

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

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

November 29, 2020

First Sunday of Advent

SONG *“O Come, O Come, Emmanuel”*

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

Good morning! And Happy New Year! I wonder what today feels like to you: the end of the Thanksgiving weekend, the beginning of the Christmas season, one more day in the endless slog that is 2020; if you're feeling especially crazy, maybe all of those things at once? It's all real and true, depending on what you focus on and how you orient your thinking; so let me add one more option to the mix. According to the traditional calendar of the Church, today is the first Sunday of Advent, which is the first day of a brand new year in the life of Christ's Church. A day to begin the journey toward the birth of Jesus. A day to begin to watch and wait for signs of God's presence among us and God's approach into our lives and our world. A day to begin – again – to prepare our hearts and homes, our lives and our world to receive God.

SETTING UP THE CRECHE

Because this is a year full to overflowing with things that are different than most years, I want to add one more change. Most years, when we decorate the sanctuary for the holidays, the creche is set up over on the side and a spot light shines on it whenever we gather. It's beautiful and striking – and I've never called much attention to it; I honestly don't know how much you focus on it. This year, I want us to put the pieces in place slowly, over the weeks between here and Christmas, and even beyond to Epiphany, so we can reflect together on who's there and why and what, if any, difference that may make to us.

We begin with the place of Jesus' birth. You get to imagine where that might have been; all the gospel writers told us was that there was no place for them in the inn. So where do you think our nativity is set? A barn, a shed, maybe even a cave. The chicken coop, horse stall, hay barn. The place out back where no one else will stay. The cluttered garage where boxes can be tossed out of the way, tires stacked, bikes rearranged, enough space cleared for the couple to get off their feet and out of the night.

I read in a short story of a woman who offered hospitality to a homeless man by letting him sleep under her porch. When I arrived at the book club and launched my indignation by proclaiming that under the porch bears no resemblance to hospitality, the woman beside me said she'd done that, given a homeless person permission to lie down and sleep. I quietly wondered what I'd ever offered anyone in need of a place to get off their feet and out of the night.

A place of shelter and respite. An opening from which to extend kindness. An empty space where world weary travelers can rest and a new life begin. What do we need to clear away, free up, make available if we seek to invite God in and create a home for love?

SONG *“People, Look East”*

People, look east, the time is near of the crowning of the year.
Make your house fair as you are able, trim the hearth and set the table.
People look east and sing today: Love, the Guest, is on the way.

Furrows, be glad though earth is bare, one more seed is planted there.
Give up your strength the seed to nourish, that in course the flower may flourish.
People look east and sing today: Love, the Rose, is on the way.

Stars, keep the watch. When night is dim, one more light the bowl shall brim,
Shining beyond the frosty weather, bright as sun and moon together.
People look east and sing today: Love, the Star, is on the way.

OPENING PRAYER (in unison)

Silently and gently, falling and failing, changing and resting, seeking you, Lord... We watch, we wait, we dream, we pray... for the earth to renew, for our hearts to soften, for your grace to cover us, for your justice to pour out, for time and space to listen, for courage to act. On the edge of Advent, we sit with you... we pause... we hurt... we repent... we rage... When will it be? Will it ever be? Come quickly, Lord Jesus. Amen.

(Rev. Deborah Vaughn, <https://revgalblogpals.org/2017/12/01/friday-prayer-on-the-edge-of-advent/>)

LIGHTING OF THE FIRST ADVENT CANDLE

Katie, Violet and Josie Bauer

For such a time as this,

God's Love becomes flesh. Again.

For such a time as this,

A child is born to us. Again.

Though the night of our despair long lingers,

There comes a Light no shadow can overcome.

Though our hearts ache for a justice we cannot yet see,

The Holy One works for those who watch and wait.

Though distanced from one another and well-acquainted with death,

Our Deliverer draws near to bring us new life.

No ear has yet heard, no eye has yet seen God's glory fully revealed.

And so we wait.

We know not when or where or how our Hope will be made manifest.

And so we watch.

The One who loves us does not slumber.

So let us keep awake.

Hope of the nations, come.

Hope of our hearts, come.

The first candle is lit.

For such a time as this, kindle our hope.

SCRIPTURE READING Isaiah 64:1-9

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,
so that the mountains would quake at your presence—
as when fire kindles brushwood
and the fire causes water to boil—
to make your name known to your adversaries,
so that the nations might tremble at your presence!
When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect,
you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.
From ages past no one has heard,
no ear has perceived,

no eye has seen any God besides you,
 who works for those who wait for him.
You meet those who gladly do right,
 those who remember you in your ways.
But you were angry, and we sinned;
 because you hid yourself we transgressed.
We have all become like one who is unclean,
 and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth.
We all fade like a leaf,
 and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.
There is no one who calls on your name,
 or attempts to take hold of you;
for you have hidden your face from us,
 and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.
Yet, O LORD, you are our Father;
 we are the clay, and you are our potter;
 we are all the work of your hand.
Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD,
 and do not remember iniquity forever.
Now consider, we are all your people.

