

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL
Wallace, Idaho

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor



December 19, 2021

Fourth Sunday of Advent

PRELUDE “*Angels from the Realms of Glory*”

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

Christmas Eve Worship: at the church 7 pm; video link will be sent; December 26: at the church 9:30

CALL TO WORSHIP

Into our world as into Mary’s womb...

Come, Lord Jesus.

Into the forgotten places, as into the stable...

Come, Lord Jesus.

Into the lives of the poor, bringing hope; into the lives of the powerful, bringing caution; into the lives of the weary, bringing rest; into the lives of the wise, bringing restlessness; and into our lives and longings, whatever our estate...

Come, Lord Jesus.

This is the good news: Christ is coming, and blessed are those who wait on the Lord.

Therefore come quickly, Lord. Amen.

(Cloth for the Cradle, Iona Community Wild Goose Worship Group)

HYMN “*O Come, Advent*”

Tune: Veni Emmanuel

O come and be the hope in all our lives Though chaos and confusion still survive

We know the path of hate all too well We need our God with us, Emmanuel!

Rejoice, rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to us And all things shall be well

O come and bring your peace upon the earth That even now still longs for its rebirth
We seek to live and move in your ways Guide us to peace and justice all our days
Rejoice, rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to us And all things shall be well

O come to us like joy of heaven's dawn, From Mary's womb a faithful paragon
Brought forth into this world by love's power Your Spirit through her labors in that hour
Rejoice, rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to us And all things shall be well

O come you source of Love unto us all Enlighten us and help us hear your call
To bear your Love out into the wild And celebrate God's wondrous holy Child!
Rejoice, rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to us And all things shall be well

(Adrian Marchuk, (c) 2021 United Church of Canada, Used with permission)

PRAYER OF INVOCATION (in unison)

As Christmas trees are lighted, as people rush to shop and send their cards, as Christmas songs are heard everywhere, keep us close to you, that the one whose coming we celebrate – Jesus Christ – may be honored by all we do. May all that we do in this season shine forth with your love. We are your people. Love through us. Let Christ be seen in us; for we pray in Christ's name. Amen.
(Ruth C. Duck, *Touch Holiness*)

LIGHTING OF THE ADVENT CANDLES

Jenniffer Carrico, Joyce Dunphy

I will light four candles
and I will be willing to light
every taper in my life,
for love asks for all that is needed
and then ... for everything else,

for this is how incarnation happens,
how God comes.

**We light four candles
or a hundred or a thousand more
whatever it takes
to remind ourselves to live in love.**

As ordinary and gentle as the holy welcome
that turns the world upside down,
comes hope, peace, joy, and love
to illuminate our 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)

HANDBELLS "O Come, All Ye Faithful"

SCRIPTURE READING Luke 1:39-56

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are

you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”

And Mary said,

“My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.

SERMON

I've been trying to remember when it started, and you can never know for sure when seeds are planted or by whom. The earliest memory I've come up with was Thanksgiving of maybe 2007, which would have made Sadie about 9 years old. Sadie's mother is my niece, and we were all together at my mother's for a family dinner. Sometime after we'd stuffed ourselves and were out of the kitchen, probably between servings of pie, Sadie asked me if she could stay after the rest of the family had left. I talked with her mother, and before long we hatched a plan: Sadie would spend the night along with me at my mother's and I'd take her home the next day on my way home. A little out of my way, but no big deal, and it would be fun. One of the pieces I've always remembered is my out-of-state brother and I watching an hour of one of our routine police dramas and Sadie being scared by it – poor choice on my part – and then the two of us snuggling together later in the dark of my mother's living room until Sadie fell asleep. Jump ahead about 4 years to 2011; both my mother and out of state brother had died, and it had been nearly a year since Sadie's younger brother was killed tragically in a car accident, when I got another inquiry: could she come to my place after the Thanksgiving stuffing and spend the weekend. Again, we hatched a plan and managed to have a couple of really fun days together, exploring a science museum, making Christmas cookies, we even ventured into a mall on black Friday if you can believe it. And ate fried seafood on our way to another family feast. More bad modeling on my part, but it was fun. We did that again the next year, trading in the mall for an afternoon at the movies; and once I moved cross country, we flowed pretty naturally into plane tickets and Idaho adventures. I've lost track of how many trips she made before Covid shut us down, but we're still in pretty regularly contact. A couple of years ago, I mailed her some cinnamon rolls for Christmas, and rumor has it she may return that favor with sourdough bread this year. It's an important relationship for both of us, not without it's strains and flaws, but what is there about life and family that are free of those?

