

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL
Wallace, Idaho

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor



December 5, 2021

Second Sunday of Advent

PRELUDE “O Come, O Come Emmanuel”

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

CALL TO WORSHIP

It is in the watching, and in the waiting
that we hear the promises made so long ago.

It is in the questions, and in the hoping
that we give thanks every time we hear the glad news.

It is in the coming, and in the going
that we welcome the One who is our Delight, our Joy.

(Thom M. Shuman, *Bearers of Grace and Justice*)

HYMN No. 124 “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.
Israels’ 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 our hearts alone;
By Thine all sufficient merit, Raise us to Thy glorious throne.

CALL TO CONFESSION

How can we stand in the presence of God? Let us confess those places where we need to grow to prepare for Christ to come into our lives.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION (in unison)

God of the loving heart, we confess before you those places in our hearts where we have refused you entrance: people we have refused to love; habits we never got around to changing; good things we have left undone; and ways in which we hurt you, ourselves, and others. Come to us in the light of your Christ. Shine on those places we have hidden from you. Show us new ways to live. Sweep clean the rooms of our hearts, that Christ may find a home among us. Be known among us now and forever! Amen.

ASSURANCE OF FORGIVENESS

This is the good news in Jesus Christ. We can stand before God, not through our own goodness, but through God's great kindness to us. Rejoice and be glad, for God comes to you!

(Ruth C. Duck, *Touch Holiness*)

LIGHTING THE ADVENT CANDLES

Mike and Nancy Branstetter

We light two candles this week
to illuminate peace.

For as God lights both gentle dawn
and a slash of lightning strike,
we affirm all the ways we seek peace –

kind persuasion with eye contact,
and a justice march with big signs,
a silent vigil of prayer and fasting,
and the gift of food, toys, or dignity
for the most vulnerable,
our quiet visits to therapist or recovery group,
and loud demands to change gun laws.

**We light two candles so we will listen
to the angel mandate of 'Peace on Earth.'**

For ordinary, available, gentle and brave,
are the hope and peace 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*)

HANDBELLS "On Christmas Night and Bring a Torch"

SCRIPTURE READING Luke 3:1-6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Iturea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.
Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”

SERMON

In the first year of the presidency of Joe Biden, when Merritt Garland was Attorney General, when General Mark Milley was chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, when Brad Little was governor of Idaho and Jay Inslee governor of Washington, and when Joel Osteen and Franklin Graham were the prophets of American civil religion, the word of God came to whom? One source I read suggested that the word of God came to preachers preparing to proclaim the gospel on this, the second Sunday of Advent, but I'm not nearly confident enough to assume that. Maybe one or two, but I have my doubts that the bulk of us have the ears or the heart to be on the receiving end of the coming of God's word.

What I know is that the passage I just read from Luke 3 opened with that kind of a detailed line up of who was in charge in a particular moment in time, a list of 7 of the power brokers who were sitting on thrones and at the heads of board tables where decisions were made and edicts were handed out; the ones in the headlines and in front of the cameras that everyone else looked to to learn their fate and position themselves for what was coming next. Into a very specific moment in history the word of God came – but not to the power brokers and policy makers, and not in Rome or Jerusalem, not to the pinnacle of power, inside the military machine or even inside established religion. The word of God came and bypassed all of that, making a beeline for the wilderness: the place on the margins where life is fragile and hard, where the only thing resembling abundance is the amount of need and hunger present, a place where few choose to be but most of us find ourselves from time to time. The wilderness is unfamiliar and uncomfortable, full to overflowing with fear and heartache, the place where life is out of our control and never to be taken for granted. More often than not, it's also the place where people meet God and where transformation happens, but even that's not enough to make it desirable or attractive.

