

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

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

December 20, 2020

Fourth Sunday of Advent

SONG    *“O Come, O Come, Emmanuel”*

**WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS**

Good morning, my friends. And welcome again to worship with the United Church of Christ Congregational. It is very good to be together to observe and celebrate the fourth Sunday of Advent, the Sunday of love. We’ve been steadily making our way through the season of Advent, always conscious of the fact that that means we’re approaching Christmas and the birth of Jesus. We’re close, very close, and so the anticipation and excitement grow even as we look around and within ourselves again to consider what we still need to do to be ready to welcome the Christ more fully into our lives and our hearts, our community and our world.

You don’t need me to tell you that Christmas is Friday, which means that Christmas Eve is Thursday. We are in the process of preparing our Christmas Eve worship, with the help of many within our congregation. A link to that YouTube video will be emailed to the congregation sometime mid to late afternoon on Christmas Eve, and as always will also be available on our church website. Please plan to join us as we celebrate the coming of God-with-Us in the birth of Jesus.

Let me also take a moment to offer a word of apology to Mike and Nancy Branstetter. We met them at the church on Friday where they gladly lit the candle in our Advent wreath for this service, and Nancy read the Scripture passage. When Ben got home and sat down with the video clips, he discovered that we had no sound from their recording. Rather than offer a silent movie of their presentation, Ben and I will fill in as substitutes.

**SETTING UP THE CRECHE**

The cast of characters in the creche continues to grow, and this week Mary has taken her place with Joseph and the shepherds. Not to sound too critical, but this set has her looking about as meek and mild as every other set I’ve ever seen. My experience of visiting new mothers has taught me that moments after childbirth is not the preferred time for a photo op, especially not a photo that will get global and eternal circulation. But add to that the grueling journey to Bethlehem, getting stuck in the barn with a feeding trough as a bed for her newborn and stinky old field hands as their first visitors. I don’t know of any 13 or 14 year old girl who would endure all of that and come through looking meek and mild. Your imagination can color in how she’s more likely to look and just what she might be about to say.

I’ve cherished Mary for a very long time; her willingness and ability to open her life so completely to God has impressed me deeply. Her words, here am I, the servant to the Lord, have been a kind of mantra for me. But I admit that open door, unconditional invitation isn’t quite as appealing as it once was. As I age, I’m becoming less eager to have my life disrupted, to say nothing of turned upside down and inside out. Don’t get me wrong: I’m still up for a lot of adventure, maybe even risk, but preferably on my terms and of my choosing. But Y’all come in now and do whatever you think best, let me help in whatever way I can, well, I need to work some more on that one.

What do you think happened in Mary between her initial question to Gabriel of, how can this be? to her response not long after, when she said, count me in, for nothing will be impossible for God? Her

pregnancy as an unwed teenager, especially in a small village where everybody knew everything, put her life at risk. By the time she got to Elizabeth's door she was singing a song, the Magnificat, about her understanding of what God was up to, it's words so powerful that it's been banned in countless places in modern history. Like Argentina: when the mothers of the disappeared plastered the city plaza with the Magnificat's vision of hope, the ruling junta declared it was too dangerous a thing for public consumption. And when the British ruled India, they didn't even want it sung in churches. I don't know who she was before Gabriel visited her, but I know once she said yes to God there was no stopping her. She was on fire with her love for God and her passion for God's people. How much of that love am I prepared to let into my life? How ready are we to deliver it into God's world?

PRAYER OF CONFESSION (in unison)

**From the fear that keeps us from answering your call, liberate us. From our attachment to the way things have always been, deliver us. From the despair that is unable to see a new thing breaking forth, save us. For every time we've said "no" to Love, forgive us, and open our hearts wide to receive you anew. Amen.**

ASSURANCE OF GRACE

God chooses us, forgives us, lights our path with the serenity of starlight, and sends us as messengers of love. Amen.

SONG "As with Gladness Men of Old"

Indy Behrendt, Flute

LIGHTING THE FOURTH ADVENT CANDLE

Ben Crosby and Alice Ling

Into our tumultuous times, the Love of God breaks in.

**Into our fearful times, the glory of God is revealed.**

Sometimes it announces itself.

**Other times we must look high and low.**

Sometimes we recognize it.

**Other times we walk right past it, lost in ourselves.**

Love's in need of willing hearts.

**Love's in need of the smallest opening.**

Greetings, favored ones! God's Love is with you.

**Here? Now? How can that be?**

Be not afraid. With God, nothing is impossible.

**Love is knocking at the door.**

Be not afraid. The Mighty One will do great things.

**Who can say what awesome thing God is up to now?**

Arise and shine, beloveds. God's Love wants to be born in you.

**Here we are, servants of the Lord. Let it be so.**

*The fourth candle is lit*

**ALL: FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS, MAY YOUR LOVE BE BORN IN US.**

SCRIPTURE READING Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son,

and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” The angel said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.” Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her.

