

Advent Year B

Company's Coming

Week 1 – November 29, 2020 – This Place Is a Mess!

[Isaiah 64:1-9](#) & [Mark 13:24-37](#)

Week 2 - December 6, 2020 – Clean-Up Crew

[Isaiah 40:1-11](#) & [Mark 1:1-8](#)

Week 3 – December 13, 2020 – Deck the Halls

[Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11](#) & [John 1:6-8, 19-28](#)

Week 4 – December 20, 2020 – Waiting on the Threshold

[2 Samuel 7:1-11](#), 16 & [Luke 1:26-38](#)

Christmas Eve – December 24, 2020 – Welcoming the Guest

First Sunday after Christmas – December 27, 2020 – Enjoying the Company

[Isaiah 61:10-62-3](#) & [Luke 2:22-40](#)

Second Sunday after Christmas – January 3, 2021 – Living the Celebration

[Ephesians 1:3-14](#)

Who doesn't like Advent? It is a season of excitement and anticipation and joy. Lots and lots of joy. Even when we acknowledge that we aren't ready for what is coming, for the realm that is promised, for the kin-dom we hope for. We admit we have fallen short; we confess that we are wrapped up in ourselves and in things that don't last; we admit that our watchful waiting has fallen by the wayside. And yet, in this season, there is joy. And we have a sense that we can start all over again, because "Company Is Coming."

Advent sits in the nexus between the past and the future. The origin of the season is to remind us that we are heading somewhere, that we are waiting for something that is not yet here. We are reminded that we are pilgrim people during the season of Advent. And as startling as that is, we find joy in the seeking, joy in the longing. The prophecies are full of warning and of struggle, but there is also a resounding vision of something greater, something of peace; and we can lean into that.

There is also joy in the remembering. We cannot look forward to the in-breaking of the one who comes without looking back to the first time God entered our history and space. Yes, Advent is more than a countdown to Christmas, but it is a reenactment of the Mass of Christ that prepares us for the return of the Christ. It is the remembering of the way the world was turned upside down when the child was born, that we can have an inkling of the righting of the world when the Savior reclaims all that belongs to the kin-dom of God.

There is joy in the anticipation, in the waiting for the one who comes, both as we look back and as we lean forward. The joy erupts, not because it will be an easy welcome—there is work to be done and transformation to occur. Our brokenness will come to light, and our healing will stretch our capacity to hope. But the joy is there, because deep down we know that what is coming is what we have been longing for. Who is coming is who we have been longing for. So, join us this Advent, because “Company Is Coming.”

Week 1 – November 29, 2020 – This Place Is a Mess!

[Isaiah 64:1-9](#) & [Mark 13:24-37](#)

INTRODUCTION

What excitement this season brings! Certainly, you’ve done it many times before; the rituals may be set in stone, the expectations ripe, and the patterns already unrolling. But there is something about the season of Advent that brings forth the kid in us, and we all lean into the hope. So, let the excitement grow; let the buzz be felt.

As adults, however, we know that there is work to be done before the season can really get underway. We are emphasizing community in this Advent worship series – Company Is Coming! We are emphasizing hospitality and inclusion. Our questions are: “How will you welcome the Christ who comes? But also, how will you welcome your neighbors and family you don’t know yet into your midst?”

We all know that even for those whose religious impulse might be minimal, there is something about this time of year that brings them out. This is our chance to make connections, to go all out in welcoming neighbors and strangers alike. So, throughout this series, we’ll be asking the worship team to pay attention not just to what happens in the sanctuary, but to what happens at the front doors and the fellowship areas. Here is an opportunity for us to remember that worship is not just an hour set aside, but it is a way of life for the community of faith.

So, if we are welcoming company, where do we start? By taking an honest look at our own space! What have we become used to, but would look like a community that doesn’t care about its space to a new person? This year, as you haul out the seasonal decorations, don’t let them cover up or hide the mess. Get rid of the mess before you make the space ready to receive your guests.

This isn’t necessarily a call to a makeover of the sanctuary, though maybe it’s time! But it is a call to ask questions about the space. It could also be a time for adding some interpretation to the traditional symbols that fill the worship space. Do a little research and ask why you have greenery and trees. What do the lights and wreath represent? Use the bulletin, if you’re back to handing those out by now; or let signs do some of the explaining for you. Let people know that the decorations aren’t used just because they are beautiful (although they certainly are), but because they have meaning; the decorations proclaim the faith as assuredly as the sermon or the hymns. So, let them speak.

Look at the worship order before this season begins. What is in there that might need some explanation for someone who doesn’t regularly worship with you? What do you do that even you have forgotten why you do it? Maybe you need to stop that activity, or maybe you need a fresh interpretation of what you are doing. Take some time in reflection; try to see what you do through the eyes of an outsider. Perhaps recruit someone who has no connection to your church to look at the space and the order of worship and tell you what he/she sees or

experiences. Be prepared; the responses might be sobering, or surprising, even shocking. We've learned to look beyond our mess.

Advent is also a penitential season, which means that we aren't just preparing our external space to receive *the Guest* and our guests. We are also preparing our internal space for that reception. Worship, therefore, needs to include both times of reflection and acts of repentance. Spoken and sung prayers of confession can be accompanied by times of prayer at the altar rail, or in the pews, that give space for and invitation to new commitments. We begin the season of Advent by acknowledging our need to clean house, because "Company's Coming".

PREACHING NOTES

Yikes, it's Advent. That's the proper liturgical formulation for this season: "Yikes, it's Advent!" It is an admission that no matter how closely we pay attention to the calendar, no matter how much we follow the development of the Christian year, we are still surprised when Advent comes. It seems too early. Too early is our normal greeting for this time of year. "It's too early," we exclaim to all we meet. "It can't be time for this," we opine. And who knows what *opine* means, but it seems to fit this season. And not because of the greenery!

We are just not ready; we have too much to do; our lists grow longer; our accomplishments are fewer. For everything we check off, six more slip onto the list. How does that happen? This is where the whole legend about elves came into being – people found their Christmas to-do lists growing almost before their eyes. Who is doing this? Must be elves. We're not ready.

That is precisely why we need Advent. The creators of the Christian calendar knew that we all would need a swift kick to get the new year started. So, it begins with a call to get ready. Because we aren't ready. Worse than that, we've forgotten that there is anything to get ready for. Or we thought that what we are supposed to be getting ready for is a celebration of the past. We are preparing for a historical observation of something God did at one time. And we are still grateful for it; we are still defined by it; we still try to live differently because of it. But it is to an extent, old news. It is a case of "been there, done that" when it comes right down to it. Or is it?

What is it that we are waiting for? What are we looking for? The first reading for this first Sunday of Advent reminds us that what we long for is not a historical remembrance but a new reality, a new encounter. And this new encounter can be shocking; it can wake us up from overlooking what really surrounds us.

You no doubt remember being sent to clean your room. And you also remember your first thought as you stumbled through the door and flopped onto the bed: "Looks clean to me!" Right? Never mind the pile of dirty clothes on the floor. Or the stack of papers teetering on the edge of the desk you can barely see the top of. Yeah, maybe that's a banana peel on the floor or an apple core, or a bag of chips you finished a few days ago. "But it looks clean to me," you think. Or maybe clean enough.

Isaiah comes along to ask us to take another look at our living space. Like our mom, Isaiah stands at the door and tells us that company is coming and would you just take a look at the kind of squalor you're living in. What would happen, the old prophet shouts, if the one you claim to be waiting for were to show up today? What if the one you want to come home, tore open this door right here and came charging into this room? What then, smart guy?

"O that you would tear open the heavens and come down," Isaiah cries on our behalf. We know you are present; our faith tells us that you are here. But we need to know it beyond a shadow of a doubt. Shake us up, so that we can be certain again. We've begun to wonder; we've begun to doubt. So, do it again, Lord. Do it again.

There is where our historical observance comes in. There is where telling the story becomes so important — not just so that we can look back with a sigh and long for the good old days, not so that we can wistfully wish for the blessing that they had back in the day, but so we can learn to recognize it when it comes again.

That is the task of Advent, to pay attention to what is and what might be, not simply to look back at what was. The people of God were in exile; the foundations of their nation had been shaken; the comforts that they had begun to take for granted were taken from them. The human institutions that they had constructed no longer held the security that they had begun to take for granted. So, they began to look elsewhere, and they realized that their faith was shaky as well. They needed a boost, so they looked back; and they looked forward at the same time.

The mountains of our society were shaken; so shake the mountains, O Lord. The foundations of our nation were shaken; so shake the foundations, O God.

They needed an Advent upside the head! We remember, they claimed, we remember how you used to deal with us, and we want that again. We want to remember as you remember. The words seem like they were reminding God, but really they were reminding themselves. The look back was not just to give them a warm feeling about what once was, but a way to spur them to living differently.

Advent is a reminder to get out of our sense of complacency. Though it is hard to be complacent when things are difficult. When all is going well, then we need the two by four of Advent to wake us up. But when things are difficult, we use Advent as a prayer, as a reminder to hope.

Believe it or not, that is the call of Jesus in our gospel passage for the week. It is a call to hope. We sometimes must listen hard to hear something hopeful in these descriptions, but it is there. It is underneath sometimes, but still there.

But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven (Mark 13;24-27).

Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake-- for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake. (Mark 13:33-37).