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, the word of God came to the wilderness and took up residence in John, son of Zechariah and Elizabeth. John was a miracle baby, born to parents who were old and barren, who had long ago sold the cradle their parents had passed to them in a yard sale. Eventually, reluctantly, they'd come to terms with the quiet of their house and settled in to old age, only to have their retirement interrupted by the appearance of an angel who brought news of pregnancy and new life. Even before the nine-month countdown began, John's parents were told that their son's role in life was to prepare the way for the one who was coming after him, to offer people an opportunity for salvation and the gift of forgiveness. When the time was right, the word of God found John in the wilderness, took up residence in him and sent him into all the region around the Jordan River, the area where centuries before the people had finally left the wilderness and crossed over into the promised

land. John scoured the countryside, calling people to turn away from their sins and into a life of forgiveness and grace, following the vision set out by the prophet Isaiah: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight; every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill be made low, the crooked shall become straight and the rough ways made smooth; before I'm done, all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

Compared with the seven names spelled out by Luke, John was a nobody; loved by his parents and his cousin, but who else even knew he existed? He dressed weird and lived on a diet that any normal person would find totally and utterly unappealing, if not repulsive. And he was in the wilderness – that in-between place of testing and waiting and sacrifice where no sensible person wants to be found. Yet this John, essentially a nobody who was absolutely nowhere, was the place the word of God went and went to work when the time came to get the ball rolling.

In the first year of the presidency of Joe Biden, when Merritt Garland was Attorney General, when General Mark Milley was chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, when Brad Little was governor of Idaho and Jay Inslee governor of Washington, and when Joel Osteen and Franklin Graham were the prophets of American civil religion, the word of God came to whom? Who is ready and willing to call people to turn around, away from their sin, self-absorption and over-indulgence, and back toward God? To extend the grace of forgiveness to any and all who are looking for a way home? To throw open doors of welcome to those who are shut out and cast away? Who is available to straighten the perilous curves that threaten to hurtle people off the road and over the bank, to fill in the potholes of poverty and homelessness, to blast away the mountains of oppression and discrimination, to level out the tripping hazards and embankments that bring so many down, to create a playing field where all can dance and sing, feast and thrive, join together in the miracle that God is even now bringing to birth?

I was drawn to a story from World War I and December 1914, when the line-up of power brokers and military leaders included names like Woodrow Wilson and Winston Churchill, Kaiser Willhelm and Bethmann Hollweg, Nicholas II, Vladimir Lenin and Franz Josef Habsburg. But as in Luke 3, the word of God didn't come to them; it came to the wilderness and to the soldiers fighting on the battlefield there. As Christmas Eve approached, the majors and generals all agreed that the war must go on; there would be no cease fire; but the enlisted men in the trenches took matters into their own hands, risking insubordination and their own lives. The Germans started it, by singing "Stille Nacht" or "Silent Night" as we know it, and the English responded by singing "The First Noel". Matthew Myer Bolton tells this story a little differently than I've heard it before, but either way, it's a story that gives me chills every time I hear it. ("Understanding Christmas, Part Two: Silent Night", *Strange New World* podcast). On the fields, from the trenches across southern Belgium, the troops sang to each other on a cold winter's night, until eventually some scouts ventured out onto the shell-blasted wasteland. They met each other there, shook hands and wished each other a Merry Christmas. More and more followed, rising out of their trenches one by one by one. As morning dawned, they gave each other cigarettes and chocolate. Someone found a soccer ball and a game broke out between the sides, while not one shot was fired that whole Christmas Day. Prepare the way of the Lord indeed! That night, all did see the salvation of God, just as Isaiah predicted.

Centuries ago, the word of God appeared in the wilderness and chose John to serve as the messenger who was to prepare the way of the Lord. I fully believe that the word of God still comes, even now, and is much more likely to appear in the wilderness than to seats of power and influence, seeking people willing to do what they can to help prepare the way for God to come among us. It's tempting to protest that we're not skilled at filling in potholes or straightening highways, leveling mountains or blasting open doorways, and sure as anything, I'm not about to stage a ceasefire on the streets of Belgium or Kabul or even Seattle, but surely there's something we can do to help pave Christ's way. To turn down the heat in some disagreements, to build bigger ramps so more people can find their way in, to soften

the tight muscles pulsing in an angry jaw. Archbishop Desmond Tutu has said, "Do your little bit of good where you are; it's those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world." Just maybe, if I keep trying to string my little bits of good together, and connect them up with your little bits of good, the word of God will come to us, and use us to help prepare the way for God.