## SERMON

Just when you think you know a story and have it’s ins and outs all organized and put in place, something new pops up. Like with the story of Gabriel’s recruitment meeting with Mary. As I said a few minutes ago, I’ve spent a lot of time with this story; a friend and I spent an entire seminary semester meeting with a renowned New Testament scholar studying Mary. When I was ordained, the invitations led with her “Here am I” response, suggesting – maybe - I was making a similar response to God. This week, I read something new – and I got it from a Lutheran pastor who used to teach preaching and was president of a seminary, and he got it from an Old Testament scholar, and I don’t know where she got it. Maybe from a careful reading of the text... Anyway, suddenly I see that when, near the beginning of today’s passage, we’re told that Mary was much perplexed and pondered what was happening, she wasn’t stewing about the fact that she was being visited by an angel, but what the angel had to say: Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.

Luke tells us that Mary had to chew on that for awhile, trying to figure out what in the world kind of greeting this was. I’m favored? God is with me? Was Gabriel mocking her, her faded shirt, ragged hair, knobby knees, the backwater town she came from? She didn’t have a pedigree, or name recognition, was almost certainly uneducated. Maybe this was mistaken identity or the wrong address, a humiliation just waiting to be unveiled. How long do you think it took her to begin to catch on that he was serious? She was known, she’d been noticed and she had been chosen. Something got through to Mary relatively quickly, so she was able to hear what Gabriel was saying – or at least enough to comprehend and trust that she wanted to be part of whatever God was up to, and so she said yes. But her ability to say yes to God started with her ability to hear – and believe – that she was favored. Loved.

A lot of people have a great deal of trouble believing that they’re favored, anybody special, capable of much. I guess there are people for whom that comes naturally, but I wouldn’t be one of them. Sometimes it stems from messages that have been thrown in people’s faces all their lives, either nastily or so subtly that they aren’t even recognizable; other times its about mistakes or poor choices people have made and then don’t find a way to put behind them so they can start over. Far too many people carry far too many messages that clog up their receptors, and make it difficult, if not impossible, to hear and receive a word of acceptance and love.

David Lose is that Lutheran pastor I referred to earlier, and he wrote, “... I think it is peculiarly and painfully difficult for us to believe that God favors us and is with us. And the results of that difficulty are as common as they are tragic. I think of a woman I know who has spent most of her adult life confusing sex with intimacy and who lives in the quiet fear that voicing any need, hope, or desire to her partner risks disappointment or desertion. Or the middle-aged executive who is the picture of success in every possible way... except for the addiction he is too ashamed to admit or address. Or the gay teen who has confessed to thinking about suicide nearly daily for years because she has never felt accepted for who she is. Or the African American parent who simultaneously welcomes and doubts promises of police reform after he has been pulled over too many times and asked a question I have never been asked – “Is this your car?” – and so will teach his son how to behave when pulled over by the police, a

lesson it never even occurred to me to offer my son.” (David Lose, *In the Meantime*, “Greetings Favored One”)

How many hearts and heads are stuffed up and sealed shut when it comes to the possibility that God, who knows us intimately and completely, also loves us unconditionally? How much of a difference would it make in the ways we live if our lives were grounded in and based on precisely that kind of love? We are on the brink of one of the most different and in some ways most dismal Christmases any of us can remember. Economic hardship, political strife, separation from our loved ones and empty places at the table, a new and sharper awareness of longstanding racial injustice, the release of two vaccines even as hospitalizations and deaths surge to new and devastating highs.... The list goes on and all of it contributes to having a hard time believing the announcement of the angel and the promise of Christmas.

The word at the heart of Christmas is inherently about God’s love. Yes, Gabriel announced it to Mary, but it wasn’t for her alone. God’s very decision to be born into our lives and our world, to walk beside us, to search us out in order to heal and cleanse, feed and embrace, call and empower, is based on God’s ongoing efforts to reach us with the very message Gabriel delivered to Mary: We are favored, we are loved, we are special, and we are not alone. That word is as vital and alive today as it was when Gabriel greeted Mary.

Christmas is precisely the promise that God comes to us in love to tell us that we are loved and to send us out to love others always equipped by the life-giving power of God’s love. We are, in fact, both favored and accompanied by God. Always. Amen.

SONG “*Mary, Woman of the Promise*”

Mary, woman of the promise: vessel of your people’s dreams:  
Through your open, willing spirit waters of God’s goodness streamed.

Mary, song of holy wisdom sung before the world began:  
Faithful to the Word within you, as you bore God’s wondrous plan.

Mary, woman of the gospel; humble home for treasured seed:  
Help us to be true disciples, bearing fruit in word and deed.

#### PRAYER REQUESTS

- Evy May asked me to convey her prayers for all of you for a Merry Christmas and the blessing of God’s love.
- Gretchen asks for a prayer for the Mexican restaurant owner Lalo’s wife Carmen who has been in an induced coma on a ventilator for a month because of COVID, they are bringing her out of it in the next few days. (she says she makes all the gift baskets that Lalo gives his wife, so she kind of feels as if she know her and I’m aware of how important it is, in the midst of hundreds of thousands of cases and deaths, to put a name and a face to the patients)
- Prayers for grandparents of a friend of Indy’s, both have Covid and she is very worried. She feels helpless because they live far away.
- Another friend asked for prayers for a family situation.
- A prayer to quiet the buzz in my head so I can make a better focus to make this season of you, Lord,...be about you, Lord.
- Lord of wisdom and light, instill righteousness in the hearts of our world leaders. Give them wisdom to do the tough work of good.

