

**UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL
Wallace, Idaho**

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

December 13, 2020

Third Sunday of Advent

SONG *“Angels from the Realms of Glory”*

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

Good morning, my friends! And welcome to worship. This is the third Sunday of Advent, when we light the pink candle, the candle of joy. In a moment when so much around us seems dark, beginning with short days that are cloaked in clouds and fog, and continuing through unsettling times of hostility and division, as well as soaring numbers of the spread of the coronavirus, we come to light one more candle, to continue to watch for the light of Christ’s presence in our midst, and to celebrate the joy that is ours because of God’s amazing love for us. We come to hear again God’s word for us and for our lives, and to offer ourselves as reflectors of God’s light into our world. Come, let us worship God.

SETTING UP THE CRECHE

As we gather, we pause again at the creche, aware that Joseph has arrived and taken his place. If he seems awkward and unsure of himself, it’s because he is. None of this is unfolding the way that he anticipated, and now... well, now he isn’t sure which end is up, much less what’s happening or why, and what, if any, role there is for him to play. One minute he thinks the future is clear: he and Mary will get married, settle down, and hopefully have a family; he’ll carry on with his work as a carpenter, and has dreamed of being able to pass the business along to his son. But now? Who knows? Now that he knows he has no right to even expect the child to call him Dad, all bets are off. Should he even be here?

Being a step-parent is unlike any other role there is. And if parenting is filled with unknowns and things you can’t control, multiply that times ten and you might be getting close. The first fact of life that you have to get clear on is that there is someone ahead of you, and you can never pretend to be the Dad or the Mom. That role’s taken. And no matter what that other relationship looks like, it’s got baggage. Whether the real parent is the top ranked best parent ever or a walking disaster; a presence that was cut short and will forever be grieved or an ongoing presence at every game, concert, science fair and spelling bee, or a ghost who went AWOL before the baby saw the nursery for the first time, accept the facts up front and get on it. Get on with your job, which is getting to know and growing to love this child. Figure out some of the details together, like what they’re going to call you, and let love lead you from there. And when you get right down to it, isn’t that what every relationship should be about? Following love’s lead?

Since Joseph is here, it would appear he’s in. Who is he to complain that the real Dad’s God? And even if the baby doesn’t have his nose or chin, there are still going to be things he can do and ways he can help, starting with keeping him and his mother safe. Eventually, maybe they’ll even get out to the shop so he can introduce him to the smell and feel of wood.

SONG *“Gentle Joseph, Joseph Dear”*

“Gentle Joseph, Joseph dear, stay with me, for the baby’s near;
God will surely your goodness hear, as you will love this newborn child,” says Mary.

“Gladly, Mary, Mary mine, I will cradle the child divine;
Here will heaven and earth combine, for you will bear God’s child, O dearest Mary.”

“Peace to all, and God’s good will,” heaven and earth with this song will fill;
Soon will God, in the evening still, be born in Bethlehem, the child of Mary.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION (in unison)

O Holy God, our Advent waiting is a confession. We wait for a Messiah because the proud are still powerful, the mighty are still exalted, and hungry people stand unheard at the door. We wait for your incarnation in human form because we have not recognized you in our sister, we have not loved you in our brother, we have not served you in our neighbor. In the stillness of Advent love and light, heal us and make us new through the good tidings of your presence in our lives. Amen.

ASSURANCE OF GRACE

We do not wait for forgiveness; it is a promise kept for every day, a light shining in every darkness, the breath under any song of justice. (Maren C. Tirabassi, *Touch Holiness*)

LIGHT THE ADVENT CANDLES

Iver and Lou Larson

In times like ours, joy can be hard to summon.

In times like ours, joy can be hard even to imagine.

And still the season beckons us to make merry.

And yet the scriptures tell us to “rejoice always.”

It sounds almost ludicrous.

It borders on outrageous.

How can we rejoice under the burden of so much injustice?

How can we rejoice under the pall of so much death?

It’s enough to make those who are alone feel lonely

It’s enough to make the grieving or depressed feel sadder still.

But ours is not a joy dependent on circumstances.

Our joy is not derived from measurable outcomes.

Advent invites us to rejoice in God’s goodness.

