



Bringing light · *Christmas dedication 2024*



Beloved person,

We hope that something will be awakened in you whilst reading this booklet. At Christmas, we celebrate the birth of a child. He had the ability to show people what it means to take responsibility for increasing what is good.

The Christmas story appeals to our imagination. What if I had been Mary? Or a shepherd? Or the child with a special task, there in the stable? We can connect our own life story with the Christmas story and with the text in this booklet. They are recognisable stories of people who want to bring light.

At Christmas, we come together in a sacred atmosphere, to again feel that everyone can be the light of love. Each of us can contribute to the fulfilment of the hope of peace. It is needed more than ever.

Nanda Ziere and Marten van der Wal
Primary Pastors

O Come All Ye Faithful

Song

O come all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant
O come ye, o come ye to Bethlehem.
Come and behold him, born the King of
Angels:

O come let us adore Him,
O come let us adore Him,
O come let us adore Him,
Christ the Lord.

Sing, choirs of Angels, sing in exultation,
Sing all ye citizens of heaven above!
Glory to God in the highest:

O come let us adore Him,
O come let us adore Him,
O come let us adore Him,
Christ the Lord.

The year is coming to a halt, slowing down gradually or with squeaky brakes. We complete our work and lay down our daily activities for a while. We make time and space to devote ourselves to warmth and light. In the Netherlands, we light candles, gather wood for the fire and hang the glittering Christmas decorations on the tree. We create light in the darkness. Sometimes situations are unbearable. Nearby or afar, in our own lives or in the lives of others. Especially during this time, it can really get to you. We make time to find our equilibrium again and reach out to people that we love.

Imagine this: somewhere near your home, a bonfire has been lit. As an initiative to bring people together especially in these days. Because when it is cold and dark, we all long for the warmth and light such a fire can bring. Maybe you remember a time when you stood outside with friends beside such a bonfire? Perhaps someone told a story, you roasted marshmallows, or you sang together. This story is about just such a moment ...

On a wintery evening like this, people are standing outside around a fire. The flames flare up high into the dark sky. The wood crackles, the heat dissipating the chill of the night. People warm their hands.

There are men, women and children with unknown names. In the background,

a man stands, a little hunched over. There is a little girl with a big woolly hat that sags ever so slightly over her eyes. A young woman blows into her hands; she seems to disappear into a huge woollen scarf. All have their own story, just like each of us. Maybe you recognise something or someone. Maybe even something of your own. We could have been standing there ourselves.

Above them are the stars in the sky; behind them is darkness. They know: if the fire goes out, it will be incredibly cold. So they keep the fire burning, tell each other stories and sing together. Because that is what has been happening around fires since time immemorial.



Silent night

Song

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,
shepherds' quake at the sight;
glories stream from heaven afar,
heav'nly hosts sing Alleluia!
Christ the saviour is born!
Christ the saviour is born!

Silent night, holy night,
son of God, love's pure light;
radiance beams from Thy holy face,
with the dawn of redeeming grace,
Jesus, Lord at Thy birth,
Jesus, Lord at Thy birth

The Christmas story (1)

"Grandma, grandma!" The little girl's hat almost sinks over her eyes. She tugs on her grandmother's sleeve and asks: "Please, will you tell that story again about the donkey and the baby and the shepherds and the star?" The woman smiles and looks around. People nod encouragingly at her and then she begins.

"A long time ago, in a land far away from here, a man and a woman were travelling together to the place where they had been born. They were not the only ones. By horse and cart, by ox cart, on camels, on donkeys or simply walking, thousands of people were on their way to their birthplace. As Mary could have a baby at any moment, Joseph and Mary travelled by donkey."¹

Inner Peace

The people by the fire listen to the beginning of this familiar story as the woman tells it to her granddaughter. After that, they are silent. All you can hear in the background is the occasional bleating of some sheep somewhere in the distance and the crackling of the fire nearby. The young woman, wrapped in a big scarf, looks at the people around her and starts talking softly.