Nervous? Well, yes, because there is much to do and a deadline to meet. But at the same time, there is the promise that the master is near – not as a threat, but as a promise. We are not alone. What we see in front of us is not all there is.

History is heading somewhere. We may not know where exactly, except that it is someplace called the kingdom of heaven, or as Jesus was fond of describing it, *life*. And that is what we long for in the end, *life* – life in all its fullness and meaning; life in all its joy and promise. That’s what is coming; that is what is promised.

And we forget every now and then. We forget that we are looking for anything, that we are hoping for anything. Until Advent comes and knocks us upside the head with a not so subtle reminder. Then we look and see what a mess we’re living in, and we need to do something about it, because “Company’s Coming!”

LITURGICAL RESOURCES

The first week of Advent is always a surprise—no matter how much preparation takes place within the life of the church; no matter that out there in the wider world, Christmas has been advertised for months. We are always surprised when the season of Advent rolls around. There is more of a theological reason for this than a calendar one. Part of the purpose of the season, then, is to remind us that we are waiting; we are looking forward; we are leaning into what is coming. And the *what* is, for us, more of a *who*. That’s why the theme of “Company’s Coming” reminds us that we are looking for the Christ who comes, but also the community we are becoming.

Therefore, one of our Advent questions must be, “Who is missing from our fellowship?” Or to say it another way, “Who are we leaving out?” “Who can we include” states it in the positive. “How can we clean up the mess we’ve made?”

Call to Worship

Come, Lord Jesus, Come

(Based on Isaiah 64:1-9)

Many: Come Lord Jesus, Come!

One: Rip open the sky,
Make planes divert their flight paths,
Tell the mountains to duck,

And rush into this sanctuary.

Many: Come Lord Jesus, Come!

One: Come and silence the violence,
Stop stray bullets that kill the innocent,
Expose dealers who peddle addiction,
Make your enemies know you and tremble in your presence.

Many: Come Lord Jesus, Come!

One: We may fail to notice your presence
In everyday living,
In casual conversations,
Or in blessings disguised as "coincidences."

Still we cry ...

Many: Come Lord Jesus, Come!

(Kwasi I. Kena, The Africana Worship Book for Year B, Discipleship Resources, 2007, p. 49.)

Opening Prayer

Father God, we thank You that You have promised to be with us no matter what difficult circumstances invade our lives and we lift up our many brothers and sisters in Christ who are facing increasingly hard times. We are watching and waiting for the soon return of our Lord Jesus Christ and join with the Spirit in praying: "Come Lord Jesus". In these increasingly difficult times, we ask for Your strength and courage to face whatever lies ahead, knowing that the suffering of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us... and that nothing can separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus. AMEN.

Source: <https://prayer.knowing-jesus.com/Isaiah/64>

An Advent Prayer

O the power of the Baby! Such power can bring mama's white family and daddy's black family to understand that it is not about race, but about love.

O the power of the Baby! Such power can melt the hardest heart. Let this be a Kodak moment reminding us of the impact of seemingly tiny gifts ... like crooked clay ash trays, popsicle crosses, stick figure pictures, wilted dandelions.

O the power of the Baby! Take this chip off our shoulder, help us forget the wrong done to us; make disappointment and rejection disappear; melt them like intense sun melts the snow. Take away the isolation of staying inside of ourselves, separated from the world.

O the power of the Baby! Take the anemic joy that we have today and light a fire under it so that we will boil over with unrestrained giving of ourselves!

O the power of the Baby! Make us angels gathering up coworkers, train-workers, house-workers, yard-workers, body-workers, taxi-workers, garbage-workers, factory-workers, classroom-workers, building-workers, and food-workers to behold the miracle child who can take our spiritual thirst away forever.

God, you opened the heavens and sent your Son down. Let us see your Star come from heaven to show us the Way. Let Mary's Little Baby lead us. Let the mountains quake in His presence and the persistent, impatient car horns fall silent in adoration. Show us your Son through the clouds of our confusion and desperation and exhaustion. Let us experience His power.

O God, who works for those who wait on you, we're waiting. There are days when we think we've just missed the train to get us where we need to go, or missed the opportunity to right a wrong. But God, keep us waiting on Jesus, the one who will make it right. Amen.

*(Sherri Dobbs Johnson, **The Africana Worship Book for Year B**, Discipleship Resources, 2007, p. 25-26.)*

A LAMENT FOR A NEW LITURGICAL YEAR (YEAR B)

O, God if you would only tear open the heavens and come down!

Come and shake us out of our apathy.

Come and unite us with your compassion.

Come and heal us with your presence.

We have had enough of our rubble.

Our rubble is not made of fragmented stones from fallen city walls and a devastated Temple. Our rubble is more subtle, but just as real. It is the rubble of a world turned in upon itself.

We are tired, God.

We are tired of being at war with our neighbor.

We are tired of tyrants who turn citizens into desperate refugees.

We are tired of fearing the stranger.

We are tired of the continual threat of destruction.

We are tired of people misusing their positions of power against others.

We are tired of acts of terror – and tired of our failure to imagine any other way to respond than the creation of terror in return.

We are tired of how our lusts and the distortion of our desires erode every relationship and destroy the lives of our children.

We are tired of greed and the way it forms systems that benefit the few on the backs of the many.

We are tired of our bluster, pride, and arrogance. Our divisive political rhetoric is pushing us to the point of exhaustion.

We are tired of keeping up appearances and expending all our energy for things that will not last.

We are tired of the idols of amusement that sedate us into apathy.

We are tired of drowning in information while starving for wisdom.

We are tired of floods, quakes, and winds. We cannot take any more death, and destruction. And we are tired of that deep inner sense of fear that we are unwittingly awakening those primeval forces of chaos that we cannot control.

With Judah, we begin a new year sitting in the rubble our sinfulness has made... morally, emotionally, spiritually and physically exhausted to the point of despair...

We have fallen into a gap of iniquity that seems to be swallowing all of creation in with it...

YET... YET... You are our Father.

YET... YET... You are the potter... we are your clay.

So we gather around your table reminded that you are present in our suffering.

But more than that, we gather around your table - not in fear of scarcity - ***but in the abundance of Advent hope that...***

Your light can penetrate the darkness of our despair...

Your goodness can overcome the chaos of our evil...

Your grace can transform the rubble of our sin...

Your life can make all things new.

We come around your table of grace as prisoners of hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who had been given to us.

https://drtscott.typepad.com/pastor_scotts_thoughts/2017/12/a-lament-for-a-new-liturgical-year-based-on-isaiah-64.html

Prayer of Confession

Call to Confession

The cares of this life weigh us down, and we seek escape more than insight, avoidance rather than confrontation with God's truth. God comes to us even when we are hiding from the best we know. God waits to hear our story and to restore us to life as it is meant to be. Let us come to God in prayer.

Confession

We confess, Surprising God, that our sense of anticipation has been dulled. We have ceased to expect any wonders from your hand. We do not see the marvels around us in the people and happenings we view as commonplace. We are not alert to your presence or your action on our behalf. Wake us up, God, lest sleep be our death. Pardon and redeem us, that we may escape the judgment we are bringing on ourselves. Send your light that it may shine through us into a needy world. In Jesus' name. Amen.

*(Lavon Baylor in Ruth Duck, **Flames of the Spirit**, Pilgrim Press, 1985, p. 15.)*

Week 2 - December 6, 2020 – Clean-Up Crew

[Isaiah 40:1-11](#) & [Mark 1:1-8](#)

INTRODUCTION

It is one thing to notice that there is work to be done. It is quite another one to determine that you are the one who needs to do that work! This week's worship is about commitment. That could be hard when a large part of the congregation is still online. How do we get folks to commit to ministry when getting together is difficult? What does ministry look like in this pandemic era? These are some of the questions the worship team might consider answering, or at least making suggestions about this week.

How might we be about the business of lifting valleys and bringing down hills so that the way of the Lord is prepared? It seems beyond us, certainly. Especially when we seem so limited these days. Where do we start? We start with prayer. Not because there isn't anything else we can do. But because that is where worship always begins. We pray, and we learn to pray, and we practice praying. What are the hills that we need to be praying get moved out of the way so that God's way can be accessed? What are the valleys, and who is down in those valleys that need to be lifted up so that they can see the one who comes? We don't pray because we're helpless. We pray because we know where the power is.

So, this second week of Advent, we pray. We pray as though we were members of a clean-up crew, knowing we are making a difference in the world and in the lives of those around us. But prayer doesn't prevent us from acting or from giving or serving or working. The clean-up crew has plenty to be doing. What Christmas ministries are you used to doing in this season? Rather than simply saying we can't do that now, rethink how to do them. How could those ministries be done in a physically distanced way, protecting workers and recipients both? This is not the time for the church to sit back and wait for a return to normal. This is a time for creative thinking, for an Advent spirit of anticipation and hope as we long for a new reality.

Some are saying, that sounds more like a missions rally than a worship service. There are some similarities, to be sure. But here in Advent, we are looking forward by making ready. We are anticipating by rolling up our sleeves and

getting to work. Worship is a call to action, not simply an opportunity to feel good about ourselves. We receive a spark to put our worship into action in the world around us.

