

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL
Wallace, Idaho

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor



November 28, 2021

First Sunday of Advent

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

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

Happy New Year! And welcome to Advent

Gretchen Ehram's artwork

CALL TO WORSHIP

It doesn't matter whether or not you can have faith; whether or not you are cynical or despairing, hope-filled or hope-less: what matters to God is simply that you are here.

We are entering the time of Advent, in preparation for Christmas. Advent reminds us that if God is to be born again in the most ordinary parts of our world and our lives that we need to prepare for it.

We need to make the space in our lives where love might be born.

Welcome to this tiny corner of a harsh and dark world. Together, let us practice being ready in the faith that Christ will come. (Cheryl Lawrie, <http://holdthisspace.org.au/all-of-who-we-are/>)

HYMN *“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.

Angels announce with shouts of mirth him who brings good news to earth.
Set every peak and valley humming with the word, the Lord is coming.
People, look east and sing today: Love, the Lord, is on the way.

PRAYER OF INVOCATION (in unison)

Lord, oil the hinges of our hearts' doors, that they may swing gently and easily to welcome your coming. Amen. (New Guinea Christian Prayer)

LIGHTING THE ADVENT CANDLE

Judy Hofmann

I light one candle here for hope
and it is like a small lamp,
lighting a bedside table with open book,
after a long day,
the glow of heart monitor in ICU,
a headlamp for a hiker on an unfamiliar trail,
or a miner down a shaft,
a toddler's paw-patrol nightlight,
or early-morning oven in a bakery.

**We light one candle so we will remember
to notice this week's ordinary lights of hope.**

For ordinary and available to all
is the hope of Advent.

**(We) will light Candles this Christmas,
Candles of joy despite all the sadness,
Candles of hope where despair keeps watch,
Candles of courage for fears ever present,
Candles of peace for tempest-tossed days,
Candles of grace to ease heavy burdens,
Candles of love to inspire all (our) living,
Candles that will burn all year long.** (Howard Thurman) (Maren Tirabassi, Gifts in Open Hands)

SCRIPTURE READING

Jeremiah 33:14-16

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: "The LORD is our righteousness."

Luke 21:25-36

"There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of

Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

Then he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

"Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man."

SERMON

Do you have a favorite place? A place where going there means going home? A sacred place where you experience the presence and movement of God? I'm having trouble settling on just one. Mountains in general do that for me, and while I could name several, one in particular stands out. The first mountain I hiked, the first mountain I took Ben and the boys up when I was introducing them to Vermont, the mountain that, a couple of years ago, Dave, Kim and Garth wondered if we would be up for hiking. It's all the same mountain and it's a sacred place for me. Nothing compares to being on top of Camel's Hump, feeling the wind, taking in the view, nestling into the rocks to sit and soak it all up. What or where is it for you? The place where you fell in love? Raised your family? Watched a baby hummingbird break out of its shell? A certain street corner or park bench? Bike path or the trails where you learned to ski? Chair in a corner of the room where you curled up to read Harry Potter or Lord of the Rings? I don't know if all of you have found it and gone there in your mind, but I hope so. Take it in, feel it, wander through the memories that conspire to create some magic and tug on your heart.

I hesitate to do this to you, but now that I've taken you back there, imagine it gone. Intentionally destroyed. Someone willfully set out to demolish that home, those woods, that nest of loons, that mountain top, that tucked in bay on the lake. Imagine, if you can, trying to make sense of that kind of malice and cruelty; the how and why and wild mess of feelings that accompany trying to come to terms with the willful ruin of the center of your world.

That's where Advent begins. Acutely out of sync with the holiday frenzy that's ramping up around us, Advent begins in the dark and in the despair that follows destruction. I totally understand – and share – the hunger and longing for lights and music, silver bells and Santa sightings, and as many moments of magical beauty that take our breath away and bring a tear to our eyes as we can pack into one month. Can't we please take a break from all that's ugly, hateful and hard? We can, but the readings for Advent land us there. Or rather keep us there, in a world that is painfully familiar to the one we inhabit day after weary day.

As I read them, this morning's readings come out of a hauntingly familiar context to ours. To get inside the experience of Jeremiah and the people he was speaking to, we probably need to think about the ash and devastation following 9/11, or what the countries of Europe stared into after both world wars, or the rubble of what used to be Syria and Afghanistan. The people of Jeremiah's homeland had been carted off into exile while Jerusalem lay in ruin. The glory days of King David's reign were a dim and fading memory, and all of Israel's hopes had been dashed upon the rocks of the brutal history of empire. And things weren't any better for the readers of Luke's gospel. The section I read today comes immediately before Jesus sat down for his last supper with his disciples, hours before his arrest and crucifixion. By the time Luke's Gospel had been written and was being circulated in the early church, the temple had been destroyed and Rome was actively persecuting anyone who had the slightest inclination to follow the trouble maker Jesus.