SERMON

You're probably used to it by now. And you're kind people, so you'd never say it, or at least not to me. Maybe to each other. But I'm smart enough to know that if you were writing the script, there's a good chance that when you came to worship on the Sunday after Thanksgiving, we'd celebrate. There would be carols and joy, a building sense of excitement and anticipation. The whole world out there is winding up and moving toward a major party. Why can't we? Traditionally after church today, we'd decorate the building, move in the tree, hang the garlands and the snowflakes, and bring out the poinsettias. If the handbells didn't play on this holiday weekend, they would the rest of the season, and oh, how we look forward to the bells. If only you could get through to the minister who insists on hauling out and hanging on to the prophets just in from the wilderness and the minor key hymns, and all the talk of doom and gloom. Doesn't she know that life is hard enough, and some of us are hanging on by a thread and straining every muscle to brace ourselves against the darkness that's lapping at the windows and breathing down our necks? Would it be so hard to lighten up for just once? To light the candles and sing the songs and let us pretend that God's in the heavens and all is right with the world?

Trust me, I do know that the message that I hear at the beginning of Advent is different than the one blasting from the speakers and splashing all over the television. But I'm not big on pretending, especially in worship. And I'm not interested in covering over the stresses and strains we're trying to stave off, nearly as much as I long for some healing and real, honest to goodness change. We all know painfully well that all is not right with our world, and I wonder if you're wondering just where God got off to. I know some people are, and that's okay.

This year, through the reading we heard today, Advent opens with a lament and with weeping. Probably not what you were hoping for. Isaiah 64 opens with the words, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence." It's a pushy prayer from desperate people at the end of their rope and calling out to God, both demanding to know where God has gotten off to and pleading for God to get down here and do something to clean up the mess. Specifically, it's a passage that was written after the agonizingly long years of exile in Babylon. The

people were finally released from their captivity and made their way home again, only to find the place in shambles. The sanctuary lay in ruins, and everywhere they looked was desolation and destruction. They looked back to the story of the Exodus and remembered the mighty deeds God had done there. But now, where was God now? Why had the mighty deeds dried up and disappeared? Why were they floundering with nothing to lean on and nobody to listen to?

That may be a little direct for your taste, but I wonder if there's any one of us who doesn't recognize something in that frustration, despair, anxiety and maybe even anger. Personally, I'll confess that I'm apt to reserve my frustration and anger for other people and the choices they make, the actions they insist on more than I tend to blame God. But that doesn't mean I'd be upset if God decided to strike them down, shut them up and super glue them to their seats. These are days and situations that trigger strong responses in many of us, and this text invites us to be honest about those feelings. Being real with God and honest about our lives is a valuable first step in the work of this season. As we move into the season in which God comes close to us, we're encouraged to come close to God with all of our complicated, messy reality, and to offer it in prayer.

Debie Thomas reflects on this passage with these words, "Isaiah longs for a Very Big God to do Very Big Things. Recalling the history of the Exodus, he asks God to once again do "awesome deeds" — deeds that will make the mountains quake and the nations tremble. Come to us as fire, he pleads. Fire that kindles and burns, fire that sets the world boiling. Who among us has not prayed such prayers? For the past nine months, my prayers have been as outsized as Isaiah's: Bring an end to the pandemic. Protect the most vulnerable. Strengthen healthcare workers. Help the unemployed. Spare the children. Save the world!

"But why stop there? Why not go further? Eradicate all illness. Clean up the mess in Washington D.C. End world hunger. Root out corruption. Destroy systemic racism. Thwart corporate greed. Protect this wounded planet before we ravage it past saving, and most of all shield us, O Lord, from our sinful, self-destructive selves. *"O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!"* ("Because You Hid Yourself", Journey with Jesus)

As we pray the prayers that Debie is describing, we're not only banging on God's door and letting God know how we feel, but we're also daring to give oxygen to our hopes and dreams for life in this country and around this planet. Rather than throwing cold water on or burying what we used to think was right and good, possible and beautiful, when we approach God with them, then we put our dreams within reach of God's dreams, and God's hope for our lives on this earth. Together, bit by bit, they can grow and live and become more and more present in this world.

One of the things I like about this passage from Isaiah 64 is the shift that takes place over the course of the text. Isaiah opened by pleading with God to replicate a Red Sea-type of deliverance for the shell shocked folks who had returned to Jerusalem – but I don't hear or see that God met that request. Instead, near the end of the passage there are references to God as a Father, and talk of God as a potter and the people as clay. God doesn't respond to their requests with a super hero kind of response, swooping in to shatter mountains, defeat enemies or destroy adversaries. Instead, God responds with intimacy and engagement, shaping the people as a parent over time shapes their children, as a potter lovingly molds clay.

In Advent, we dare to enter a time of waiting and watching for God to come among us, remembering that long ago God defied all reason and expectation, set aside the Superman cape and entered into our world in all the vulnerability and powerlessness of a newborn child. Advent dares to believe that God still comes among us, hears our prayers, heals our brokenness, shapes our dreams, and molds us into creations of beauty and love.