Issue the call, this second Sunday of Advent. Invite the worshipers to join the clean-up crew. Let the work be as physical as possible, as well as spiritual; let it be as communal as it can be, as well as individual. There should be both a desire to do something after the benediction is pronounced and something clear to do. Plan for follow-up of this worship. Include getting the church ready for guests to come as we get closer to Christmas. But don't let all the work be inward-focused. How will we invite our community to join us? How will we make it clear that we care about their lives and not just the numbers in the pew or log-ins to our YouTube channel?

Worship cannot begin and end in the sanctuary or online stream. It has to grow out of real needs in the lives of the worshipers and the communities in which they live, and then it has to feed out into those communities, even as it continues to work on those who shared the worship experience.

Let it begin with the lighting of the Advent wreath. Communicate that the light isn't to be kept inside only for those gathered in person or online. But it is hoped that this flame will bring light to the whole world. Because we are the ones who know that company's coming.

PREACHING NOTES

Having surveyed the mess around us, the next step is asking who is going to do something about it? Who is going to step up and clear away the rubble? Who is going to be a part of the clean-up crew? Who is ready to work?

<Crickets chirping>

You feel like that sometimes, don't you? You feel that no one is listening; no one is responding. You keep issuing the invitation, but it often lies unattended in the midst of the people of God. We aren't even sure anyone even heard the call.

We like to know we are being heard. We desire two-way communication, which means, of course, that we must learn to listen as well as to speak. And maybe, we

should listen more than we speak. What is that old saying? God gave us two ears and one mouth.

Advent isn't really about communication, yet when you read the passages for this week, you can't help but hear that theme underneath. The proclamation is, in part, about hearing and being heard.

"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight'" (Mark 1:3). John appears every Advent to remind us that we haven't been paying enough attention. He shouts to wake us up. He dresses oddly to capture our fascination. He storms up and down the riverbank, asking us to take the plunge. He doesn't seem to be here to listen. He is here to talk, to announce, to shout — a one-way communication, you would think.

Except John is asking for something from us. He is asking us to join the road crew. We've got streets to level and curves to straighten. Whether we think in personal terms about cleaning up our own hearts and bodies, straightening out our behavior patterns; or in communal terms of justice and anti-racism as we make straight the pathways to wholeness that have bent in ways that keep certain people out — either way, there is work to be done. A response needs to be made. John wants us to be participants in our own salvation; the one who comes doesn't overwhelm us, doesn't transform us against our will. We are partners, contributors in the conversation of hope and transformation.

Yet, some will argue, it is all about marching to the tune of the one in charge. Right? It is not about conversation; it is about obedience. It is about following orders. Get to work; clean this up; take care of that; do this; don't do that, and on and on and on. That is hardly a two-way street, some argue. This is the Lord's highway we are straightening. And we all know that it is the Lord's way or the highway! Right?

Not according to Isaiah. We have to get the whole picture. This conversation doesn't begin with Jesus or with John. It began long before that. Jesus was a response. Listen to this: *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* (40:1-2).

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 (40:9-11).

God heard the cry, and now comes with a response. God has listened and now speaks, and the word God speaks is Jesus. Oh, that wasn't the word that the first hearers of Isaiah's words heard. They heard home. The people of God were in exile, cut off from the land they loved, the land that God had promised to them, the land where God took up residence. They felt alone, cast adrift in an unfeeling, uncaring world. They cried out to God; they confessed that they had forgotten to live as God's people and were now paying the price. Their society had begun to cater to power and influence and wealth, and many suffered because of it. They forgot to look out for the ones on the margins, and now they were all on the margins. The systems in which they had placed their trust no longer were strong enough to support the life they took for granted. So, they cried out. And God heard.

And God will bring them home —not necessarily to the home that they envisioned, but to the home that God envisions—the community that God calls us to create. The relationships that fulfill us and connect us—this is the home we seek, all of us. And it is the home we find in Jesus. The child in the manger and the savior on the cross speak of home to us. Home is where we are loved and healed and heard.

The glory of Christmas is that while there is a silent night, there is a need to listen and to shut out the distracting noise of the world and our own brokenness, it is fundamentally a dialog. The Lord's highway is a two-way street. Our call is to listen and to respond. To announce, to proclaim. To make way: *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!"*

Company's coming, and so we need to make ready. We need to make ourselves ready, make our world ready, for the one who comes to lead us home. The joy is that we get to be a part of the clean-up crew. This isn't a menial task; this is the glory of the Lord. This is a sign that we are those who know that company is coming and we want to be ready. We want to be inclusive. We want to be hosts for the one and the ones who come. Get to work; company's coming.

LITURGICAL RESOURCES

In week two, we are beginning to get on board. In fact, that is the theme of this service, making the choice to be Advent people, or joining the clean-up crew. Our emphasis, then, needs to be on what we can do to make ready for the company that is coming. What can we do to invite and make space for the wider community to join us this season? If not for worship, then what other point of contact might be made? Yes, we might still be concerned about over exposure, about physical distancing, but still we can be hospitable; we can be invitational. Remember, as we invite the community, we are inviting and making ready for the Christ who comes.

Call to Worship

(based on Isaiah 40: 1-11)

One: Listen! The voice of God calls out across the ages.

***Men: We hear and respond. We rise up to worship God
from the valleys, the mountains, and the plains.***

One: Like a shepherd God leads us and tenderly gathers us together.

Women: Comfort, comfort O my people says our God of love.

**All: The grass withers and the flower fades;
But the word of our God will stand forever!**

<https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2011/11/opening-liturgy-isaiah-40-1-11.html>

Prayer of Invocation

O God,
You call to us from the wild places,
You call to us from the inner chambers of our hearts.
We come in answer to your call.
We come to pray, to praise,
To learn of your love for all creation.
Reveal your glory that we may see it together -
Inform and inspire us to seek your kingdom on earth in our time. Amen.

— *From Valleys to Mountains, Service Prayers for the Second Sunday of Advent, was written by the Rev. Penny L. Lowes, an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ and a free-lance writer. Posted on the [Worship Ways](http://www.worshipways.org) website of the United Church of Christ.*

<https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2011/11/opening-liturgy-isaiah-40-1-11.html>

Prayer

Preparing the Way

Where there seems to be no way
to end the conflict and violence in our time,
we pray that you would teach us, O Christ,
to prepare the way;

Where we can see no way
to provide for the needs of all people,
we pray that you would show us, O Christ,
how to prepare the way;

Where can find no way
to work together for justice,
we pray that you would change us, O Christ,
until we prepare the way;

Where we are unable to believe in a way
to live simply, responsibly and mindfully,
we pray that you would inspire us, O Christ,
to faith that prepares the way;

In a world where we are tempted

to see so many of our challenges as dead-ends,
we pray for a new vision, a new heart and a new commitment
to prepare the way for your reign,
your grace, your shalom
and for the liberation, justice and peace that you bring.

Amen.

<https://sacredise.com/prayers/season/advent/preparing-the-way/>

Intercessory

God of hope,
you raised up John the baptizer
as a herald who calls us to conversion.
As we joyfully await the glorious coming of Christ,
we pray to you for the needs of the church and the world.

Prayers of the People, concluding with:

Hear our humble prayer
that we may serve you in holiness and faith
and give voice to your presence among us
until the day of the coming of your Son, Jesus Christ,
who lives and reigns for ever and ever. Amen.

<https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu//prayers.php?id=49>

Benediction

Leader: Go forth from this place an awakened people, aware of the world's
darkness, yet reaching for the light.

People: We see God at work in our world, and that makes all the difference.

Leader: Go forth from this place an expectant people, conscious of judgment in
our midst, yet welcoming God's new order and justice.

People: We welcome God's new day, believing that Christ will set us free.

Leader: Go forth from this place a serving people, sensing anew the pain so many bear, yet confident God will bring healing, even through you.

People: We open ourselves as channels of God's grace, for we have heard good news and we have been empowered to share it.

Leader: Amen.

People: Amen.

*(Lavon Baylor in Ruth Duck, **Flames of the Spirit**, Pilgrim Press, 1985, p. 17.)*

Week 3 – December 13, 2020 – Deck the Halls

[Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11](#) & [John 1:6-8, 19-28](#)

INTRODUCTION

After finding the mess and cleaning it up, what now? Decorations! We've got to make the place look great for those who are coming. We want our welcome to be beautiful and our hospitality to be breathtaking. So where do we start? What do we include? What does it matter?

If we're mostly online, who cares what things look like? Right? Well, we do. Of course we do. Online is a visual medium. We have to see how things look – especially if we are looking outward, trying to see through the eyes of those who don't know us, who aren't yet able to look beyond the surface to see what is really important. What's important, of course, is the nature of the community. What's important is the condition of our hearts and the genuineness of our welcome.

Why do we decorate our homes or our sanctuaries? It could be argued that it is to show off, or to make us happy, to feel good about where we live and worship. That's certainly not untrue. But the real impetus for decoration is invitational. How do we include others? How do we draw them in?

At least part of the answer is being our best selves. If we listen to John, that means that we are constantly pointing beyond ourselves. We are not claiming to be more than we are, but we are honestly revealing our brokenness, even as we

invite other broken people to come and meet the one who can heal us, make us whole. So, let our worship be about pointing to Christ. Let our prayers be an invitation to Christ to come and dwell among us. Let our testimony be about the work of Christ in our midst. Let our celebration be the awareness of the presence of Christ. Let our commitment be to the cause of Christ and the opening of the doors until all can come and know his grace and redemption.