Into both of those settings of heartbroken forlornness, God spoke, announcing a new and glorious day: a day of restoration and promise, of righteousness and justice, of redemption, healing and hope. Pain and suffering, death and destruction are not all there is. Jeremiah boldly proclaimed, the days are surely coming. This desolation won't last forever; Judah will be saved, Jerusalem will live in safety, and a green and growing branch will come out of what's left of David's tree. Trust me: this is a promise you can take to the bank and build a future on. The passage from Luke opens with a frightening description of a world gone mad: signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, distress among the nations compounded by the roaring of the sea and mighty waves. Jesus said, when you see all of that happening, stand up and raise your head, because your redemption is drawing near. I don't know about you, but that word of instruction challenges me. When things are uncomfortable or scary, I'm much more inclined to keep my head down than pop myself up out of my seat. We see it in pictures following earthquakes like the one recently in Haiti, people crouching and hiding while the ceilings fall and the walls collapse. People on the battlefield hunker down in the trenches, craving every ounce of safety they can find. We keep our heads down when we don't want to answer the question being asked and are doing our darnedest to avoid becoming one of the volunteers being sought out. Keep your head down and stay under the radar. But here Jesus said, you're going to think the world is falling apart, but I want you to stand brave and tall; raise your head and look for me and for my work, for my arrival and my movement among you. Be on guard. Watch and wait. Be alert and pray with everything you have in you. Watch for signs of my presence in your midst.

Advent is a season that calls us to do exactly that: even, or maybe especially, in the midst of all the mess and mayhem of the world, watch and wait for God. Advent is a season that assures us that God shows up in our world, especially when and where we need God most. It's a season that invites us to remember the way that God came among us in the person of Jesus, as a tiny, vulnerable, dependent child. But the power of these texts on this first Sunday of Advent is that we're not just encouraged to look back and remember God's marvelous arrival into Mary and Joseph's world; we're also called to look ahead, forward for the ways and places that God is showing up even now. One writer reminds us that, "...in Luke's Gospel God shows up in the amniotic fluid of an unwed teenage mother, and then sleeping in a trough for livestock. A God like this is liable to show up anywhere." (William H. Lamar IV, *The Christian Century*, November 7, 2018, page 20) And so Advent calls us to watch and wait, to stay alert and attentive. And if we hope to see God in the unusual ways and places that God is likely to appear, a little imagination and eyes open to wonder might be helpful along the way.

One of the things that I love most about Advent are the ways in which the prophetic passages tug at my heartstrings. They reawaken the longing I carry within me for a world at peace, where love reigns and all people are treated with God's justice and mercy. For a season, I dare to dream again of what such a world would look like, to flirt with the notion that such a world really can exist, and that indeed, my longing is but a drop in the bucket compared to God's. Advent beckons to me and asks that, even as I watch for signs of where God is present, and what God is already doing for and among us, I also consider the ways in which I can play a part in helping to shape God's glorious new day. Advent is a season that dares us to dream, and also urges us to align the deepest longings of our hearts with the great and beautiful dream at the heart of God. Or as the modern theologian Dorothy Sölle has said, "God dreams for us today. Today, at this moment, God has an image and hope for what we are becoming. We should not let God dream alone."

Advent is a season in which we celebrate and give thanks for the miracle and mystery of God coming among us in the birth of Jesus; but it's also a season in which we are urged to stay alert to the signs of God showing up even now. You don't need me to tell you that much about our world is broken and bleeding, but Advent assures us that it won't always be this way; God has promised that the days are surely coming when all God's people will live in peace, when righteousness and justice shall reign, that

life as we know it will be transformed by the grace and mercy of God. Advent assures us that God is on the move and God is on the way, so watch and wait and stay alert.

I listened to a podcast this week in which the teacher and theologian Matthew Meyer Boulton spoke about Advent hope with these words: It may seem that armies have stormed the temple and broken the sacred heart of the world, and they have; the losses are real. But something else is also here: in the midst of the ashes, shadows and sorrow, right here in the midst of a great loss is where the angels arrive singing their good news of great joy, telling all the people that despite all appearances to the contrary, God is on the way. The sacred center of the world will be restored. The central message of Christmas begins in the shadows of hopelessness, and there we light a candle of hope because God is on the way. It begins in the life of an ordinary young woman in the middle of nowhere in an occupied territory who raises her voice to sing that God is on the way. That's where Christmas begins: not in the presents, lights and feasting. Christmas begins in the dark, in the shadows, the rubble and ash, because in those places, really only in those places, can we hear the good news of the gospel, of hope when all hope seems lost. That's where Christmas begins. (*Strange New World: "Hope Against Hope"*, Salt Project)

Advent begins in the dark, and in the brokenness of a bruised and bleeding world. God meets us there with the promise that the sacred center of the world will be restored. And so we light a candle of hope. We watch and wait, we dream and imagine, alert to the signs that God is even now on the way, bringing healing and hope, mercy and peace; for us and for all humanity. May it be so. Amen.

HYMN No. 141 "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.

PRAYER REQUESTS

For the Silver Valley Meals on Wheels program; they're reduced their delivery days to 3 because of lack of funds, and the first time in 20 years that funds haven't stretched to meet needs

PASTORAL PRAYER

Open our eyes, God, especially if they are half shut because we are tired of looking, or half open because we fear to see too much, or bleared with tears because yesterday and today and tomorrow are filled with the same pain, or contracted, because we only look at what we want to see.

Open our eyes, God, to gently scan the life we lead, the home we have, the world we inhabit, and so to find, among the gremlins and the grayness, signs of hope we can fasten on and encourage.

Give us, whose eyes are dimmed by familiarity, a bigger vision of what you can do even with hopeless cases and lost causes and people of limited ability. (*Pause*)

Show us the world as in your sight, riddled by debt, deceit and disbelief, yet also shot through with possibility for recovery, renewal, redemption. (*Pause*)