## PASTORAL PRAYER

Holy and loving God, you are the source and creator of all love, and we give you thanks. We marvel that you, who is all powerful and mighty, would bother to love us; surely there are others who are more important and more helpful. We fail to comprehend how you who know and see everything, our failures and shortcomings, our meanness and apathy, could continue to love us, to come to us, embrace and welcome, forgive and equip us, and accompany us through all our nights and days of faith as well as doubt. Holy God, pour your love upon us, plant it deep within us and teach us how to love others as you love us. Send us out to share your love and put skin on your presence, that through our lives and work, service and care, others might come to know that they too are loved, they too are not alone.

Holy One, we bring before you the needs of those around us, as well as our own needs. We pray for the countless thousands who battle COVID, aware that each person has a name and a family and a story. Today, we pray for Carmin and for grandparents, for a music director and grandchildren, for those waiting for a bed and those whose beds are in the gift store or the parking garage. We pray for medical personnel, for essential workers, for the isolated and cut off in nursing homes, for those who can't go home for Christmas, for those who no longer have a home to go home to. We are profoundly grateful for the creative and committed ways people are caring for each other, even as we pray for those who are falling through the cracks and go unseen in the struggle. The needs are everywhere, and so we ask you to show us what we can do, we who can't do it all. Help us to share your love where we can, trusting you to multiply and enlarge what we have to offer. Bless those who distribute and administer the vaccine, and guide all of us in the steps before us that will slowly but surely lead us toward health and wholeness. We pray for leaders everywhere, for the courage to lead, the wisdom to make loving choices, the willingness to protect and preserve that which is good.

As we draw closer to Christmas, we ask you to quiet the buzz in our heads, the frantic scramble to get everything done, the distraction of what we would like to do and the emptiness of that which we can't do. Calm us, center us, turn us away from longing after that which is out of our reach, and open our eyes and our hearts to the sights and sounds, smells and wonders, gifts and graces that are emerging in every direction. Come among us, God of all love. Be present with us as we watch our videos and laugh with family over Zoom and carol together at the table and light candles that soften the dark. Be born among us on Christmas, and on every day between now and then, and far into the new year.

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

## PRAYER OF OUR SAVIOR (debts)

## OFFERING

The last few weeks, I've been encouraging donations to the Wallace Christmas Fund and the Food Bank, and I'm very pleased to report that as of Friday, you've given \$900 to the Food Bank and \$380 to the Christmas Fund. Thank you for your generosity and the difference your gifts will make in the lives of many.

Today I want to shift our focus to an offering of the United Church of Christ, which is also called the Christmas Fund. It's the fund that we routinely designate to receive all of the offering on Christmas Eve. This year, we won't have a plate waiting to receive your gifts at the back of the sanctuary, but donations are even more needed than usual. The Christmas Fund gives gifts to retired clergy and their families as well as long-time lay employees of the church. The gifts are sometimes used to supplement inadequate pensions, and sometimes to help in emergencies. I was really moved to read how, in the past 9 months, COVID-related needs have increased the number of grant recipients and the total dollar amount distributed approximately 300% over the same period last year. In a single week, six ministers

received emergency grants as their congregations were no longer able to pay them because of declining donations. Several chaplains who were laid off due to pandemic-related downsizing received assistance, as did retirees who depended on income from supply preaching and who found themselves in financial difficulty when those opportunities dried up. An individual whose search and call process stalled because of the pandemic and who faced an eviction notice also received an emergency grant.

A friend of ours tells a powerful story about another aspect of the fund and its outreach. Cathy lives in Helena and, you might remember, led worship with me a few years ago. Listen to her story about lives touched and changed by this fund.

*(Video)*

As with all gifts, mark your donation clearly for the UCC Christmas Fund and leave it at the church. And as with all gifts, believe in the impact your contribution makes, and thank you.

SONG    *“What Child Is This?”*

What Child is this, who, laid to rest, On Mary’s lap is sleeping?  
Whom angels greet with anthems sweet, While shepherds watch are keeping?  
This, this is Christ the king, Whom shepherds guard and angels sing;  
Haste, haste to bring him laud, The Babe, the Son of Mary.

Why lies He in such mean estate Where ox and ass are feeding?  
Good Christians, fear; for sinners here The silent Word is pleading...

BENEDICTION

Having heard the words of prophets, may we recognize God’s truth.  
Having heard the words of angels, may we recognize God’s joy.  
Having heard the words of promise, may we recognize God’s love.  
And so may God bless us, Mystery of creation, Child in the manger, Holy Spirit of glory,  
and may we welcome and walk in the promises of God. Amen.