And what does all of this have to do with decorating? We reflect our inner experience with our outward appeal. When we are a place of joy and invitation and inclusion, our environment reflects that. When we are a place that understands the depth of pain and suffering, of the ugliness in our world, then our doorways open to a place of comfort and beauty and welcome. Having reflected on our need to address the mess, we now set about bringing beauty and light into the world.

What do we show in this season through the screens, in person? That's the question that can occupy the thinking of the worship team this Advent, because we know that company is coming.

PREACHING NOTES

It might be the current economic crisis, or the looming questions about opening up, but there seems to be an inundation of promises to pass on mounds of money "with no strings attached" if you simply reply to the email. Most of the emails end up in the spam folder, but some get through. Lots of them get through. And there are basically two types: "You are a winner!" which then tries to get us to respond because the check is waiting – and "I chose you, dear friend," which then tries to tell us someone died and left scads of cash and to help disburse it, they need my email reply to get the ball rolling.

Well, we've done enough reading and have lived long enough to recognize a scam when we see it. But you might consider adding up all the cash being offered over the past few weeks, discovering that if all the offers were legitimate, they would generate enough money to resurrect a broken economy. It is so much money that it is easy to see how some people get sucked into it. "Maybe," they think, "maybe this one is real. Maybe there is someone out there just waiting to pass on

hundreds of thousands or even millions of dollars to a random email address. Maybe. And they just happened to choose mine. Maybe I did enter a contest in a foreign country I've never been to. Could happen. Couldn't it?"

The worrying thing is that are so many for whom that is a logical argument or maybe an act of desperation. Things are tough out there. Every day, it seems we read of another company going out of business, another spate of layoffs, another sign of shut down hurting local business, another front page full of disheartening news. Desperate times seem to call for desperate solutions.

Isaiah understood desperation. The people in the latter part of this multi-themed prophetic tome understood it anyway. There are at least two moods in Isaiah – the first half, when things were going well for the people as a nation, was a mode of warning and judgement. Pay attention, the prophet said over and over again. Look at what you are doing to one another. Look at how you are living; look at the source of your wealth; look at the foundations of your society. Does your socio-economic system reflect your status as a people of God? The second half of the book speaks to a desperate people who have lost all, who are hungry and afraid and homeless; they are refugees, without status or rights.

Now the mood shifts, the tone of the book is starkly different. Now it is a word of hope; it is a promise. It is a call to live - even in desperate times - by a different standard. Look at our Hebrew Scripture reading for this Third Sunday of Advent:

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; ² to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; ³ to provide for those who mourn in Zion-- to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, to display his glory. ⁴ They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations (Isaiah 61:1-4).

Things are bad, take his word for it. The prophet comes to these people and says . . . what? Good news. Good news for the oppressed, good news for the

brokenhearted, good news to captives and prisoners, good news to those who mourn. Great. What is this good news? What do they get? Garlands, oil, a mantle. Uh, what? Where is the promise of wealth and goods? Where is the “you may have won” email that tells us we could be set for life with no more effort than hitting reply? Where are the goods?

God comes to people who are desperate and tells them to decorate? It doesn't seem right. It doesn't seem enough. Decorations are nice and all, but they hardly serve to make things better. They hardly can be counted on to change the world. Can they? Why do we bother, in the end? Are we just shouting in the darkness?

Well, yes, in a way. But shouting in the darkness is a noble profession. It is a calling. When we shout, when we decorate our homes and our churches, we are not saying that we are unaware of difficulties, we are not saying that we are oblivious to bad news, but we are saying that we choose to live by good news. We are saying that we choose to live by hope and not despair.

But what keeps this from becoming a rose-colored glasses scenario is the prophetic call to act in hope. Look back at Isaiah's words. The Lord brings the good news, the Lord through the prophet – proclaims the year of the Lord's favor. But then we are the ones who bind up hearts; we are the ones who set people free; we are the ones who rebuild. We work because we believe. We build because we hope. And because we hope, we are blessed.

John wants us to hope. Both Johns do, actually: John the Gospel writer and John the Baptist. But John knows that the only way to do that is to look beyond. John the Baptist is introduced in the gospel as seemingly the first human being in the story. But he is presented in a way as to point beyond himself to the one who comes.

John 1:6-8 *There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.*

These verses seem so out of character from the ones that surround them that some scholars have assumed they were misplaced or a later addition – which they may be. On the other hand, they might be where they are for precisely the reason that they serve to point beyond the named person to something greater,

something brighter. He was not the light. Just like you are not the light, we are not the light. But we light the lights, so that the true light can be seen.

In the second part of the Gospel text, John continues to point beyond himself. I am not the messiah. This seems a simple and obvious statement. Yet how often do we need to repeat this phrase for ourselves? “I’m not the messiah!” It’s a good phrase to remember. Especially when we add it to the other task that John reveals. He’s the one preparing the way. He’s the one who can recognize the messiah when he sees him. He’s the one getting people ready.

He is decking their halls. Isaiah does it with garland and oil; John does it with water. But it is part of the preparation, part of the declaration waiting for the one who comes. We are preparing our space, preparing our hearts, preparing our world for the one who comes. With decorations, yes, but mostly with acts of love and service. Our preparation for the company that is coming is a proclamation and invitation. We practice for receiving the Savior by receiving the ones the Savior saved. Our company is always both/and, not either/or. We don’t wait for the return of the Christ by excluding others. We acknowledge them as a part of the company for whom we wait.

LITURGICAL RESOURCES

The decorations should be out; the lights should be lit. This is the week we begin to celebrate the first incarnation, even while we look forward to the return of Christ. It is also *Gaudete* Sunday, meaning that joy is at the heart of what we do together here. Isaiah 61 drips with joy and the invitation to see beyond the immediate situation, which has all kinds of struggles, into a possible future where God’s grace guides our every step.

Call to Worship

(based on Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11)

We come to worship Christ

Who proclaims good news to the poor,
binds up the broken-hearted,

frees the prisoner
and comforts those who mourn.

We come to worship Christ

Who bestows a crown of beauty instead of ashes,
the oil of joy Instead of mourning,
and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.

We come to worship Christ

Who rebuilds ancient ruins
and restores broken places.

— written by Phil Whyte, Holy City Planning Group, and posted on the Church of Scotland's [Starters for Sunday](#) website.

<https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2011/12/advent-call-to-worship-isaiah-61.html>

Invocation

Come, Christ Jesus, be our guest,
and may our lives by you be blest.

Come, God-with-us,
and free us from the false claims
of the empires of this world.
We are lonely for you and your peace.

Come, Emmanuel, and dwell with us,
make us your people indeed,
the people through whom you bring
love and justice to the world.

Come, Jesus, and reign;
claim your rightful place in our hearts
and in the midst of our community.
Plant the seeds of hope among us.
Establish God's reign on earth.
For we pray as you taught us

that God's reign might come in fullness on earth.

(The Lord's Prayer)

*Ruth Duck, **Flames of the Spirit**, Pilgrim Press, 1985, p. 14.)*

Prayer

Why Do You Bother?

Why do you bother, Jesus,
when we are so certain
that we can create life for ourselves?
When we try to pretend
that we aren't frightened of those different from us,
that we aren't driven by our insecurities and greed,
that we aren't overwhelmed by life and its challenges?

Why do you still come to us?
Why do you send us your messengers?
Why do you invite us into the water
to be refreshed, washed, changed?
Why do you embrace stables and crosses
to offer yourself as Shepherd to the lost sheep we are?

Somehow, it seems, in ways that we may never understand
you really are a God of infinite grace;
Somehow, your judgment and your grace are not opposites,
but expressions of the same surprising reality,
That you always seek to save, to restore, to renew;
that your forgiveness and your commandments together
offer us a way to be fully alive.

Thank you. Amen.

<https://sacredise.com/prayers/type/confession/why-do-you-bother/>

Choral Reading (Litany)

Jesus Is Coming: Things Are Going to be Different

Choral reading for seven readers from John 1:6-8, 19-28

Reader 1: We are people of light and when we walk with the Messiah, we will know no darkness, no matter who or where we are. Our beams will banish the dark places and all who see them will bask in their warmth and radiance. We will testify of God's goodness.

Readers 1 & 2: Jesus is coming soon; make way for the light.

Reader 2: When Jesus comes, everything will be different. Justice really will roll down like a mighty stream and there will be freedom and everybody will have what they need and are supposed to have.

Reader 1, 2 & 3: Jesus is coming and things are going to be different.

Reader 3: All God's children will have shoes, plenty good food to eat, clean water to drink, a warm, safe place to sleep and a voice to speak for themselves. We're gonna laugh and we're gonna shout if we want to, just because we want to and nobody can give us that *hush yo' mouth* look. Yes, children of God, there'll be some changes around here.

Readers 1, 2, 3 & 4: Make straight the way cause things are going to be different.

Reader 4: Jesus, today we've decided that we won't wait until you get here to see the difference. Starting today we're going to *be* the difference. We will *see* our brothers and sisters with new eyes so we won't be acting like we do now.

Reader 5: You know. Speeding up at the intersections, or turning away at the exit ramps, walking fast and clutching our purses so nobody will ask us for a dime or a dollar. Lord, we're going to see *you* in the hollow eyes and battered signs and though their eyes may not change, *ours* sure will because we're going to *see* and treat them like you would.