"I've been thinking a lot about inner peace in recent weeks. I'm looking for it, but: what will I find? Or: what do I want to find? And where? I am so busy every day, and with what? And what do I feel when I manage to become still? These questions alone, plus my search for the answers, create such a buzz in my head! Especially around Christmas, I long for inner peace. But I also want to get a Christmas tree -



in a timely fashion, preferably with roots and not too expensive - and make delicious food. And I want to divide my time between friends and family. These desires make me think ahead constantly about how I will manage to do all that later. I long for peace and quiet, but trying really hard to create inner peace doesn't seem to work.

Even now: I talk too much... To find the inner peace in myself, I bring to mind the image of a mother feeding her newborn child at night. The whole world is asleep, there are no outside stimuli. The mother picks up her child at the first sound. She slides the curtain aside and the glow of the moon provides just enough light. It is so pure. At a moment like this, life is meaning, you don't have to do anything for it.

To achieve inner peace myself, it helps me to take refuge in such an image. To let things be. To create breathing space."

Still, still, still (with Brahms' "Lullaby")

Song

Still, still, still, you can hear the falling snow.
For all is hushed, the world is sleeping,
holy star its vigil keeping.
Still, still, still, you can hear the falling snow.

Sleep, sleep, sleep, 'tis the eve of the baby's birth.
The night is peaceful all around you,
close your eyes, let sleep surround you.
Sleep, sleep, sleep, 'tis the eve of the baby's birth.

All the stars in the sky
Looked down where he lay,
little baby, tender child,
asleep on the hay.
Silent night, holy night,
all is calm, all is bright.
Guardian angels in the skies
looking down where he lies.

Still, still, still, he sleeps the night in peace,
The mother's arms enfolding,
warm and safe the child are holding.
Still, still, still, he sleeps the night in peace,
'tis the night of the baby's birth



Then an elderly man speaks up.

"You describe it beautifully. It is important to pay attention to what helps you to find inner peace, especially in these days. With a baby at night, this almost comes naturally; but I have to make a conscious effort. Silence alone is not enough for me to find inner peace, but it does give me the space I need to connect with the deepest feelings within myself. I often call that my soul. Especially towards the end of the year, I feel a need for that. And because I then practice making that connection, I experience moments of inner peace more often. For me, the connection with the transcendent, or the divine is important. Another thing that helps me, by the way, is staring into the fire, quietly watching the flames as we are doing right now. An excellent moment to read this poem to you."

Healing tranquillity

Poem / Song

Oh God, may there be peace in me,
I long for quiet deep in me.
When struggles rage throughout my life,
I'm overwhelmed by daily strife,
I long for that tranquillity,
that peace and quiet deep in me.

Whenever anger fills my heart,
I find the glow of love departs.
Give me the purity of mind
so that myself again I'll find.
Then I will feel that love again
to drive away despair and pain.

When peace once more returns to me
my origins, again, I'll see.
I then find peace within my soul,
my spirit's stronger, free and whole.
Yes, time and time again I know
the goodness of that peace once more.



The Christmas story (2)

It's getting late. Unnoticed, people have moved closer together. Some people throw fresh wood on the fire. It creates high flames.

"Grandma ..." The little girl looks up. "And then the baby was born, right?" "Yes," says the woman, "a very special child was born then. Joseph and Mary were both exhausted, but also very happy. And when Mary fell asleep after a while, Joseph went out to get water from the well. He looked up at the sky, where thousands of stars were shining. Right above the stable was the most beautiful star of all. A big, bright star. And suddenly, Joseph knew for certain: something very special had happened that night."¹

The star of Bethlehem

Song

Shining in the darkness it told us once of Him,
full of light and glory, the star of Bethlehem.
Wise men came to the stable to honour God,
so mild,
they bowed their heads before the newborn child.

For in that child there, so tender and so small,
God's love came nearer, revealed itself to all.
In him God's love had found once more
a dwelling place on earth,
a dwelling place on earth.

