

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

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

December 6, 2020

Second Sunday of Advent

SONG *“Lo, How a Rose E’er Blooming”*

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

Good morning, my friends! And welcome to this second Sunday of Advent. We come to worship to prepare the way of the Lord to enter our world and to enter our hearts. We cry out together in the wilderness: The kingdom of heaven has come near. We come to be part of the light– the light that shines in the darkness, confident that the darkness will never overcome it.

As we prepare for worship, I would remind you that we will celebrate communion today. If you don’t have something with you to function as the bread and the cup, this would be a good time to get it. Also, as always, along with this video, I’m sending a PDF that contains all of the words of this worship. If you want to print it out or can read along while you watch, you will see responsive and unison readings as well as the words to the songs. I share those in the hope they help you more fully participate in this time of worship.

SETTING UP THE CRECHE

As we begin, we pause again at the creche, aware that the participants continue to gather. The shepherds were pleased to be invited. That doesn’t happen often for them. Of course, they have obligations and responsibilities that tie them down and keep them at home, but it’s not just that. They’re simply not the kind of folks that end up on invitation lists. Socially awkward, hardly stimulating dinner companions, rarely clean under their fingernails or within reach of anything presentable to wear.

Many of you know that I grew up on a working dairy farm; what you probably don’t know is that that farm was located in a town with a pristine spring fed lake. Over the generations, that lake has managed to attract and assemble a prestigious assortment of summer people. Not tourists who drive through on their way to somewhere else, but families that have acquired a camp and come for a month, or maybe the summer. Corporate executives and seminary professors, artists, poets and writers (including Wallace Stegner), foreign diplomats, a UN Ambassador and even the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court (William Rehnquist). Good people, kind people, generous people, but not people who invited us to dinner. For six summers, through high school and the first half of college, I worked at the local store, running the cash register, cashing their checks, bagging their groceries, pumping their gas. And then we went our separate ways. Them to play golf, sail in the regatta, have cocktails on the porch; me to go after the cows, help pick up the hay, get supper started.

When God’s in charge of the invitation list, the shepherds just may end up at the top (sheep welcome to come too), followed closely by the ones who make the beds and wash the floors, work in the mines and empty bed pans, line up for groceries outside the food bank and linger on corners with a sign that asks, Help. We’re more than welcome to come too. Just know that the last and least will be greeted first, the down and out given seats closest to the fire and ushered to their place at the head of the buffet line.

SONG *“Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus”*

Come, Thou long-expected Jesus, Born to set Thy people free;
From our fears and sins release us; Let us find our rest in Thee.

Israel's strength and consolation, Hope of all the earth Thou art;
Dear Desire of every nation, Joy of every longing heart.

Born Thy people to deliver, Born a Child, and yet a King,
Born to reign in us forever, Now Thy gracious kingdom bring.
By Thine own eternal Spirit, Rule in all our hearts alone;
By Thine all sufficient merit, Raise us to Thy glorious throne.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

The voice of one comes crying out in the wilderness... prepare the way of the Lord. A messenger prepares the way, transforming us like the refiner's fire... calling us to account. For the prophets of old have spoken, announcing the breaking open of the dawn... guiding our feet in the way of peace.

Merciful God forgive us...Forgive us when we are quick to point the finger at someone else. Forgive us when we put our heads down and ignore the cries of injustice. Forgive us when we presume to understand the complexity of issues that divide and distract the peoples of the land your feet once walked.

Merciful God... forgive us, heal us, encourage us and speak through us, that we may be transformed through the refiner's fire, and the offerings of our hands and our hearts may prepare the way for the Christ child to be welcomed among us in peace. Amen

(from the Monthly Prayers page of the Christian Aid website)

ASSURANCE OF GRACE

My friends, God loves us, God comes to us, God walks with us step by step through every day, offering mercy and hope, compassion and peace, encouragement and love. This is the good news of great joy for each of us. Thanks be to God!

LIGHTING THE ADVENT CANDLES

Judy Hofmann

Even now, the Peaceful One is drawing near.

Even now, the day of our salvation is at hand.

The God who comforts us speaks tenderly to her people.

The Shepherd who feeds us longs to take us into his arms.