Readers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 & 6: Yes, Lord, things are going to be different when you get here.

Reader 6: We're going to stop letting babies die having babies they don't need or want and stop letting old folks die alone, hungry and overmedicated to keep them

oblivious to our neglect. We will cherish them like the treasures the wise men brought.

Reader 7: Our best and brightest will flourish and dream again because their minds and bodies are clean, clear and pure. Praise God, things are going to be different around here.

All Readers: Shine the light Lord cause things are going to be different around here. Hallelujah.

*(Cynthia A. Bond Hopson, **The Africana Worship Book for Year B**, Discipleship Resources, 2007, p. 105-106.)*

Benediction

Go in peace; love and care for one another in the name of Christ;

- and may God the Father bless you richly,

- may Christ the Son pour the riches of his grace upon you,

- and may the Holy Spirit, our comfort and our support, lead you in the path of hope, and of peace, of joy and of love.

both now and forevermore. Amen

<http://spirit-net.ca/sermons/b-ad03sg.php>

Week 4 – December 20, 2020 – Waiting on the Threshold

[2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16](#) & [Luke 1:26-38](#)

INTRODUCTION

It's the fourth Sunday of Advent, and the tug of war is over. Christmas now takes center stage. Families who have come home and may not join you for Christmas Eve services are expecting a Christmas message. It won't do to keep to the Advent theme of anticipation of the second coming of Christ. We need to relive the first. We need to live into the first. We are on the threshold of a new world. Never mind the fact that we've been on this threshold for over two thousand years. We are standing on the brink. We need to proclaim what is on the other side. What does it mean for Christ to take up residence in our world? What did it mean then,

and what does it mean now? Those are the questions that even the casual attendee has come to ask today.

The problem is, they've come with their answers too. And their answer is "not much." It doesn't mean much, except in romantic holiday movies and sappy cards in the mail. But this is your chance to tell a different story. This is your chance to tell the story of a life with Christ that changes everything.

It is important to remember, however, that this is an invitation, not a one-upmanship. We don't design a worship experience that announces how great we are. But we celebrate what God is doing in our midst and how our lives are being transformed. That's the key, that "being" word. We are in process and just as liable to mess up as anyone. We are not perfect people, but we love a perfect Lord, and we are trying to live into a perfect love.

The focus, of course, is not on us, but on Christ. So we tell the story of the unimaginable love of God that causes the incarnation to happen in history. The God who was and is other, is also one of us, Emmanuel. We sing the songs of the Christ who comes among us. We celebrate the wonder of incarnation, God in flesh among us. So, sing the Christmas carols we love so much, but keep in mind that we are not simply remembering a long time ago, but living in the presence of Emmanuel today.

We also find ways to share the presence. It isn't something we keep to ourselves. The one who comes to us comes to all, and our privilege is that we can announce this invitation, this good news to everyone. The lights we light in our sanctuaries and our homes is not just so we can enjoy them, but so that they can serve as beacons to a hurting world. How are we spreading the Word; how are we inviting the community? These are the questions that guide our worship this Sunday. Because we are the ones who know that company is coming.

PREACHING NOTES

It's almost Christmas. We hit critical mass somewhere around this last week before the day itself. We run on overload or we find a little bit of magic, a little miracle working to make it all come out the way we hope and pray that it will.

Those seem to be our choices in this season, don't they? Overwhelmed or by the skin of our teeth.

Why? Because it is Christmas. That's the answer we give and we get when we ask, which doesn't really help. It's almost the same as saying, "because I said so!"

Why do we do it? Well, because company is coming, and we want the house to look nice. Now, that might sound shallow, but it is what motivates us.

Appearances. It's not supposed to sound shallow, because there is something important going on there. In the desire to present a welcoming home, a home of joy and light, full of the sights and sounds and smells of the season, there is something profound being said about the nature of Christmas itself.

Appearances. How would it look if someone showed up before you got everything spruced up? How would it look if you were found with the boxes from the attic not put away, and the decorations strewn across the floor, and the kitchen a mess because the kids had to "help" with the baking, and the cat knocking the ornaments off the tree with abandon, and the tempers running short, and the strain beginning to show, and "if you push replay on 'Jingle Bell Rock' one more time I'm not going to be responsible for my actions!" How would it look?

That was essentially the question that David asks in second Samuel. He was relaxing in his Lazy-Boy throne, watching the Philistines losing to the Amalekites in the fourth quarter, and he happens to glance out the window into the backyard and sees what God has been living in since he moved back from wherever it was that he got stolen to; and he thought, "How does this look? Here I am living in my brand new house, with the full finished basement, full baths on every floor, walk-in closets and three-car garage, and there's God living in a pop-up trailer in my backyard. There's something not right here." Or maybe it was his grumpy wife Michael, who told him she didn't like the look of God's camper next to her rose bushes, and ever since God strung those lights up on the canopy it is starting to look like a trailer park out there.

How does it look to have me in here and God out there? Not good, was his conclusion. So, David says, well, we just gotta build God a house. And Nathan, who runs messages back and forth from the camper in the back into the palace, says, "Good idea!"

At least until he trundles out to the backyard and has a word with God. And God says no, says he's kinda partial to the pop-up camper. He likes being able to go where the people are; he likes to be on the move; he doesn't want to be tied down with the maintenance worries that home ownership brings. He prefers to be able to run out in front to head off the bad guys at the pass. And who's the one in the home building business anyway? Wasn't it I who led you home to the Promised Land? Wasn't it I who made you safe enough to build your tri-level ranch style palace anyway? I'm the one in the home-establishing business, not you. In fact, you might say, that is my main motivating factor in all this chosen people stuff in the first place, to make a home, a home for you and my people and through you to make a home for the whole world.

God says, "Come home." That's the offer God makes to David. "Come home, home to me, home to your true self, home to your true family." That's what God is really talking about, *home*. David is talking about building a house, and God wants to talk about finding a home. God built in all of us this desire for home. And maybe at Christmas, this desire for home is a little bit stronger, or a little bit closer to the surface. And sometimes we have to move heaven and earth to get there. And it upsets our routines, and we will wonder on occasion whether it is worth it, and yet we go, or they come, or we find a new place.

God told David that David wasn't going to build God a home, and then it said in the verses we skipped over, that David's son was going to do it. Then later, David and everyone thought that God was talking about Solomon, because Solomon did indeed build the temple as a home for God. At least that's what everyone thought God meant.

Everyone, but Luke that is. Luke reminds us that God had different ideas than the rest of us did. Solomon's temple was quite a structure, and God apparently liked it well enough. Well enough to visit, but it was never really God's home, or so it seems. For one thing it was always called Solomon's temple.

No, God had a different son in mind, when he said, "Your son will build my home." God was thinking of the one that Gabriel would call, "the Son of the Most High," the one that would "reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there would be no end." That's the son who would build God's home. No one quite got that. David didn't really understand what God meant. Solomon

didn't really understand either, but he got the construction crew out anyway. No one knew what God really meant— no one, but Mary.

But then the indications are that Mary didn't really understand either. How could she? Just imagine, this young, unmarried, soon-to-be married girl, gets a message from God. And the message is, God's coming home. Taking up residence. In her. Excuse me?

This nothing special, backwoods, teenager was going to be God's home for a few months. And talk about your troubling house guests! Feet on the furniture are nothing compared to this. Those who are mothers, who have experienced the joy of pregnancy and birth know better than the rest of us the hard realities of this little event. We are here a few days before Christmas talking about Mary finding out she's going to be pregnant, and then Wednesday night, she gives birth. Pretty amazing, really. But not real. She carried this load just like everyone else; she hurt and she sweated and she paced and she groaned and she struggled and she wondered and she worried and she bled and she gave birth in a barn because no one was willing to give her a bed. "Greetings favored one, the Lord is with you." The Lord has a different idea of favoritism than we do. The Lord has a different idea of blessing than we do. The Lord has a different idea of home than we do.

"Come home," says the Lord to us at Christmas time. "Come home." David wanted to build a house for God on the tallest hill in Jerusalem, where God could be removed and distant and overlook all the people who would have to go out of their way to give obedience to God. But God wanted to build his home a little closer to the deep realities of living in this world so that we would be surprised by God where we live. God wanted to build his home where we sweat and labor, where we work and play, where we laugh and cry, where our hearts are lifted up and often broken and sometimes healed.

David wanted God's home on a mountain, but God wanted his home in the womb of a virgin, in the feed box behind an inn in the little town of Bethlehem. God wanted his home in the backwoods region of Galilee, on the roads of the countryside, in the grassy place where five thousand sat and ate their fill. God wanted his home in the birthing units and wedding celebrations and the dinner parties. God wanted his home in the tear-filled bedrooms and sick beds and the graveyards of his children. God wanted his home in the court rooms and prison

cells and then on the streets of sorrow of Jerusalem and the dark hill called Calvary.

God wants his home in your home, in the living rooms and kitchens and playrooms and bedrooms of your life. God calls to us at Christmas and says, "Greetings, favored ones! I'm coming home, coming home for Christmas. Is there room for me in your crowded, busy lives? Is there room for me?" And like any baby born in our midst, he says, "I won't take up much room, just all that you have. Is there room for me? I'm coming home." And off to the side, almost out of our vision, an angel waits for our answer.

