

**Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa
December 24, 2024 – 10:00 am service**

This Sunday combined both the fourth Sunday of Advent and Christmas Eve.

The theme of the service was the symbols of Christmas, starting with a reading from *A Gift from St Francis*, by Joanna Cole and Michele Lemieux, which told the story of the first crèche scene.

The other symbols were shared as reflections, with scripture and singing.

Evergreen/Christmas Tree

Long before the beginning of Christianity, plants and trees that remained green all year had a special meaning for people who experienced the winter. Just as people today decorate their homes during the festive season with pine, spruce, and fir trees, many ancient peoples hung evergreen boughs over their doors and windows.

It is a widely held belief that Martin Luther, the 16th-century Protestant reformer, first added lighted candles to a tree. According to a common version of the story, walking home one winter evening, Luther was awed by the stars twinkling amidst evergreens. To recapture the scene for his family, he erected a tree in the main room and wired its branches with lighted candles. In 1846, the popular royals, Queen Victoria and her German Prince, Albert, were sketched in the *Illustrated London News* standing with their children around a Christmas tree. Unlike the previous royal family, Victoria was very popular with her subjects, and what was done at court immediately became fashionable. The Christmas tree had arrived.

Electricity brought about Christmas lights, making it possible for Christmas trees to glow for days on end. With this, Christmas trees began to appear everywhere and having a Christmas tree in the home became a Christmas tradition, because they symbolize God's everlasting love. Hear the words of the prophet Hosea 14: selected verses

*The Lord says, "I will bring my people back to me.
I will love them with all my heart;...
I will answer their prayers and take care of them.
Like an evergreen tree I will shelter them;
I am the source of all their blessings."*

Stars

The Christmas star symbolizes the star of Bethlehem, which according to the Biblical story, guided the magi, or wise ones, to the baby Jesus. The star is also the heavenly sign of a prophecy fulfilled long ago and the shining hope for humanity. In the book of Genesis, God promised Abraham descendants, as numerous as the stars in the sky. And in the book of

Numbers, the prophet Balaam envisioned a future leader who would arise like a star from the heavens “I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near— still a star shall come...”

When Jesus was born, the gospel of Matthew tells us that the star of Bethlehem appeared, and it was that light that led the magi to Judea and to Bethlehem, and to the place where they found Jesus.

Matthew 2:7-11

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸ Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, ‘Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.’ ⁹ When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising,^[1] until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped,^[2] they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹ On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Candy Cane

Legend has it that in 1670, the cane shaped candy became historical when a choirmaster at the Cologne Cathedral in Germany bent the sugar-sticks into canes to appear as shepherd's hooks. The all-white candy canes were given out to children who attended the ceremonies. This became a popular tradition, and eventually the practice during church ceremonies which spread all over Europe and America.

The solid white sugar canes were on Christmas cards in the early 1900's. The first red and white striped candy canes were made at the turn of the 19th century. At the same time the first striped candy canes appeared, and candy makers added the peppermint flavor which quickly became a traditional flavor.

Another story tells that the candy cane is not a cane but the letter J for Jesus. The red stripes convey his holiness, the red his passion, and the green for everlasting life.

The two are not mutually exclusive: Jesus was known as the good shepherd, fulfilling the prophets' vision of a saviour who will lead the people of God like a good shepherd. So we hear some verses from John 10:14-15

Jesus said: am the good shepherd. As the Father knows me and I know the Father, in the same way I know my sheep and they know me. And I am willing to die for them. ¹⁶ There are other sheep which belong to me that are not in this sheep pen. I must bring them, too; they will listen to my voice, and they will become^[3] one flock with one shepherd.

Wreath

The wreath is circular, a never-ending symbol of eternal love and rebirth. The evergreen branches symbolize God's everlasting love for the world. The round shape reflects the round world and God's creation and love for the whole world – that round shape is also seen in the traditional Christmas balls we use to decorate.

The use of the wreath and candles during Advent are a longstanding European tradition that was originally adopted by Christians in the Middle Ages as part of their spiritual preparation for Christmas. There is an old story about a village priest who found his people so busy preparing for Christmas and travelling to Festive Markets that they did not heed the message of Advent, nor attend any worship events until Christmas Eve. He decreed that every family should remove one wheel off their wagon, to limit their travel. They should wind evergreen around the spokes, and light candles to mark the four weeks of waiting, and then celebrate the birth of Christ.

Imagine what that would look like in the 21st century! Having survived a pandemic Christmas, I think many of us appreciate both the opportunities to get together with others, AND the opportunity to stay home and reflect on how we might prepare our hearts, not just our houses or parties.

The prophet Isaiah reminds us of God's all-encompassing care:

Isaiah 40:21-22

Do you not know?

Have you not heard?

Has it not been told you from the beginning?

Have you not understood since the earth was founded?

*²² God sits enthroned above the circle of the earth,
and its people are like grasshoppers.*

*God stretches out the heavens like a canopy,
and spreads them out like a tent to shelter us.*

Mistletoe

Mistletoe is a parasitic plant, meaning it lives on the tree that it is attached to and, without the original plant, the mistletoe would die. Mistletoe has long been used as a symbol of love, and some believe that the Druids used mistletoe as a medicine and some claim that it could promote fertility. The berry of the mistletoe ripens in December, and the plant remains green, hence its appeal in wintertime. Because mistletoe could blossom even during the frozen winter, the Druids came to view it as a sacred symbol of vitality, and they administered it to humans and animals alike in the hope of restoring fertility.

The word *mistletoe* comes from the Old English *mistel* and *tan*, with *tan* meaning “twig” and *mistel* derived from an obsolete, Germanic-derived noun *mix*, meaning “filth” because the seeds of the plant are often spread through bird feces. Not very romantic, is it?

The origin of kissing under the mistletoe is shrouded in uncertainty, but it is believed the ancient Greeks celebrated the winter holiday of Kronia—a lively festival and one of the biggest of the year—with mistletoe and that may have started the tradition of kissing under it.

The kissing tradition we know appears to have first caught on among servants in England before spreading to the middle classes. As part of the early custom, people were allowed to steal a kiss from anyone caught standing under the mistletoe, and refusing was viewed as bad luck.

There is no mention of mistletoe in the bible, but there are lots of healing stories. In the book of Proverbs, the writer reminds us that God’s wisdom is the best medicine.

Proverbs 3:5-8

⁵ Trust in God with all your heart. Never rely on what you think you know. ⁶ Remember God in everything you do, and God will show you the right way. ⁷ Never let yourself think that you are wiser than you are; simply obey God and refuse to do wrong. ⁸ If you do, it will be like good medicine, healing your wounds and easing your pains.