While we watch and wait for steadfast love and faithfulness to meet,

While we wonder if justice and peace will ever kiss,

We can prepare the way of the Lord.

We can clear a path for him in our hearts and in our world.

In these days of setback and struggle, we choose to prepare and not to despair.

In a world drunk on wealth and power, we choose to walk the path of peace.

For such a time as this, the Holy One comes speaking peace.

For such a time as this, we are called to make peace.

Get ready! Our Savior comes.

Get ready! The peace of Christ is given for one and for all.

The second candle is lit.

ALL: For such a time as this, fill us with your peace.

SCRIPTURE READING Isaiah 40:1-11

Comfort, O comfort my people,

says your God.

Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,

and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the LORD's hand
double for all her sins.

A voice cries out:

“In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.
Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

A voice says, “Cry out!”

And I said, “What shall I cry?”

All people are grass,
their constancy is like the flower of the field.
The grass withers, the flower fades,
when the breath of the LORD blows upon it;
surely the people are grass.
The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will stand forever.
Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good tidings;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,
lift it up, do not fear;
say to the cities of Judah,
“Here is your God!”
See, the Lord GOD comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.
He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead the mother sheep.

SERMON

Comfort, O comfort, my people. Sounds heavenly right about now. What does comfort look like to you these days? What does it feel like? What lulls you to sleep or makes you purr like a kitten? I think of that bowl of chocolate brownie thunder ice cream drowned in chocolate sauce that I allow myself about once a week. Or sitting in my recliner, feet up, basking in sunshine, reading a book until I nod off and drop the book. But that's these days. It doesn't include the comfort of making that return trip to see family that we aren't even talking about any more, because... well, because. You know why as well as I

do. I expect that some of us are doing better than others of us, but I also believe comfort is something all of us crave. Our search for it is probably what triggered the notion of “the COVID 19”, a new vision of weight gain that’s replaced “the freshman 5”. We reach for comfort where we can find it, and when travel and friendships, family gatherings and live concerts, football games and singing are curtailed by a pandemic, more often than not we find comfort in food or in shopping, in a bottle or some other extravagance. But does any of that really satisfy – for more than 5 minutes?

When this morning’s Bible passage opens, we hear the prophet Isaiah making a declaration to the people of Israel: God says: Comfort, O comfort, my people. Tell Jerusalem she has served her term and her penalty is paid. Now, when I hear those words, I’m tempted to think it’s time to get up, dust myself off and get ready to be picked up by a helicopter and whisked away to some glorious mountain resort or sandy beach. But when I go back and look at the text, I see that’s not the deal at all. God may have sent the announcement of comfort to the people who have been in captivity and exile for generations, but that doesn’t mean they’re on the brink of being teleported back home. And even if they were, they’d soon learn that home is a shambles. Their houses are gone, their temple is dust, their government, streets, infrastructure have all disintegrated. Even if the specifics change, they’re staying in the wilderness for the foreseeable future. So what’s this glorious promise of comfort?

First of all and most of all, God is with them, as God has always been with them, and God will continue for far longer than any of them will exist to stay by their side, offer them shelter, lead them through the wilderness and one day take them home. I admit that some days I stomp my feet and pout and protest that that’s all well and good, but let’s be done with this pandemic already. It’s time to get on with our lives. But then I take a breath, I hear the promise again, and I look around me and know that it’s true. God is here. Just look at the people who are donating countless hours to unpack and shelve food so others can come in and prepare the boxes that will be given to the hungry. Look at the college students who are collecting produce farmers can’t sell and finding a way to get it to the distribution line. Consider the medical workers who work hundreds of days without a break, so they can monitor vital signs and improve breathing and rub shoulders and hold up an Ipad to connect patients with their loved ones. Think about the unprecedented speed scientists have used to create a vaccine. And if all of that fails to kick me back in to gratitude and a sense of the nearness of God, all I have to do is go for a walk in the freezing fog and see blades of grass with miniature ice cycles running up one side, boards and rocks that have grown peach fuzz overnight. The signs of God’s gentle presence, protective embrace and sustaining love are everywhere, if we will but look and see. God and the prophet call us to lean on those signs and so many more, to trust in God’s abiding presence and to draw deep, sustaining comfort from them.