LITURGICAL RESOURCES

The preparations are made; now you stand at the door in anticipation of the party attendees arriving. You can't wait. You've done your best; now whoever comes will be the life of the party, will have the time of their lives. It is hard to contain the joy. That's the mood of this fourth Sunday of Advent.

Remember, we are "of" Advent, not "in" Advent. We don't simply reside in the season, we become it. We exude it. We live it and announce it and celebrate it with every fiber of our being. Company's Coming! And we couldn't be more excited.

There are some in your congregation for whom this is like Christmas Eve. They will be traveling or receiving guests and not be able to come to your services. There will be others who come especially for that sacred night, of course. But some will be missing. They need to hear the promise. They need to remember the hope and how God chose to become flesh and dwell among us so that we could see God's glory. Don't skimp on the glory for this Sunday. Don't hold it in abeyance. Enter into the moment, and embrace the gift. Let worship be as outward focused and celebratory as you can make it. Let everyone know that this child has come for them; this salvation has come to their house. This is not a secret we keep to ourselves, hidden behind locked doors. This is news we proclaim from the mountain tops, even if you live in the flatland. Make your own mountain and proclaim the good news.

Gathering Meditation

Ain't That Good News

(Based on Luke 1:26-38)

A whisper of grace landed in my ear. "You're going to have a baby boy, Mary! Now ain't that good news?" But my mind captured every question overwhelming me, and only one found its way free. "How? How can this be?"

"Mary, don't you know? Nothing is impossible for God! Nothing!"

And that's the only reminder I needed. Somewhere inside of me something was breathing life into my faith and calling me to speak. These words came from the gut of my soul where joy and pain, laughter and tears, life and death are born. They came from a place where God's Spirit dwells. And that soul smiled as these words journeyed from my mouth. "I am the Lord's. Let it be."

*(Ciona D. Rouse, **The Africana Worship Book for Year B**, Discipleship Resources, 2007, p. 26.)*

Call to Worship

Leader: Now is the time of watching and waiting.

People: The time of pregnant expectation of new life.

Leader: Now is the season of hope unfolding.

People: The dark winter season when hope is waiting to be born.

Leader: Let us come before God with receptive and willing spirits.

People: May our souls magnify God's name and may our spirits rejoice in God our Savior!

All: Rejoice! God comes to bring the birthday of life and hope. Amen.

*(Ruth Duck, **Bread for the Journey**, Pilgrim Press, 1981, p.18-19.)*

Prayer

O come to us, abide with us, our Lord, Emmanuel! God with us, You came to us long ago as a helpless babe, as one in need of human love and care. You taught us how to love and care for one another. Help us to hold on to childlike wonder,

amazement, and love, and help us to love one another all year long. Guide our feet into the way of peace, as only the Prince of Peace can lead us, by laying down our lives for one another and serving one another. In the name of Christ, Emmanuel, God with Us, we pray. Amen.

Liturgy created/adapted by Rev. Mindi Welton-Mitchell, rev-o-lution.org. <http://rev-o-lution.org/2017/12/15/worship-resources-for-december-24-2017-fourth-sunday-of-advent-christmas-eve/>

Prayer

(Let us pray for God to be with us. [silence])

Thank you, loving heavenly Father,
for coming with power to the Virgin Mary
and making her the mother of our Lord.
Come to us with your Holy Spirit,
so that we receive your saving word
and rejoice in our Savior.
For he lives with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever.

Amen.

<http://www.lca.org.au/worship/cowadmin/?p=6651>

Prayer of Confession

“Lord, We Do”

Lord, you know that the time we’ve spent away from you has been filled with turmoil, disappointment, frustration, heartache, and despair. We have forgotten all about being blameless and turning the other cheek. We gave in to urges to be petty, spiteful, and hurtful. And while “telling it like it is” sure felt good at the time, we now find ourselves empty, confused, and ashamed. Today, we come here for Sabbath, for rest, refreshment, and renewal. Lord, we want to be sanctified and holy; we do. We want to be kind, to hold on to the good and encourage and greet each other in love, but you’re going to have to help us – a

lot. Fill our mouths with praise and laughter, our hearts with joy and peace and our souls with quiet satisfaction. This is our prayer. Amen.

Response: The grace of our Lord is all over us, no matter what comes or what goes. Whether there are floods, earthquakes, overdue bills, disease, hardheaded children, unresponsive parents, betrayal, unfaithfulness – it doesn't matter because God is bigger than all the things that perplex us. May our hearts and minds be filled with confidence and peace. Amen.

(Cynthia A. Bond Hopson, The Africana Worship Book for Year B, Discipleship Resources, 2007, p. 148)

Litany for Christ's Coming (week 4)

A. As the days of Advent hasten on and we draw nearer to the day of Christ's coming, let us pray with fervent hearts for the needs of the world:

C. Come, Lord Jesus, and do not tarry.

A. Lord Christ, in joy and anticipation, we await your coming with lamps lighted and hearts aglow with faith.

C. Come now and illumine the whole universe.

A. All creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God.

C. Come soon and save those who wait in darkness.

A. The suffering and the poor look to you for their hope.

C. Come and raise us to glory in your presence.

A. The troubled and oppressed have nowhere to turn but to you.

C. Come quickly and banish the powers of evil and darkness around us.

A. The sick and weary, the dying and faint-hearted cry out in their despair.

C. Come and bring us eternal wholeness and health.

A. Even the martyrs and the blessed dead make their plea, "O Lord, how long?"

C. Come now and give us eternal life.

A. The Spirit and the Church cry out:

C. Come, Lord Jesus.

A. All those who await your appearance pray:

C. Come, Lord Jesus.

A. The whole creation pleads:

C. Come, Lord Jesus.

P. Hearken to the prayers of your servants, Lord Jesus. By the sign of the manger of Bethlehem, give us hope in the promise of your return. Come quickly, Lord, and bring us to the joys of heaven, where we will praise you with the Father and the Holy Spirit forever and ever.

C. Amen

The Rev. Thomas L. Weitzel, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

<http://www.liturgybytlw.com/AdvXmas/Advent.html>

Advent Benediction

P. Receive the benediction. In all your Advent preparations, remain watchful with your eyes on Christ, whose birth in a manger is but a promise of his coming again in glory. And may the blessing of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit be with you now and forever.

C. Amen.

Advent Dismissal

A. The Lord is coming soon. Come, Lord, and do not tarry.

C. Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

The Rev. Thomas L. Weitzel, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

<http://www.liturgybytlw.com/AdvXmas/Advent.html>

Christmas Eve – December 24, 2020 – Welcoming the Guest

Christmas Day – December 25, 2020 – Welcoming the Guest

INTRODUCTION

It's Christmas Eve! Or Christmas Day! Maybe both, if you are able to gather a community to worship on these high holy days.

What a feeling of celebration, what a joy that all this anticipation has come to a kind of fruition. True, there will always be the questions about whether anything

will change in the world around us because of this event. Transformation always takes longer than we think it should. And it often begins with something small, a new vision, a stronger hope, a baby in a manger. Something small that will change everything.

But for now, we welcome. We welcome the stranger and the family with the same enthusiasm. We welcome the sojourner and the faithful, together with the one who comes with healing in his wings. This is a night for celebration or a day for reflection and joy. Whether that celebration is loud and raucous, or quiet and reflective, there needs to be celebration that God is faithful and that the promised one is with us, Emmanuel.

What texts should you read? Any of them. All of them. Tell the story. Here are the texts assigned for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. Choose whatever speaks to you. Read them all in a celebration of the living Word.

[Isaiah 9:2-7](#); [Psalm 96](#) (UMH 815); [Titus 2:11-14](#); [Luke 2:1-20](#)

[Isaiah 52:7-10](#); [Psalm 98](#) (UMH 818); [Hebrews 1:1-4 \(5-12\)](#); [John 1:1-14](#)

Some of the classic texts for these days – walking in darkness with Isaiah on Christmas Eve; singing a new song with the psalms; grace has appeared says Paul to Titus, even as he points to Easter; and Luke’s story of angels and shepherds and a babe at the center of it all. Read it all, if you dare, or choose what speaks to your community, what opens them to the guest in your midst. Or on Christmas Day, go with Isaiah to tell it on the mountain; sing with the orchestra of creation the song of victory with the psalmist; preach the sermon of Hebrews about the Son who bears the imprint of God into the midst of the people, a task now given to us; or recite John’s poem of incarnation that describes the indescribable in the only language that works.

Then let the word speak. Read it, perform it, sing it, present it. But don’t explain it. Don’t reduce it by attempting to put it into terms our human minds can easily grasp and then dismiss. Instead stand in wonder at it; let awe be the mode of worship. A joyful awe that sweeps everyone up into one heart and mind is what brings the faithful and the straggler back year after year. Light the lights, knowing that the darkness is still surrounding you, but be amazed at how the little, feeble

flame chases away that dark. In the glow of the candles, there are friends to be seen, brothers and sisters, not strangers and enemies. We are one in the light.

This is a night for tradition, for children and for adults turned into children again. Not childish, but childlike so that we can see the kin-dom. Don't shuttle the children to the side; don't worry about interruptions on this night, on this day. This celebration is about the interruption to end all interruptions: God tearing open the heavens to reside among us in the body of a child—not a child, an infant, vulnerable, loud, and human.