Now, I assure you that I'm no Elizabeth, and Sadie is no Mary, but there are some common themes between the two stories. Starting with the obvious: let me say that I've always assumed Elizabeth was much older than I am, and she may have been. But when I stop to think about it, I realize that Luke tells us that she and Zechariah were getting on in years, and you aren't likely to let me get away with pretending I'm not. While we're not given any of the details like we had with Abraham and Sarah who were in their 90's, Luke does lead us to assume that after all those long, barren years without a pregnancy, the door is now securely closed and sealed, and even I wouldn't deny that one. At 23, Sadie is significantly older than Mary was when Gabriel introduces us to her, but their time lines likely crossed about the time Sadie and I were making cookies and going to the movies. One of the things that is clear is that Elizabeth and Mary were far from the same age, and there was probably at least one generation between them, if not more than that. And they didn't live near each other. There were probably about 80 miles between Elizabeth's home in a Judean hill town and Mary's parents' place in Nazareth; which is hardly Vermont to Idaho, but in their day, the trip would have been close to insurmountable. I wonder if the two women had ever met, or even heard about each other; whether they had family Thanksgivings or get togethers that reached across the miles and obstacles that stretched between them. All we know is that when Gabriel appeared to Mary, stopped her heart and changed her life with the inconceivable news of accomplishing the impossible, and then pointed in the older woman's direction, saying her relative Elizabeth in her old age had conceived a son, and was 6 months along in a pregnancy that everyone had long ago written off and given up on, Mary knew there was something there. Someone out there who offered the possibility of understanding and connection, which was more than she could imagine in any other direction she looked, so she went with haste to find Elizabeth.

I have no idea how long it took Mary to travel those miles, whether she walked or rode an animal, whether she went alone (which would have been very unsafe) or her parents sent her with escorts, how many times she rehearsed the conversation with Gabriel and what sense, if any, she was able to make of it, whether her stomach was more full of the fluttering of excitement or the acid of despair. Luke skips over all that kind of detail, and just takes us to the moment of arrival, when she entered the house and greeted Elizabeth. It's easy to assume the bewildered old priest Zechariah was hovering in the background, but all of the focus is on the two women. At the sound of Mary's greeting, Elizabeth's body taught her a theological truth that led to a confession of faith. Elizabeth's son did somersaults and spins, and his mother named the child in Mary's womb her Lord; and then the blessings began: blessing the child who was to come, and blessing Mary, not for bearing the child, but for her faith. Blessed is she who believed that God would deliver on the promise that had been handed her by the angel. Blessed is she who said yes to God.

It was an amazing moment as the four heartbeats met on that threshold: two women whose lives had been changed by the intrusion of God, an intrusion that was about to change the world with the two lives growing within their wombs. The message and the messenger, sent from God to deliver on ancient promises, to usher in a new day and bring about the restoration of all creation. At which point, Mary began to sing. She sang for herself, her joy because of what God was doing in and through her. *The Message* uses these words for the opening of Mary's song;

I'm bursting with God-news;

I'm dancing the song of my Savior God.

God took one good look at me, and look what happened—

I'm the most fortunate woman on earth!