Even as we watch and wait and aren’t sure what’s coming.

Advent invites us to rejoice in all the ways God’s love is with us.

Even as it empowers us to be true to all we feel.

It won’t be long now ’til the blessed babe is born.

We rejoice in the true light shining its way into the world.

The third candle is lit.

ALL: For such a time as this, may our joy be full.

SCRIPTURE READING John 1:6-8, 19-28

Lou Larson

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?” He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, “I am not the Messiah.” And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the prophet?” He answered, “No.” Then they said to him, “Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” He said,

“I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness,

‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’”

as the prophet Isaiah said.

Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, “Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?” John answered them, “I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.” This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

SERMON

Our Conference Minister, Mike Denton, recently told a story about the spring of his final year of seminary. It was the spring of 1999, and he was preparing to graduate from Chicago Theological Seminary when he and his classmates were given an opportunity to question a panel of members of the faculty they had studied with. Ask any question you want, and we’ll do our best to answer it. What he told us about was the question that one student asked, which was: what do you think the biggest challenge of the next millennia will be? He reflected that many of the answers given made sense then and have proven true over the course of the past twenty plus years. In commenting on the biggest challenge of the next millennia, faculty members named racism, and income inequality, and climate change, religious intolerance and religious conflict. But the one that has stuck with him the most is one he really didn’t understand at the time, and it was a one word answer. In response to the question of what would be the biggest challenge of the next millennia, one faculty member said, grandiosity.

I’ve had to think about it a bit, and relisten to Mike’s words several times, but I think it fits. We live in a time when people are encouraged to be grandiose, to be larger than life, to promote themselves and how good things are in their lives, to create an impression of who they are (photo shop the photos if need be) and then splash it about for the world to see – on social media, in politics, and in countless other parts of our culture. People who don’t appear strong enough or articulate enough don’t stand a chance against the strong and powerful, the beautiful and elegant. Or as a different preacher, Lutheran pastor David Lose said: “From the constant self-expression and self-aggrandizement encouraged, promoted, and even demanded by social media to the posturing of too many political candidates as the only person who can do the job, we are living during a distinctly ego-centric, if not full-on narcissistic, time in our culture.” (David Lose, “Joyful Sacrifice”, *In the Meantime*)

John didn’t get that memo. Or maybe that memo wasn’t circulating back around the year 25 when he and Jesus were out and about. In today’s reading from the Gospel of John, we heard about a swarm of priests and Levites swirling around John, asking him over and over, who are you? Not only was he not trying to promote himself as the biggest and best thing to hit the River Jordan since Moses’ stick, but he began all of his answers by telling people who he was not: I am not the Messiah, I am not Elijah, and no, not a prophet either. When they pushed on, he pushed back and said, I’m the opening act but not the one you came to see. I’ve come out to get people ready and receptive to the one who is coming after me. I’m not here to make a name for myself, but to bear witness to the one who is still on the way. We can also back up to the very opening verses of today’s reading where the writer used different imagery to say the same thing, and that’s when the text says that John came as a witness of testify to the light. He wasn’t the light, but he came to testify to the light.

As I read and ponder this text, I find myself drawn to John’s assignment. You may recall that I’ve been known to rail against the weirdo, but this gospel doesn’t push the wacky part of his story on us. In terms of this text, I resonate: I am no Messiah, I’m not Elijah, not a prophet and very far from being the light. So what does that leave? That leaves the task of pointing toward the one who is all of those things, witnessing to, drawing attention to, reflecting and highlighting. You can disagree with me if you want, but I hear it as a role for all of us to play.

So how do we do that? Some of us are more inclined to witness with words than others of us, and that’s okay. Talking about our faith and about the good things God has done and is doing in us and in the

world has a place, and I hope we don't shy away from it too much. But we also witness with our lives and our actions, living in ways that express how the love of God and the light of Christ have made a difference in who we are and how we treat other people. In the kindness we show, the patience we display, the forgiveness we offer. What do you think people witness in your life – or in mine – or in our worship? What are we telling them about the real deal, the Messiah whose birth we're preparing to celebrate? Or are we only talking about ourselves?