It is also true that the place where we find ourselves has not always brought out the best in us or in our life together. Early on, I had great hope for the ways we were coming together and extending kindness as we hadn’t in years. I think that’s still true, but I’m also watching as people assert their rights and claim their freedoms at the cost of their neighbors. I see people maneuvering for political gain at the expense of the unemployed, the newly evicted and hungry. COVID has shown us how much more vulnerable people of color are to contracting and suffering seriously from the virus. There’s much we can learn from the place where we find ourselves; ways, if we come together, we can work to make straight in the desert a highway for all the people to travel on, removing obstacles, filling in pitfalls, learning all over again the truths we learned in kindergarten about what it means to be nice people and look out for one another.

I don’t like being in the wilderness of 2020 any more than any one else, but here we are. And we’re living both in the hopeful anticipation of a vaccine that really is close and really sounds effective, and yet... we’re not there yet. And we’re approaching what is probably the hardest season we’ve faced yet,

both because of the devastating numbers of infection, hospitalizations and deaths, and the predictions about the coming months that accompany them; and also because it's Christmas. And well, honestly, this isn't how we wanted to spend it. There's much to grieve, and if you're so inclined, there's much to protest against. But there's also much to embrace and celebrate. We travel with a faithful, comforting, transformative God. The God who demonstrates the strength of arms and the power of might, and yet draws us close as a shepherd cradles sheep. A God who promises peace, and who recruits us as first line workers in building up a community of care and compassion.

Comfort, O comfort, my people. In the midst of darkness, light breaks in. In the midst of despair, hope erupts. After long waiting, a branch will sprout. The complete fulfillment of God's promises has not yet happened, but it is coming. Such is Advent faith, and Advent hope, and Advent promise. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Let us join our hearts and minds in prayer:

Holy God, you know us, and you know what we carry with us, what sits on our hearts, wakes us in the night, brings a smile to our face and a tear to our eyes. You know who and what we grieve, the people we miss, the traditions we set aside, the comforts we crave. You also know where we find joy, the projects we have underway, the places we invest ourselves, the plans we have for expressing our love and pointing out the beauty we see all around us. You know. We give you thanks that you draw us close and comfort our weary hearts, that you take our breath away with glimpses of wonder, send us off on adventures and to do work that will bring others joy. Thank you for using us, equipping us, accompanying us, and always loving us.

There is much and there are many that we care deeply about, and bring before you now for healing and for holding. We pray for the sick, for those who battle cancer, undergo tests in search of a diagnosis, who live with the reality of failing health and increasing age. We pray especially for all of those whose lives have been touched and changed by COVID, for those battling it's wrath and fighting for their lives, for medical personnel who give and serve, labor and love with heroic dedication, for the unemployed and newly homeless, for those who struggle to juggle work and parenting, teaching from home and the support system that makes it all possible; for small business owners who wonder how long they can hold on, and communities who feel the constraints and shut downs.

Beloved God, in this season of once again preparing to celebrate the birth of Jesus among us, we come to you and ask for your help. There is much that feels off and strange, much that we long for and cannot have. Receive our sadness. And spark us with creative imaginations that in these weeks, we might discover new ways to shine a light into the darkness around us, to welcome life, walk in hope, spread the joy of your presence, to experience the wonder and mystery of angels' song, plant the seeds of peace that truly will prepare the way for your coming among us.

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

PRAYER OF OUR SAVIOR (debts)

OFFERING

Christmas, at heart, is about generosity. Some days it's hard to know where the cultural celebration of trees and lights, horse drawn sleighs and Santa coming down the chimney ends and the celebration of Jesus' birth begins, but either way, generosity and gift giving are woven all the way through this month. We buy and wrap, make and share, give and donate in an effort to express our love, increase others' joy and lighten the burdens that far too many are shouldering. This year, those burdens seem heavier than