The woman takes her granddaughter's hand.
"And still, that age-old story is relevant,
and it is told all over the world every year.
Because even in these times, it is and remains
so important for light to be reborn. On this
night, so many people focus on love and
wish for peace. That must bring some good,
right?"

"Yes, I believe in that too," says a young
man. He steps forward and recites out of his
head, full of passion:



There needs to be people

Poem

... there needs to be people
Who light up suns
before the world is washed away.
People who fly summer kites
when it is icy winter
and who sprinkle confetti
among the snowflakes.
Those people are necessary.

There needs to be people
Who play the harmonica
sitting among the rubble.
There needs to be people
who stand on their chairs
to hang stars
in the mist.

Who make spring
From fallen leaves
and from fallen shadows,
light.

You know,
there needs to be people
who shout from the rooftops
that there is love
and wonder
when all those others are shouting:
"Everything is useless!"
Then they keep shouting:
"No, the world will not go under!"
And they see in every ending
a new beginning.²



Connection

The woman, who had been standing alone at the back all this time, walks forward and finds a spot close to the fire. She takes a deep breath and begins.

"What you just ended with - seeing in every ending a new beginning - for that I need to deeply feel that light can be re-created again and again. Because who amongst you has not said goodbye to people, to dreams, to health or to opportunities that you had been taking for granted previously? I did, and it made me feel alone. I was searching eagerly for a new beginning in the ending. For sparks of light in my darkness. At first, I waited for people to come to me. But at some point I thought: I can also look for that connection myself. That is also what the story of the soup stone is about. Do you know that story?"

Those around the fire shook their heads.

"My grandfather had such a stone and has told me the story many times. One day he was walking in a neighbourhood where there was a lot of poverty and loneliness. He had endured a long journey and was hungry. Looking through the windows, he saw that almost everyone sat alone in front of the television. He rang the doorbell at a house where two men were sitting at a table together. "I would like to make some soup," he said, "do you have a large pot for me?" Surprised, the men asked what he wanted to make soup from, as he had nothing on him. Then my grandfather took out a beautiful stone from his pocket and said, "This is a very special stone. A soup stone." The men did not immediately believe what he said, but they did have a large pot and water, and thought to themselves,

oh well, why not? Curious, they watched my grandfather carefully place the stone in the pot. When the water boiled, he said, "Now we should add a little salt." The man who lived in the house, got up and fetched some salt. "I also have a bay leaf," he said. "Good," my grandfather said. "And a piece of meat would make the soup even tastier." The other man said, "I have some meat at home." He got the meat and also brought some carrots. On the street, he met the neighbour who had leeks in her garden. And she knew a man further down the street who always had tins of beans in the house. And that man asked a student across the street if she also had something in the cupboard. And so everyone in the street brought something for the soup.

Moments later, there was a wonderful smell in the room. Plates and spoons were prepared,

chairs were gathered around. "The soup is ready," my grandfather said and scooped it into the bowls. The room was pleasantly crowded, there was chatter and laughter everywhere. And together they emptied the whole pot. Only the soup stone was left. My grandfather got up and wanted to leave. "You forgot your soup stone!" the student shouted." "You can keep it," he said, "you can use it to cook soup with it many more times, as long as you do it the way we did just now." And my grandfather left. Coming out of town, he looked for a nice round stone which he put in his pocket."

The woman looks around the circle of people for a moment. She walks to the pile of wood, grabs as many logs as she can carry and throws them on the fire. When she walks back, some people are waiting for her with open arms.

Reflection

Song

Whenever one gives what others need
and each then complements the other,
then God's creation finds fulfilment
revealed in glory here among us.

Each speaks in their own voice and way
to the highest in the other every day,
then it will not be left to tranquil dreams,
but peace will truly be within reach.

The Christmas story (3)

It got more crowded by the fire. The group that was scattered at first has gradually formed a circle. New people have also come, attracted by the warmth and light. Everyone arranged themselves so that all the people could fit in the circle. The little girl pulls her hat well over her ears and wraps her arms around her grandmother's waist.