As I was reading and writing about Hanukkah this week, I was reminded of one particular candle in the menorah. We talk a lot about Hanukkah as an eight-day, eight-candle celebration, but a lot of pictures of menorahs display nine candles. The ninth candle, the *shamash*, is the one parked in the middle and it's used to light the other 8 candles, one night at a time. I'm drawn to that image and to the question I saw someone pose: how can you be a *shamash*, a helper candle, and help others shine the light within? Because it's the holidays, I've seen and heard a lot of stories this week about people who are trying to do just that, to shine the light and help people find their way. Steve Hartman revisited his annual story about a Secret Santa, who this year intends to give away about \$100,000 to essential workers who have particularly large needs. I also saw a story of a Florida business man who paid the utility bill for 114 families at risk of having their lights turned off. Incredible stories about wonderful kindnesses, but I have to tell you that the one that tugged on me the hardest was out of a small town in northern Minnesota that Ben and I occasionally pass through. Somebody pulled up to the Dairy Queen drive through in Brainerd, MN and as folks sometimes do, said they wanted to pay for the meal for the car behind them. The car behind them did the same, and somewhere, a trend developed until car by car, they kept the generosity going for 2 and a half days, more than 900 cars – each one buying dinner for the people behind them. There is no grandiosity in that chain of generosity, but a whole lot of *shamash*, of witness, of reflecting a light that has shone in the darkness, a darkness that can never put it out.

John knew who he was not. He didn't try to make himself out to be more or better than he was, and he certainly did nothing to make himself the point of the story. Instead, he witnessed to the one who was coming after him; he testified to the light and love of Christ, and he served as a helper candle, shining just enough light that others could see their way to the light of the world. My friends, may the same be said of us. In our living and in our loving, let us prepare the way of Christ's coming. Amen.

SONG “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel”

Indy Behrendt, Flute

O come, O come, Emmanuel, And ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in loney exile here, Until the Son of God appear.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel Shall come to thee, O Israel!

O come, Thou Dayspring, come and cheer Our spirits by Thine advent here;
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night, And death's dark shadows put to flight.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel Shall come to thee, O Israel!

RECEPTION OF NEW MEMBERS

I am very excited this morning to welcome six people as members of our church. If this were any other time, we'd all stand together up front, so you could see their faces and they could see yours, so we could ask them some questions and enter into covenant face to face. As we're all painfully aware, this isn't anything close to a normal time, and rather than put them off, we've decided to go ahead today with words of welcome and blessing. I rejoice that even in these days when we're not able to be in the same place at the same time, they are finding a place in our worship and fellowship, and that together we bear witness to the truth that our church is not closed, but gathering differently: under the umbrella of God's abiding love, joined together by the pulsing presence of the Holy Spirit, walking in faith alongside Jesus in the community that he has gathered.

You saw two of our new members earlier, when Iver and Lou Larson lit the Advent candle. Iver and Lou live in Kellogg and have been worshipping with us for quite awhile. You may remember my telling you a few months ago that when Lou was at the church to read scripture, she learned that we needed to paint our kitchen ceiling, and immediately signed the two of them up to take care of the project. One day, we'll be able to do things together... They were previously members of a United Methodist Church in Colorado, and we're very pleased to welcome them among us.

We also welcome Alice Holmes and Geoff O'Meara as Associate Members. They began to worship with us when Trinity Episcopal Church closed, and have quickly made themselves at home here. They split their time between Wallace and Gainesville, Florida, spending summers and winters here where they can enjoy skiing, hiking and many of the gifts of north Idaho. They've stepped forward to represent us and serve actively with the Food Bank, spending countless hours behind the scenes sorting and shelving groceries. Because they have deep and long ties to the Episcopal Church and are members of a church in Gainesville, we welcome them as Associate Members.

And finally, we're thrilled to welcome Rick and Gretchen Ehram. Gretchen grew up in this church and has always felt like she was a member, which may be your perception as well. They have a home in Seattle as well as one here, and have been spending more and more time in Wallace – even before COVID brought them east in the hope of lowering their risk. Ironically, at the moment, Rick is in town and Gretchen is in Seattle, but that sort of reflects the shape of their lives. It's very good to make official what has been an informal tie for a very long time, so welcome, Gretchen and Rick.