The colors are white and gold. White encompasses all the colors of the spectrum, including the ones we can't really see, the ones beyond our vision. Gold is the precious treasure of heaven spilled out on the floor of earth like an accident in the secure vaults of paradise. Except it wasn't an accident. It was a choice, a plan, a hope poured out that we might know what true riches are, and rejoice. Let everything that breathes, every color, every treasure, proclaim the beauty and the wonder of God, born a child among us. Company has come.

PREACHING NOTES

If you haven't already, please read the Planning Worship article for this day or these two days. Our helps work for either Christmas Eve or Christmas Day. No doubt if you're doing both, the crowd on Christmas Eve will far eclipse that of Christmas Day. But it is certainly worth gathering, if there are those who will gather, even online, for a celebration of the day.

But, to repeat, it is not the preacher's responsibility to explain incarnation. It is an exercise in futility. Dr. Harrel Beck, the late Old Testament Professor from Boston University said "When I climb into the pulpit on Christmas Eve, there is a voice inside of me that says, 'don't preach. Sing!'"

These are services for story, for art, for breathless excitement and deep joy. And invitation, don't forget the invitation. But don't be heavy-handed about it. Just open the door, kneel at the manger, and invite others to come and kneel with you.

There are plenty of texts that could be used. Here is what was written in Planning Worship for this service in case you skipped to the preaching notes:

What texts should you read? Any of them. All of them. Tell the story. Here are the texts assigned for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, choose whatever speaks to you. Read them all in a celebration of the living Word.

Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 96 (UMH 815); Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-20

Isaiah 52:7-10; Psalm 98 (UMH 818); Hebrews 1:1-4 (5-12); John 1:1-14

Some of the classic texts for this day, these days – walking in darkness with Isaiah on Christmas Eve; singing a new song with the psalms; grace has appeared, says Paul to Titus, even as he points to Easter; and Luke’s story of angels and shepherds and a babe at the center of it all. Read it all, if you dare, or choose what speaks to your community, what opens them to the guest in your midst. Or on Christmas Day, go with Isaiah to tell it on the mountain; sing with the orchestra of creation the song of victory with the psalmist; preach the sermon of Hebrews about the Son who bears the imprint of God into the midst of the people, a task now given to us; or recite John’s poem of incarnation that describes the indescribable in the only language that works.

Here’s the reality: every time you preach, you are attempting to re-create the incarnation. It is the task of the preacher to put flesh on the idea of Christ. You take an idea, a text or an issue, and you weave a reality around it with words and stories. When the preacher preaches, Christ walks up and down the aisles of the sanctuary; Christ enters the homes of those watching online. The best response to a sermon has always been, “Now I see.” The shepherds returned praising God for all they had heard and seen. It doesn’t say they told what they understood, or figured out, or theologized about. Just what they saw, and what they heard.

You are describing the indescribable. So why not fall back on the prologue to the Gospel of John? How do you describe the indescribable? How do you explain the unexplainable? It is beyond our capabilities, to be honest. It escapes us. And yet we try. We see a glorious sunset, and we want to describe to someone who wasn’t there. We wax eloquent about hues and shading, about cloud formations

and transitions, and when we are done, they say, “Sounds nice.” “Nice?” we think, “nice? It was mind blowing, heart stopping. And you think it was nice?”

Tell people about a landscape you saw or a concert you heard. Tell them about an intimate moment with the love of your life, and if you are lucky, they will smile and say, “nice.” Or something equally deflating. Because it doesn’t transfer. You can’t recapture the moment and pass it on to someone else. No matter how good you are with words, you can’t describe the sight you saw or the experience you experienced in a way that transfers to someone else’s mind and heart.

The best you can hope for is that the description you provide allows them to recall a similar sight or moment in their own life. Association sometimes works. They can say, “Well, I remember a sunset I saw from my cabin on the coast: it was . . .” And then your eyes glaze over as you begin to think, “It couldn’t possibly be as spectacular as the one I just saw.” You can’t describe the indescribable.

So, have some sympathy for John. He is trying to give us the essence of the Christmas story. He doesn’t want to tell us the surface of the event, like Matthew and Luke. They were interested in happenings, in personalities. Who said what, when, and where. They are like journalists, which, though complicated, is why their stories are so different. But their task was still easier than what John sets out to do.

John wants us to see the grandeur of this sunset – or sunrise, which might be a bit more descriptive. He wants us to understand the nuance of the symphony that God has composed and conducted and played in our presence. John wants us to not just hear the notes, but to follow the story, to see beneath the surface into the intentions and purposes, the meanings, and the applications. He wants us to not just see the landscape, but to be a part of it, to stand in awe of it, even as we walk through it, abide in it.

So, of course he falls back on poetry. Of course, he sings a song; he tells a story. There aren’t enough facts; there isn’t enough reality to contain a thesis on incarnation. And you couldn’t have said it better yourself.

The only way to say this same thing with even simpler words is this: Merry Christmas. Welcome the guest.

LITURGICAL RESOURCES

Here we are, gathered on this holy night (or special day), remembering how God tore open the heavens, how God redeemed all of history, how the Incarnated Christ came to gather all souls – our souls – into a new kin-dom of love and grace. We have entered into an invitational way of living, an opening of doors and minds and hearts. Company has come to worship with us, serve with us, love with us. Tonight we celebrate the community that we are and that we are becoming.

How should this service sound? Well, that depends. If children are involved, it should be loud and fast and breathless in its excitement. If it is late, midnight candlelight, it should be reverent and quiet, listening for the angel wing flapping in the night. You determine how it should sound. You open the door for spontaneity or for practiced ritual. You help shape the experience as best you can. But let there be sound, laughter, and shouts of joy. Let there be excitement. Yes, many have done this over and over for years, and yet it is all new again tonight.

Find ways to be tactile, keeping in mind safety concerns for the virus. But ask people to bring something to hold, something to wave, whether in person or online. It could be a decoration or a gift—something that speaks of connection and community, of invitation or welcome. Provide a hostess gift, if that can be allowed—something that says, “I’m glad you came tonight”. At the very least, let people see smiles and welcome on the faces of those who lead.

Notice that we haven’t made specific suggestions for what scripture should be read in this service. But certainly the Word should be read! Some choose to tell the whole story, from both Matthew and Luke, weaving them together as though they were one ongoing narrative. This is how we have heard the story, and it is the popular understanding. That is why our nativity sets have both wise men and shepherds in them, even though the story doesn’t have them there at the same time. Perhaps it would be better to focus on part of the story. Even though Year B is Mark’s year, we’ve told part of Luke’s story already, so why not continue with that for this service?

The other option is to go to a Hebrew scripture prophecy, Isaiah 9:2-7, perhaps. Or go to John’s prologue as a way of telling the story from a poetic or theological perspective. But present it with a sense of wonder and of joy, not of complacency as though we’ve heard it a hundred times. We may have heard it that often, but it

is new. And just maybe there is someone who has gathered or logged on with you who has never heard it before. Present it for that person, let that person have the joy.

Call to Worship

Unexpectedly, the time came! The child was born!

The Savior of the world is here!

Unexpectedly, the angels told the shepherds of the newborn Savior;

The Savior of the world is here!

Unexpectedly, the shepherds went and found the child, lying in a manger.

The Savior of the world is here!

We wait for Christ to come again. We wait for Christ to enter our world and lives in a new way.

Come, Lord Jesus, Come!

Liturgy created/adapted by Rev. Mindi Welton-Mitchell, rev-o-lution.org. <http://rev-o-lution.org/2017/12/15/worship-resources-for-december-24-2017-fourth-sunday-of-advent-christmas-eve/>

Call to Worship

A New Day Dawnin'!

(Based on Isaiah 9:2-7)

One: We were down in the dark, now we glimpse a great light.

Many: Thank God, we see a new day dawnin'!

One: What was nothing is turning to something. Terror tried us, storms denied us. Injustice angered us, apathy discouraged us. But thank God today that,

Many: We see a new day dawnin'!

One: Oppression giving way to overflow.

Many: We see a new day dawnin'!

One: Burdens becoming blessings!

Many: We see a new day dawnin'!

One: Sadness to salvation!

Many: We see a new day dawnin'!

One: The yoke is broke! A new day is dawnin'! For a Savior is born for us.
Wonderful Counselor – guide for us. Everlasting Father – provider for us. Prince of
Peace – drawing near to us.

All: It's a new day! And I thank God for it! Let us worship the Lord our God!

*(Joseph W. Daniels, **The Africana Worship Book for Year B**, Discipleship Resources, 2007, p. 51)*

Prayer

Loving God, moved by the coming of Christ to our lives, we seek to be your people. Help us to live in faithful covenant with you and with one another. Let the peace of Christ guide us, and let Christ's message in all its richness live in our hearts, that we may praise you without ceasing. Amen.

*(Ruth Duck, **Bread for the Journey**, Pilgrim Press, 1981, p.24.)*

Prayers of the People/Intercessions

O God, you are never revealed so completely as in the face of the child of Bethlehem. Hear us as we give you thanks for those who today reveal your love in our world in his spirit.

We pray for those who give you hands by doing their best toward their brothers and sisters; for those who give you a mouth by speaking words of justice and peace for the broken and oppressed; for those who give your poverty the look of hope for your reign, revealing you simply by being your children, reflecting your beauty as did your only Son Jesus.