"Grandma, now the shepherds come, right?" she asks. "Yes," replies her grandmother. "Now it's time for a maternity visit."

And she relates:

"On that night when the star was in the sky, there were shepherds sitting around a fire. Occasionally you could hear one of the sheep bleating, but otherwise it was quiet. Suddenly, an angel appeared beside the

flock. The shepherds were startled, but the angel said, "You need not be afraid. I have come to tell you something beautiful. A baby was born this night. That may not seem very special, but this child will bring peace. When he is older, he will help people. He will teach them what true friendship and love is." Then the shepherds left for Bethlehem. There they found Joseph and Mary and the baby who was lying in a manger.

Hope

A young man wearing sturdy boots and with a large backpack beside him takes a sip of water from his bottle and clears his throat. First another sip, and then he begins.

"The other day, I saw 10,000 pairs of children's shoes, side by side in a big square in my city.³ Can you picture it? Each pair represented a child who died in the war in Gaza. Their names rang out in that square, one by one: Aziz, Mohammed, Sofia ... I fell silent. I didn't want to look away. Their parents had envisaged a hopeful future together with them. I sometimes wonder if there is still hope with so much suffering in many places around the world. I want so badly to trust that things will work out. There, and also here nearby, when people no longer understand each other.

At times, I would almost give up on my ideal of wanting to work towards a more beautiful world. And then something very simple happens that shows me a glimpse of a different side. Someone at the checkout

says to me: 'Would you perhaps like to go first? Because you only have a few groceries and I have a full cart.'⁴ A small gesture, but it feels big and hopeful to me at such a moment. One person made all the difference to me. Simple, during an everyday activity like grocery shopping. It appeals to my own attitude: how connected am I to my fellow human beings and my environment?⁴ Without faith, I remain nailed to the ground. And without faith, no actions. I want to believe that the world can be more beautiful, more just, more peaceful and more humane. And that I can contribute to that in my own way."⁵

The boy falls silent. A man with grey curls and blushing cheeks goes to stand beside him and says:

"Let us, with our lives, pay tribute to the gentle forces in our world: the bridge builders, the light carriers, the extraordinary and beautiful souls who silently weave connections of humanity in this often-cruel world. The selfless and unsung heroes who offer strong counterforces in a world that is mostly at war with itself. They are the gentle whisperers of hope and peace. Look for them in the darkest places on this planet. Light your candle with their fire. Bring light to a dark and desperate world. No matter how hard it seems sometimes, be brave and seek the lost hero in your soul."

All the people are silent.



Die donker

(lyrics are Afrikaans, but freely translated as follows)

Video

In the dark corridor shines a light, but the flame is delicate and fragile.

And I yearned for springtime on my uncle's farm without electricity.

My aunt said, "My child, my child, love and moths are blind."

The flame is delicate and fragile, and it can disappear like a thief in the night.

Deep in the dark corridor I yearned for something.

I heard the wind sing, "Spring will bring love!"

I heard the day wither - it is only the sun disappearing.

And as the earth is turning, a rooster will crow again.

Late one evening, the night became like day as the storm erupted with all its force!
And I hid in the corridor, because I feared the electricity.

If darkness comes to fetch me,
and if the Lord does not look for me when the ozone layer perishes,
and falls into a chandelier of stars,
lay my heart to rest in KleinTambotieboom
and scatter my ashes on the Bushveld horizon!

Desire

The man with the grey curls throws a large block of wood on the flames with visible pleasure. As he dusts off his hands, he starts narrating again.

"In the dark, cold winter, who does not long for light and warmth? Fortunately, in the northern hemisphere, the sun is slowly but surely gaining strength again. That is why, around this time, people have been celebrating the winter solstice here for centuries. According to the Romans, it is the 'day of birth of the invincible sun', the victory of light over darkness. The days will - slowly, but surely - get longer and lighter again from now on. It is not for nothing that the birth of Jesus is celebrated just now. The story of Christmas reminds us of the age-old longing that light can also be created within us. It is about the realisation that you

yourself can be a carrier of light. And that by doing so, each in our own way, we make a positive contribution in this world. That is such a hopeful thought. I want to pass this on to you, because this poem has always given me hope. No matter how dark it was in my life."

