no means all the stories of the One who came to be God with Us. We're no place near the end and if we told them all we'd be here all night and most of tomorrow. But these are the stories for here and now. Here and now God is With Us. For in this One, God knew and knows us even in abandonment, loneliness, darkness, betrayal, despair, defeat, anger, guilt, and grief. To each of us he says:

**Matthew 5:3-10**

Blessed are you the poor in spirit, for yours is the kingdom of heaven.  
 Blessed are you who mourn, for you will be comforted.  
 Blessed are you the meek, for you will inherit the earth.  
 Blessed are you who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for you will be filled.  
 Blessed are you the merciful, for you will receive mercy.  
 Blessed are you the pure in heart, for you will see God.  
 Blessed are you the peacemakers, for you will be called children of God.  
 Blessed are you who are persecuted for righteousness' sake and for justice,  
 for yours is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are we, not despite of, but because of.

**Lighting Candles in the Dark**

We light four candles tonight in honour of our loved ones. We light one for our grief, one for our courage, one for our memories, and one for our love.



9. ***This candle represents our grief. We own the pain of losing loved ones, of dreams that go unfulfilled, of hopes that evaporate in despair.***

*Silence.*

***This candle represents our courage. It symbolizes the courage to confront our sorrow, to comfort each other, to share our feelings honestly and openly with each other, and to dare to hope in the midst of pain.***

*Silence.*

***This candle represents our memories. For the times we laughed together, cried together, were angry with each other or overjoyed with each other. We light this candle for the memories of caring and joy we shared together.***

*Silence.*

***This candle represents our love. The love we have given, and the love we have received. The love that has gone unacknowledged and unfelt, and the love that has been shared in times of joy and sorrow.***

*Silence.*

You are invited to come forward to light one of the tealight candles which represents your burdens, griefs, sorrows, all those things that make Christmas a difficult time for you. You may speak the name or the event if you wish to do so. When you have lighted your candle or candles you may return to your seat.

## **Hymn**

In the Quiet Curve of Evening

VU #278

***In the quiet curve of evening, in the sinking of the days,  
in the silky void of darkness, you are there.  
In the lapses of my breathing, in the space between my ways,  
in the crater carved by sadness, you are there.  
You are there, you are there, you are there.***

***In the rests between the phrases, in the cracks between the stars,  
in the gaps between the meaning, you are there.  
In the melting down of endings, in the cooling of the sun,  
in the solstice of the winter, you are there.  
You are there, you are there, you are there.***

***In the mystery of my hungers, in the silence of my rooms,  
in the cloud of my unknowing, you are there.  
In the empty cave of grieving, in the desert of my dreams,  
in the tunnel of my sorrow, you are there.  
You are there, you are there, you are there.***

**Longest Night**Ann Weems, from *Kneeling In Bethlehem*

The Christmas Spirit  
is that hope  
which tenaciously clings  
to the hearts of the faithful  
and announces  
in the face  
of any Herod the world can produce  
and all the inn doors slammed in our faces  
and all the dark nights of our souls  
that with God  
all things are possible,  
that even now  
unto us  
a child is born!

**A Blessing for the Longest Night**

All throughout these months  
as the shadows have lengthened,  
this blessing has been gathering itself,  
making ready,  
preparing for this night.

It has practiced walking in the dark,  
traveling with its eyes closed,  
feeling its way by memory  
by touch  
by the pull of the moon even as it wanes.

So believe me when I tell you  
this blessing will reach you  
even if you have not light enough  
to read it;  
it will find you even though you cannot  
see it coming.

You will know the moment of its arriving  
by your release of the breath you have held so long;  
a loosening of the clenching in your hands,  
of the clutch around your heart;

11. a thinning of the darkness  
that had drawn itself around you.

This blessing does not mean  
to take the night away  
but it knows its hidden roads,  
knows the resting spots along the path,  
knows what it means to travel  
in the company of a friend.

So when this blessing comes,  
take its hand. Get up.  
Set out on the road you cannot see.

This is the night when you can trust  
that any direction you go,  
you will be walking toward the dawn.  
— Jan Richardson

“This is the solstice, the still point of the sun, its cusp and midnight, the year’s threshold and unlocking, where the past lets go of and becomes the future; the place of caught breath...”  
— Margaret Atwood

It is true - tonight is the longest night, but tomorrow the day grows longer as the sun shines a bit more, growing stronger minute by minute. From here on out, the light is coming. The turning of this year is here.

I leave you with this blessing as a sign and symbol of the hope that is arriving even now. Indeed, “this is the night when you can trust that any direction you go, you will be walking toward the dawn.”

**Carol**

Still, Still, Still

VU #47 (verses 1 and 2)

***Still, still, still: the night is calm and still.  
The Christ-child in his crib lies sleeping,  
angels round him watch are keeping.  
Still, still, still: the night is calm and still.***

***Sleep, sleep, sleep: sweet Jesus, softly sleep,  
while Mary sings and gently holds you,  
safely in her arms enfolds you.  
Sleep, sleep, sleep: sweet Jesus, softly sleep.***

**Carol**

Silent Night

VU #67 (verses 1 and 3)

***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!  
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.***

The Pastoral Visitation Ministry at Fairlawn provides support and compassion for those who from time to time experience difficulty in their lives. If you would like to speak or arrange a meeting with a member of our team, please email [pastoralcare@fairlawnavenueunited.ca](mailto:pastoralcare@fairlawnavenueunited.ca).

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