In the first year of the presidency of Joe Biden, when Merritt Garland was Attorney General, when General Mark Milley was chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, when Brad Little was governor of Idaho and Jay Inslee governor of Washington, and when Joel Osteen and Franklin Graham were the prophets of American civil religion, the word of God came to whom? What are the chances it might be one of us, doing what we can, offering our little kindnesses in order to fill in the potholes of poverty and homelessness, blast away the mountains of oppression and discrimination, to level out the tripping hazards and embankments that bring so many down, to create a playing field where all can dance and sing, feast and thrive, join together in the miracle that God is even now bringing to birth?

PASTORAL 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 frustrations we feel, 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 to 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 undergo tests in search of a diagnosis, who live with the reality of failing health, who battle addictions and depression, for families who long to help and don't know how. We pray especially for all of those whose lives have been touched and changed by COVID, for those vaccinated and not who continue to confront its wrath, the unsettling unknowns of yet another variant and the scientists who race for insight; for medical personnel who give and serve, labor and love with heroic dedication, for all of us who grow weary and long to be done but who need yet again to put on caution and exercise restraint. We pray for all those places across our country that are regularly confronted by the presence of violence, this week especially the high school in Oxford, Michigan, the families of those killed, the students wounded and traumatized, the security shattered, the community grieving.

Beloved God, in this season as we once again prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus among us, we come to you and ask for your help. As we sort through the precautions and protocols, wish lists and supply chain shortages, traditions and possibilities, show us where and how to prioritize love, to care for our neighbor, to celebrate in a way that encourages connection. 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 you to come 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

I've been aware of how much I've talked with you recently about money, and special opportunities to give alongside the ongoing needs of the church for its operating expenses. And now, here I am again,

ready to talk about a special Christmas gift. Let me pause for just a moment to say that I trust each of us to decide for ourselves what we feel called to and able to do; I provide you with opportunities, and you discern where and how much you're inclined to give. As I said last week, as we approach Christmas, we are again inviting gifts for the Food Bank and/or 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: buying, wrapping and delivering gifts for necessities, warm clothing, books, and toys. The Food Bank is open once a month in Wallace and once a month in Osburn; in November, in preparation for Thanksgiving, they served 40 families in Osburn and 48 in Wallace, giving them bags of food as well as vouchers they can take to the grocery store, and this year, they increased the amount of the voucher rather than giving away turkeys, allowing families to purchase what will best meet their needs. It's 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; if you don't designate, we'll split it evenly between the two funds. The Treasurer will follow your instructions, and write checks to both the Wallace Christmas Fund and the Food Bank after worship on the 19th. Thank you in advance for the ways in which you bless the lives of others through your generosity.

PRAYER OF DEDICATION (in unison)

Powerful God, through the work funded by our offerings, may we participate in bringing the light of your love to those who dwell amid pain or sorrow. Use our gifts to brighten persons depressed or grieving, to enlighten persons seeking wisdom and grace, to energize persons building justice and peace. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. (Glen E. Rainsley, *Hear Our Prayer*)

HYMN "Come to the Table of Grace"

Come to the table of grace. Come to the table of grace.

This is Christ's table, not just yours or mine. Come to the table of grace.

Come to the table of peace...

Come to the table of love...

Come to the table of joy...

THE SACRAMENT OF COMMUNION

Invitation

This table does not belong to any denomination, church or community. It belongs to Jesus.

It was at table that he met people, heard their stories and shared his. It was at table that he deepened his friendship with poor folk and prostitutes, the business class and puzzled bystanders. It was at table that he shared profound insights into who God is and what God wants.