The man takes a note from the inside pocket of his coat and reads:

Poem

Amid hatred I found within myself
an invincible love.
Amid tears, I discovered within myself
an invincible smile.
In the midst of the chaos, I found within myself
an invincible calm.
I realised, through it all,
That in the middle of winter, I found within myself
an invincible summer.
And that makes me happy.
Because it means that no matter how hard the world
pushes against me,
there is in myself something stronger, something better,
pushing back.⁶





Love shine a light

Song

Love shine a light in every corner of my heart
Let the love light carry, let the love light carry
Light up the magic in every little part
Let our love shine a light in every corner of our hearts

Love shine a light in every corner of my dreams
Let the love light carry, let the love light carry
Like the mighty river, flowing from the stream
Let our love shine a light in every corner of my dreams

And we're all gonna shine a light together
All shine a light to light the way
Brothers and sisters, in every little part
Let our love shine a light in every corner of our hearts

Bring light

The man now has a big smile on his face.

"Tonight, here by the fire, we hear the story of light, love and hope. We realise that light can always be created within us. Let's keep the fire of love burning together. When it gets dark, in whatever way, create light yourself. Even the smallest flame illuminates a dark room. Create light in words, actions, gestures. Don't think: I don't need to. Or: I can't do that. Because you can."⁷

It is already late. It has become a special evening, being together around the fire and connecting with so many people. People have smiles on their faces. The girl with the hat can hardly keep her eyes open anymore. It really is time to go home. Someone starts singing the song that sounds all over the world these days. The others sing along with

him. It is the song that unites them and us today: Glory to God. And as they sing it, they feel the importance of that essential connection with all the people who want to work for peace, with all the people who want to bring light, together.

Renewed promises

Song

Come, let us all rise and affirm how we want to live,
let us give thanks and renew our resolve to give,
inspired and more conscious than ever before
let sounds of our joy and love open heart's door.

Come, let us all rise as a sign we participate,
where we can, let us heal, together celebrate.
Anew and sincerely on this we rely:
our mutual promise that love will not die.



References

- ¹ Freely from *Het Kerstverhaal* (The Christmas Story) by Marianne Busser and Ron Schröder (2008, Uniboek | Het Spectrum).
- ² Toon Hermans, abridged version.
- ³ Initiative by the organisation Plant een olijfboom (Plant a olive tree) on 13 January 2024 in Amsterdam.
- ⁴ Freely from Weekly Letter no 19, 27 May 2024.
- ⁵ Inge Bos in The Current (summer 2023).
- ⁶ Albert Camus, *Retour à Tipasa* (1952) in *L'Été* (Les Essais LXVIII), Les Éditions Gallimard, 1954.
- ⁷ Freely from a LinkedIn post by Elise Kant on 22 May 2024.

Account of songs

- *Oh Come All Ye Faithful* – Classic Christmas carol
- *Still, still, still* (with Brahms' Lullaby) – Phillip Keveren
- *Healing Tranquillity* – Choir, song 15. In the Christmas dedication, this song is read as a poem.
- *The Star of Bethlehem* – Children's Choir, song 3.
- *Reflection* - English translation of the song *Overweging*, choir, song 61.
- *Die Donker* – André van der Merwe, performed by Stellenbosch University Choir.
- *Love shine a light* – Youth Choir, Part 2, song 22.
- *Renewed Promises* – Community choir, song 129.
- *Wood for the fire* – English translation of the Dutch translation of the song '*Holt veur op 't vuur*' by Daniël Lohues. From the album *Hout moet* (2011).
- *Glory to God* – see the online music library at apgen.nl

Additional materials and suggestions can be found at apgen.nl/kerstwijding



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