My friends, Advent has begun. Let us watch and wait for God. Rather than accepting that the sorry state of this world is what it is, let us pound on God's door and insist that something has got to be done. Let us carry our wounded, weary, broken hearts to God, and open them up to receive healing. And let us light one small candle in order that others might see the face of God in its glow. Amen.

PRAYER REQUESTS

- Prayers for Amelia Thomas (Janice's cousin Bill's mother-in-law) whose heart rate dropped to 40 on Thanksgiving Day. She will be in the hospital until at least Monday.
- For all the lives that have been directly affected by covid...those that have gone on home to God, with families left behind to mourn and feel the void, for JoHannah, Sam and Arlo who have been touched by it in their family...the good news from them is that Sam tested negative and JoHannah is feeling well, her time of quarantine will end on Monday
- Praise God from whom all blessings flow.....and especially the great love that each one of us have in our lives from the people God has put there for His great purposes....Thanksgiving indeed for that unending greatness!
- Continued prayers for Clyde Horning who is still recovering from his liver transplant...that he will find more patience to endure the wait before he can come back to Wallace.
- For all people that are dealing with cancer...and the loved ones that journey with them.
- Thanksgiving for Ben and Alice who continue to provide church services for us online and staying physically connected with us in our own times of need.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Into our troubles and weaknesses, into the barren places of our souls, Come Lord,

Come down, come in, come among us and make us whole.

Into the war torn and the refugee, into those who live in conflict, Come Lord,

Come down, come in, come among us and make us whole.

Into the homeless and the unemployed, into those who feel abandoned, Come Lord,

Come down, come in, come among us and make us whole.

Into the sick and the disabled, into those with COVID and with cancer, Come Lord

Come down, come in, come among us and make us whole.

Into the poor and the starving, into those who are oppressed or abused, Come Lord

Come down, come in, come among us and make us whole.

Into the lives of loved ones, into those from whom we are estranged, Come Lord,

Come down, come in, come among us and make us whole.

Into our joys and celebrations, into our work and our achievements, Come Lord

Come down, come in, come among us and make us whole.

O Christ we long for your coming. Hasten that day when those who seek you in every nation will come from the east and the west, from the north and the south and sit at table in Your Kingdom. Hasten the day when your Kingdom will come in all its glory, and suffering and pain and sickness and oppression and death will be overcome forever. Hasten the day when we will be resurrected as a great multicultural family and live in peace, harmony, joy and love together in your kingdom.

(Christine Sine on **Godspace** [http://godspace-msa.com/.](http://godspace-msa.com/))

Hear us as we join our voices in the prayer that Jesus taught, saying: Our Father...

PRAYER OF OUR SAVIOR (debts)

OFFERING

Although it takes a wide variety of shapes in our lives, I think it's safe to assume that gift giving is an important part of Christmas for most of us. Because of that, we want to offer you a couple of

opportunities to give to people in our community: the Wallace Christmas Fund, which is coordinated by the Elks, and the Food Bank. Both of these funds offer vital gifts to individuals and families for whom resources are in short supply and a gift of kindness can make a world of a difference. The Wallace Christmas Fund provides gifts that will be necessities, toys, books, warm clothing and gifts to children in need from the Wallace School District area during the Christmas Holiday. They've been hard at work fundraising in new and creative ways, since COVID has placed some of their traditional efforts out of bounds, and they are looking forward to once again being able to present gifts to these children for the holidays. And the Food Bank is continuing its essential ministry to people who would otherwise go hungry. They serve families in Wallace, Osburn and Mullan, and are deeply grateful for the support of the community. I talked with Art Fleming a couple of weeks ago, and he was feeling good about their ability to respond to the people who show up seeking assistance, even as he commented that he didn't expect to receive the donations of Thanksgiving turkeys this year that they often have, and they were scrambling a bit to find the hams they wanted to purchase so that each household could have one if they wanted it. They are grateful for donations of food and money, as well as the purchase of the food bags at either Steins or Harvest Foods.

I invite you over the next few weeks to consider a gift to one or both of these funds. Drop it off or mail it to the church as you do with other contributions, and designate it for the Food Bank or the Wallace Christmas Fund. If we receive general Christmas gift offerings, the money will be split between the two funds. The Treasurer will send money as it is received but encourages you to have the gift at the church by the 20th of December. And as always, thank you for all that you do and all that you give. None of us can fully comprehend what a difference it makes.

SONG *“O Come, O Come, Emmanuel”*

O come, O come, Emmanuel, And ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely 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...

O come Desire of nations, bind All peoples in one heart and mind;
Bid envy, strife and quarrels cease, Fill all the world with heaven's peace...

BENEDICTION

We are looking for God in our world. May we see what God wants us to see.
We are looking for God in our lives. May we be who God wants us to be.
And may God our Shepherd, Protector, Awakener, and Holy Spirit bless us through these Advent days.
Amen.