As soon as we are able to gather in one place for worship, we will say our welcome more personally. And once we can again eat and drink together, we'll gather around a cake, because how else do you make a covenant visible? But for now, and for today, we give thanks for the ways in which Christ is even now knitting us together as one in the Body of Christ.

PRAYER REQUESTS

Lord, please remind us that we still need to be vigilant against the complacency of how long it's taking to "get back to normal".

Prayers for support of all world leader doing good work. We need unity!

Show yourself to our hearts in this season of YOU!

PASTORAL PRAYER

Let us pray:

Holy God, we rejoice to welcome Gretchen and Rick, Geoff and Alice, Iver and Lou to our community. By your grace, knit us together into one fellowship of witness and worship, service and prayer, learning and outreach. Open us to learn from them and their experiences, that they might also learn from us, and together we can grow in faith and friendship. We do indeed look forward to days when we can sit side by side at table as well as worship, and until then ask you to lead us into covenant with each other and with you. Help us to live in the power and grace of your Spirit, and to so love each other that we may have among us the same mind that was in Christ Jesus, and that our life together might bear witness to you and draw others to the light of your love.

As we make our way through the season of Advent and these days of preparing to celebrate Jesus' birth, we bring before you the unfamiliar assortment of how it looks and feels this year. There is so much that we miss, starting with carols and handbells, parties and concerts. And there is also much that surrounds us with beauty and promise, comfort and joy. Help us to be gentle with ourselves and others, offering a helping light where we can, extending kindness, reaching out, opening doors, paying it forward in the currency of love. In all that we do, ground us in your presence, focus our attention on Jesus' birth, fill us with wonder at your astounding decision to come and live among us.

We continue to pray for our country and for our world. We pray for all who are sick, fighting cancer, recovering from transplants, facing surgery, battling COVID. We pray especially for medical personnel who give more than any of us can comprehend. Strengthen them through these roughest days, and lead us all to a place where they can know rest and we can begin to heal. We give deep thanks for the creation, production and distribution of vaccines, even as we pray for patience and vigilance that we not relax more than is wise. Carry us through the days and months ahead, and help us make choices that carry others through as well. We ask your sheltering, protective love on all those facing into the reality of our economic distress, and ask you to show us what we can do to help feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, lighten the load of the burdened, care for all your people. We give thanks for every sign of cooperation and compassion, wisdom and courage, strength and gentleness, humility and leadership. Bind us together, O God, that we might live and move, love and serve as one people, your beloved people, here and throughout the world.

Hear our prayers, spoken and unspoken. And hear us as we pray together the prayer that Jesus taught, saying: Our Father...

PRAYER OF OUR SAVIOR (debts)

OFFERING

I've talked the past couple of weeks about opportunities to give a special Christmas gift for either the Wallace Christmas Fund or the Food Bank – or both. Several of you have responded generously to this invitation, and I want to repeat it one more time. The Christmas Fund raises money and collects needs and wishes for children in our community, and then provides gifts to those who otherwise might have little on Christmas morning. And the Food Bank works throughout the year to provide groceries as well as food vouchers to people in our communities who otherwise would go without. They work hard during the holidays to enlarge the routine donations, in the hope of increasing the sense of celebration for those who have little. If you would like to participate in these offerings, get it to the church this week, marked clearly for how you would like it directed. The Treasurer will write checks next weekend, so that your gifts will be on their way before Christmas.

This is a season in which we celebrate God's overwhelming generosity to us in coming to live among us in the birth of Jesus, and much of our celebration is marked by generosity as we give gifts and express our love to others. Thank you for the times and ways that your generosity includes the needs and wounds of our community as well as the ministry and operation of our church. Together, we serve God, and together, we build up the ministry of Christ's church. Thanks be to God.

SONG *"It Came upon the Midnight Clear"*

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, goodwill to all, 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 the wing:
O rest beside the weary road And hear the angels sing.

BENEDICTION

Let us depart this day, filled with the gifts we need to join in God's life-sustaining, hope-giving, light shining work in the world;

Let us bear witness to God's presence and reflect Christ's light

Let us go and share God's joyful vision of beauty and justice in this world God has created and continues to love.

Let us go, in hope, peace and joy In the name of the One who is coming,

Amen