And it was at table, with bread and wine, that he initiated the sacrament we now celebrate.

So come to this table. Leave behind any baggage of arrogance or unworthiness. Do not think, "This is not for me." Think rather of Jesus saying, "I am for you," and accept his invitation to be the friend he cherishes and longs to feed.

The Communion Prayer

God be with you.

And also with you.

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them to God.

Let us give thanks to God Most High.

It is right to give God thanks and praise.

For you, Creator God, the valleys laugh and sing and the trees of the field clap their hands. Your earth summons us to break silence and be one with the song of creation.

We give you thanks and praise.

For you, God of all, the church in its myriad forms and countless languages honors its Savior. Millions upon millions invite us to be one with them in the drama of worship.

We give you thanks and praise.

In heaven, beyond our seeing, the angels and saints are caught up in song. And those we have loved and lost are part of that great company. They call us to be one with the harmony of heaven.

We give you thanks and praise.

So, gladly, we join our voices to those of earth, sea and sky, in the universal hymn of praise which echoes through time and eternity.

Holy, holy, holy God of love and majesty, the whole universe speaks of your glory, O God Most High. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of our God! Hosanna in the highest!

Come now, O Christ, bone of our bone, flesh of our flesh, forever bound to us in promise and mystery; breathe your Spirit on us and on this bread and cup. Let them become, for us, the seal and sign of your love, healing, redeeming, making us whole. And through them let us together become, for you, your body, loving the world as God loves, serving its people as God wills and always being transformed until we and all humanity resemble the One whose food we now share.

The Story

Long before this building was erected, in open spaces and hard places, people heard of how on the night of his arrest, and aware of what lay ahead of him, Jesus sat at supper with his friends.

During the meal, he took a piece of bread, blessed and broke it and said to his disciples, "This is my body, given for you."

Later in the meal he took a cup of wine, saying, "In this cup is the new relationship with God, made possible because of my death. Drink it, all of you." I will not drink wine again until I do so in the coming kingdom of God.

So we take this bread and this cup, offering them to God for blessing, so that through them the goodness of God may bless, enrich and enlighten us.

The gifts of God for the people of God. Through them God comes to us, so that we can come to God.

Sharing the Bread and Cup

Take and eat: the Body of Christ broken for you.

Take and drink: the Cup of Salvation poured out for you.

Prayer of Thanksgiving (in unison)

O Brother Jesus, we have been guests at your table; come with us wherever we go and be present in all we share. Summon out in us, whom you have fed, generosity of spirit to ensure that all the hungry are nourished and earth's barren places are fertile with food, faith, hope and love. Amen.

(Iona Abbey Worship Book, The Iona Community)

HYMN No. 128 *"It Came upon the Midnight Clear"*

It came upon the midnight clear, That glorious song of old,
From angels bending near the earth To touch their harps of gold:
"Peace on the earth, good will to all, From heaven's all-gracious King!"
The world in solemn stillness lay To hear the angels sing.

Still through the cloven skies they come With peaceful wings unfurled,
And still their heavenly music floats o'er all the weary world.
Above its sad and lowly plains They bend on hovering wing,
And ever o'er its Babel sounds The blessed angels sing.

And ye, beneath life's crushing load, Whose forms are bending low,
Who toil along the climbing way With painful steps and slow,
Look now! for glad and golden hours Come swiftly on the wing:
O rest beside the weary road And hear the angels sing.

Fo lo, the days are hastening on, By prophets seen of old,
When with the ever-circling years Shall come the time foretold,
When the new heaven and earth shall own The Prince of Peace their King,
And the whole world send back the song Which now the angels sing.

BENEDICTION

Now go in peace, do what God wills, follow where Christ calls, pray for the gifts of the Spirit;
and may the blessing of God, the Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer, rest on you and remain with you
now and always. Amen. *(Iona Abbey Worship Book, The Iona Community)*