ever, the requests for help more plentiful; and we do what we can and give as we feel led. As I said last week, we are again inviting gifts for either or both the Food Bank and the Wallace Christmas Fund. The Christmas Fund works with children in the Wallace School District area; they collect funds as well as needs and requests, and then work to do all they can to fill those requests: gifts for necessities, warm clothing, books, and toys. The Food Bank is open once a month in Wallace, once a month in Osburn and once a month in Mullan; in November, in preparation for Thanksgiving, they served 60 families in Osburn and 63 in Wallace, giving them bags of food as well as vouchers they can take to the grocery store – vital assistance for those who otherwise could well go hungry. It's impossible to estimate the value of your gifts, but you can trust that they will be carefully used and greatly appreciated. We invite you to leave donations for these programs at the church; designate how you would like your gift to be directed, and the Treasurer will see that it gets there. And while it may go without saying, let me say it anyway: the church is also deeply grateful for your gifts. In this strangest of all years, we're holding our own and doing what we can to reduce expenses, but it's also clear that giving is down from other years. We may not be in our building, but our ministry and expenses continue, any and all gifts are gratefully received and used to strengthen our life together.

SACRAMENT OF HOLY COMMUNION

Invitation to Communion

This communion liturgy has been prepared by pastor, poet and friend Maren Tirabassi. To begin, she tells a story that she admits she doesn't know where she heard it and can't confirm it as historical, and yet, in wonderful ways, it speaks truth: The story tells that during the Blitz in World War II Britain, when the city was strafed and bombed, Operation Pied Piper evacuated many children to the country, but some remained in London and many of those were orphans. Some were sheltered in a Jesuit order of brothers, who noticed the children had trouble falling asleep or staying asleep, night after night. When the children were being put to bed one night, one of the brothers guessed the children's problem was that they were anxious because of uncertainty in their lives, and gave each child a small piece of bread, saying something like – "Hold on to your piece of bread while you are sleeping. Remember when you woke up this morning, we fed you and took care of you. When you wake up tomorrow, we will be here for you. Let the bread remind you of this. Good night, children." The children slept.

Come, to be comforted in the story of Bethlehem, and in this the House of Bread. Come to be comforted at this table by a handful of bread and a cup of love, that will stay with you always.

Words of Remembering

We remember God's promises of Emmanuel, and a branch of Jesse's root, of Leader, Wisdom, Monarch, Key of all that is locked, and Dawn of every morning.

And we remember the sacred story, that happened in the House of Bread for a new mother and a fostering father, sheep and shepherds, a few wise travelers with gifts and many, many angels.

And we remember that the baby named Jesus, grew up to heal people, and teach them with strange parables, that made people angry. At Passover he broke unleavened bread. and poured wine and love freely. that all may live in peace, and be comforted, and be led in peace, and also hope and joy and love, with all the world.

Prayer of Consecration

Let us pray:

Emmanuel, God with us, in our lonely nights, under our guiding stars, with the hopes and fears of all our years, we come for comfort, for peace of mind and peace on earth, for a blessing on our hands and the bread in them, on our lips and the cup we lift to it.

(in silence, breaking the bread, lifting the cup)

May this bread and cup be your holy Life, that we may ponder in our hearts, receive into our bodies and pray in our community. Amen.

Sharing of the Elements

The Holy Child of Bethlehem descends to us,

and is born in us in these days

Let us share the bread.

We hear the Christmas angels their great glad tidings tell.

Let us drink deeply,

O come to us, abide in us, our Lord, Emmanuel.

Prayer of Thanksgiving

God, we give you thanks that you have come to us – in the child of Bethlehem, in this bread and cup, and in your answer to all of our hopes and your offer of peace, deeper than any truce, truer than the upheaval that surrounds us. You have comforted us with your promise and your presence so that we too may spread the welcome wings of your good tidings. Amen.

(Maren Tirabassi, Gifts in Open Hands Blog Post)

SONG “*O Little Town of Bethlehem*”

O little town of Bethlehem, How still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep The silent stars go by.
Yet in thy dark streets shineth The everlasting Light;
The hopes and fears of all the years Are met in thee tonight.

How silently, how silently The wondrous gift is giv’n!
So God imparts to human hearts The blessings of his heav’n.
No ear may hear his coming, But in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive him still The dear Christ enters in.

O holy Child of Bethlehem! Descend to us, we pray;
Cast out our sin, and enter in; Be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels The great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide with us, Our Lord Emmanuel.

BENEDICTION

In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord; Make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Let every valley be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low – that through our living and our loving, the glory of God may be revealed, that all people may see it together.
Go forth in the confidence that God goes with you, this day and all the days of your life. Amen.