But Mary knew this wasn't a moment to stay focused on herself or to gloat about her role in God's bold new adventure, so she went on by shifting her focus. She sang of God's mercy and grace, of a world that was about to be turned upside down by the life she was carrying, or maybe more accurately, it was a world being turned right side up again after centuries and generations of being upside down. Now,

through this birth, they were moving into a world where God's vision was clear and bright and very much alive. In the new day that was coming, the powerful are knocked off their thrones and the lowly are allowed to stand straight and tall; those who were hungry have been filled with good things, while those who are rich were sent away empty.

It's striking, when you look closely at Mary's song, to realize that she used the past tense, or as Barbara Brown Taylor has said, she was singing ahead of time, declaring that this big reversal of the order of things had already happened. Taylor has said that prophets never get their verb tenses straight, because part of their gift is in being able to see the world as God sees it, not divided between things that are already over and things that haven't happened yet, but woven together in an eternally unfolding mystery that surprises everyone. Mary doesn't need to wait to see how things will turn out; she believes and trusts and lives as if that vision is already at hand, because it is. She can feel it stirring even now in her womb.

One of the truths that Mary sees most clearly is the expansive way in which God's gift to her is already moving beyond her, onward and outward to embrace and include all people. Wesley Allen teaches preaching at Perkins School of Theology in Dallas, Texas, and he speaks to this dynamic by observing that "We often talk about... individual redemption. But Mary will not allow us to think of individual salvation apart from Jesus turning the power structures of the world on its head. As the beginning of the Magnificat that focused on the reversal of Mary's situation cannot be separated from the latter portion that focused on systems of power being reversed, our salvation is part and parcel of the saving of the world." (Commentary for December 19, 2021, WorkingPreacher.org).

I can't think of many themes that are more relevant and pressing for our day. Much of the time, our focus is on the individual: what we want, what feels good to us, what makes our lives comfortable and good. It can be a serious challenge to any and all of us to focus on others, what they need, what creates their situation, how our lives impact theirs. The hungry and the homeless, the refugee and the immigrant, the poor and the abused, the angry and the addicted. In contrast to that, one of my favorite TV ads, made to encourage people to get the Covid vaccine, features a young woman who serves as the Co-Pastor of a church in Washington. She says clearly, there really isn't much in the Bible that talks about our individual rights, but it's overflowing with instruction from Jesus that we're to love our neighbors. That's the kind of vision Mary was singing about, when she sang about scattering the proud, bringing the powerful down off their thrones while raising up the lowly; filling the hungry until each has had enough and sending the rich away empty. It's a more active, even disruptive, expression of love than we're used to, but it's a song of reversal and compassion that we'll read all the way through the Gospel of Luke. Mary launched the tune here, in the Magnificat – there's a lot more coming.

Mary and Elizabeth spent three months together. One of them sharing from a lifetime of living and walking in the faith of their ancestors, pointing to the ways she saw their pregnancies delivering on what had been promised long ago. The other singing with the wonder of youth, of the bold, new, unprecedented thing God was doing in and through and around them. Together, they wove their different experiences into one fabric that revealed the mystery of God's presence in their bodies, their lives and their world.

These two women have countless gifts to offer us, beginning with their readiness to reach across the generations for companionship and wisdom, nurture and support. In a world where the visions of God still appear wildly out of sync with our everyday lives, we too are encouraged to build relationships and nurture dreams on the confidence that with God nothing is impossible. In a world that still longs for a gentle peace, a generous sharing of the goods of the earth, a time of quiet joy and deep healing, we are invited to stand on the threshold with Mary and Elizabeth, expectant with hope and filled to the brim with joy because our tenses have been jumbled, too, and we have seen in every moment of tender love

and forgiveness the promise of what is yet to come. We sing with Mary and Elizabeth, welcoming the goodness of God into this world, and into our lives as well. Amen.

HYMN No. 148 "O Holy Night"

O holy night! the stars are brightly shining, It is the night of our dear Savior's birth;
Long lay the world in sin and error pining, Till he appeared and the soul felt its worth.
A thrill of hope the weary world rejoices, For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn;
Fall on your knees, Oh hear the angel voices! O night divine, O night when Christ was born!
O night, O holy night, O night divine.

Truly he taught us to love one another; His law is love and His gospel is peace;
Chains shall He break, for the slave is our brother, And in His name all oppression shall cease.
Sweet hymns of joy in grateful chorus raise we, Let all within us praise His holy name;
Christ is the Lord, Oh, praise His name forever! His power and glory evermore proclaim!
His power and glory evermore proclaim.

PRAYER REQUESTS

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 weariness 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 neither alone nor forgotten.

Holy One, we bring before you the needs of those around us, as well as our own needs. We pray for the thousands of people who continue to be diagnosed with Covid, for the threat posed by new variants and the deep pandemic weariness felt by all, for those who grieve the 800,000 mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, husbands, wives lost to Covid across our country. We pray for medical personnel who continue to care for the sick and dying at great cost to themselves. Staggered by the devastation across the Midwest from tornadoes and unprecedented winds, we pray for all those only just beginning the work of sorting through the rubble and searching for a way to begin again. And we give you thanks for all those who step into disaster and need to share love: serving meals, donating supplies, opening doors, checking on students, binding up wounds, buying and wrapping gifts. We pray for the sick and discouraged, those overwhelmed by rising costs and isolated by pandemic precautions. 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 and the scramble to get everything done. Calm us, center us, open our eyes and our hearts to the sights and sounds, smells and wonders, gifts and graces emerging in every direction. Come among us, God of all love. Be present with us as we gather with loved ones, cherish quiet moments of deep joy, sing the songs that herald your birth and light candles to 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

You are indeed a generous people! As of last Sunday, you had given \$280 to the Wallace/Osburn Food Bank, and \$215 to the Wallace Christmas Fund. Those gifts will be sent off this week and put to work alongside other people's gifts to help supplement small Christmases and provide some important winter essentials like jackets, boots and mittens, as well as stock pantries and put food on the table. It's hard to overstate the importance of these gifts. Thank you!

In addition to that, I wanted to point briefly to what I said yesterday in my email about the Christmas Eve offering. Once again, we'll send everything that's not otherwise directed to the United Church of Christ's Christmas Fund. This is a fund that the denomination uses to say thank you to its clergy and lay employees, offering supplements to those who have small and inadequate pensions, as well as one-time gifts in response to crises or need. Check out the video link in my email, and hear the story of one recipient – and person who just happens to be a close friend of ours. As with all gifts, make checks out to our church, but mark them clearly for the UCC Christmas Fund.

And don't let me ever neglect to say thank you for the ways that you support the ongoing work of our church. Especially in these times of Covid, many small churches have really struggled to meet their expenses, but you keep us strong and operating in the black. In terms of the end of the year, the Treasurer will close the books on January 2, but any gifts for this year should be dated no later than Dec. 31.

PRAYER OF DEDICATION (in unison)

Thank you for the gifts that we have the privilege of sharing in these days. May they become expressions of love and care for those who are most in need. Transform them and us into agents of change toward a world where no one is lacking, and everyone has enough and more. Bless every cent, dollar, minute, hour, skill, talent, mind, and body generously and freely offered to you, gracious God. Amen. (2021 UCC Christmas Fund Worship Resources)

HYMN No. 137 "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 Christian, fear; for sinners here The silent Word is pleading...

So bring Him incense, gold and myrrh, Come, peasant, king, to own Him;
The King of king salvation brings, Let loving hearts enthrone him...

BENEDICTION

We have peeked at the light under the stable door.
Do you have the courage to unwrap the gift the Christmas Christ brings?
Go forth now and open the door to let joy break forth.
Open the gift and give hope to one another.
Open your heart and let peace and love enter in. Amen. (Jacqueline C. Burnett, *Before the Amen*)

Many thanks to Gretchen Ehram for the art to lead us into the Sunday of Love. Used with permission.