We hold up in prayer the lonely and hurting, the hungry and homeless, the sick and dispossessed, knowing that your heart has always been nearest those who are poor in spirit and least likely to be thought of as people touched by the hand of divinity.

As we remember how you came to live among us in the flesh, and as we celebrate that moment long ago which lives forever in the hearts of those who believe, and as we long for your fullness in our lives that we too might enflesh the goodness and love of Christ in our day, we ask that you would bless us, your church, to be

food for the hungry and hope for those who are lost and alone—a living testament of Christ’s faithfulness to you. May all who drink of your one spirit receive new life to give to those in our world who are thirsty for meaning and belonging.

Pour out your Spirit upon us, your people. Continue in our lives the mystery of Christmas. Let your Son become flesh in us, so that we may reveal you to our world all the days of our lives. Holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray. Cast out our sin and enter in. Be born in us today.

(From Life in Liturgy, <https://lifeinliturgy.wordpress.com/2017/12/11/christmas-eve-day/>)

Prayer

In our more cynical or despairing moments,
we wrestle with faith
and with the idea of you coming to us, O God;
But, somewhere in our hearts we know,
that we do not need you to come,
because you have always been here
with us,
among us,
within us.

And so now, as we welcome you again,
we acknowledge that you need no welcome;
it is we who need to remember
who need to see again your presence,
who need to allow your ‘with-us-ness’
to flood our hearts and lives.

Welcome to our world, Jesus,
but more importantly, we thank you
for welcoming us
into your ever-coming, always-present world.

Amen.

<https://sacredise.com/prayers/season/advent/welcome-to-our-world/>

Prayer of Confession

We celebrate You and praise You,
God of new beginnings and surprising opportunities

Because You never cease to make Yourself available to us.

We appreciate You and thank You,
God of unquenchable life and irrepressible grace

Because You continue to offer us the resources of Your Spirit.

We love You and embrace You,
God of unfailing compassion and constant companionship

Because You walk beside us and transform us into agents of love.

Forgive us, O Lord,

**When we seek to keep You to ourselves
and shut others from Your influence.**

Forgive us, O Christ,

**When we wallow in our own weakness
and take advantage of the weakness of others.**

Forgive us, O Spirit,

**When we deny Your friendship
and withhold Your compassion from others.**

(Silent Confession)

**Heal us, restore and empower us, O God, we pray
For the sake of Your kingdom which has broken into our world.**

Amen.

(Written by John van de Laar Ä 2008 Sacredise, <https://sacredise.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/A-Liturgy-for-Advent-and-Christmas.pdf>)

Benediction / Christmas Blessing

Behold the Lord proclaims to all the earth, “Your salvation has come! You are my holy people, the redeemed, whom I have sought out, never to be forsaken.” As God delights and rejoices over you, go in peace, rejoicing in the Lord. And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you now and always. Amen.

(From *Life in Liturgy*, <https://lifeinliturgy.wordpress.com/2017/12/11/christmas-eve-day/>)

First Sunday after Christmas – December 27, 2020 – Enjoying the Company **[Isaiah 61:10-62:3](#) & [Luke 2:22-40](#)**

INTRODUCTION

There is an inevitable let down after Christmas. This is December 27, only two days after the day that most are still digesting. The other phenomenon that normally occurs at this time is that folks are starting to depart; families are returning home; people are going back to work. That may all be different now, even as we will still be recovering or enduring the pandemic. But there is still a shift in thinking, in focus, in direction in these Christmastide worship experiences.

That is why we chose to continue the series through the Sundays after Christmas. It is hoped that if there were folks who appeared during the peak of the Christmas season, that you are holding on to them, or at least making sure they know that the welcome continues. This is not the time to shift to taking for granted those who may be new to the fellowship. Yes, we want them to feel a part of the body and not outsiders, but our hospitality need not end once they’ve made their second or third or even more visits to our gathering.

The hospitality teams or the hosts (appointed or natural) need to be on the lookout for those who might still be new. It is not the time to overwhelm newcomers; however, but to begin to work on the connections. Evidence suggests that folks stay because they find a relationship within the community they have attended. Who is reaching out to welcome? Who is gathering them under their wing? Who is showing them around or accompanying them to worship and other events in the life of the church? This kind of hospitality is harder if worship is online only, but connections can still be made.

How do you enjoy your company in worship? First of all, you make them feel at ease. That means that you explain everything that you do. You don't have any little *gotcha* moments in worship, where everyone knows to stand or sit or move, except those who are new because nothing is ever written out, instructions are not given or posted to help people move through the service. Secondly, find out something about newcomers, but not by putting them on the spot in a large group setting. That can be intimidating for people familiar with the space. Instead, find someone who can approach them and engage them in conversation about themselves. Most people like talking about themselves in a safe environment with someone who seems genuinely interested in them. And then make sure that these "investigators" know how to share the information and with whom to share it. They can also introduce the new folk to pastors or other leaders who might continue the conversation.

Maybe there isn't anyone identifiably new in your setting. We know everyone, and everyone knows what to do and where to go. That may be true, but it is still worth practicing how to include guests and shape the service to first timers, so that they feel comfortable. And no matter how close-knit your congregation might be, there are those who aren't as well known, whose stories haven't been told, and who could provide hospitality practice for the congregation. Continue to examine the worship flow to get a sense of how it might be viewed by someone who hasn't grown up in a church environment. Help everyone see the reasons behind the different movements of the worship order. It just might be that some long timers among you might say, "I didn't know that's why we did that!"

Enjoying the company means also celebrating the Christ among us. As the chief guest who is also the host, let our worship be full of celebration of that presence. Let the prayers acknowledge the Christ born among us; let our songs be not just about the baby, but about the call to go and tell the story. Isaiah tells us to celebrate the new spring that has been planted in us (yes it is the dead of winter, but the new life of spring is not far off). He tells us to rejoice in the new clothes of righteousness. Maybe you could ask everyone to wear something new, if they received a gift of clothes for Christmas, as a sign of this celebration.

Above all, Isaiah tells us we cannot keep silent. Let there be shouts and songs of joy, face to face or online. For those joining online, ask for a recorded shout to be

played during worship, everyone checking in as we celebrate the new life among us. Let us together enjoy the company we've welcomed.

PREACHING NOTES

Out of the blue one day, my parents bought my brother a piano. We were older, then, college age. Because he could play. Oh, my, could he play. I was given the gift of appreciation of musical ability. Yeah, that means I can't play anything. But I can listen. And he could play, my little brother. I know he would say he hasn't kept up with it and isn't as good as he was, and I wouldn't argue with him. I know it takes practice to be good. But I never saw him practice before. I just saw him play. I mean, it never seemed like it was hard, like he was straining or struggling or working at it though I know he was. But it never looked like it and rarely sounded like it. He just played. He practiced playing, and I practiced listening.

Listening doesn't get you many admirers, not like playing does, and yet it is essential for the life of the Spirit. This week of the "Company's Coming" series, we get to hear the story of a professional listener, a man who dedicated his life to listening. And then when the time came, he played. He sang the song he'd been listening for. He sat down to play the tune he had learned by ear.

It's a long story, but worth reading all the way through —because we need to listen for a while. We needed to catch the tune; we needed to follow the rhythms. Simeon learned how to listen. His name means "heard," believe it or not. It was what he was born to do. So, he did. He listened; day and night, he listened. He was listening for the future. He was listening for hope, the consolation of Israel, Luke tells us. He was listening for that which would bring peace, that which would bring light. He listened. Day after day, he went to the temple to listen. He heard the cries of the people. He heard the songs of the prayers, the loud happy celebratory ones that seemed so loud and brash, but good hearted anyway. He heard the ritual ones, spoken sometimes as though they had lost their meaning, and sometimes as though the meaning was so deep it resonated through the souls of those who prayed. He heard the wordless prayers that were wept from swollen and reddened eyes, wrung out of twisted scraps of cloth between hands

gnarled with pain and fear. He heard the proud and grateful prayers of people who knew how blessed they were. He heard them and wept and laughed with them. He heard them all.

But he heard more because he listened deeper. He heard the responses. He heard the sighs of the Spirit as it flowed like wisps of comfort into the hearts of the hopeless and broken. He heard the soothing song of blessing as it played on hearts less in tune than his, but aware nonetheless somehow. He heard the invitation of the God he loved, to follow, to obey, to keep close and stay awake, to watch and listen. He heard the commandment not as a hammer on a cymbal, but as a finger plucking a string. He heard; somehow he heard. Then, that day, he heard the music shift into a higher key, a note of anticipation fulfilled, a baton pointed, a new singer taking the stage. And he followed the director's gaze and welcomed the one who comes.

Then Simeon, who lived a life of listening, became a teacher of the song he knew. He sang into the hearts of those who came carrying more than they knew. His song was a gift to the church. Called the "*Nunc Dimittis*" from the first words of the song in Latin, "*Now let your servant depart in peace.*" We've always thought that he was saying it was time to die. Because Luke told us that he was promised that he wouldn't die until he heard what he was listening for. But maybe he is simply saying, "I'm done listening. I've heard all I need to hear. I've heard the voice of the one who sings a song of salvation, who chants the chorus of redemption. My ears are full."

He may be done listening, but he isn't done singing. He has to teach the song to those who will sing it. And his colleague, Anna, teaches it to any and all who are around them, running from one to another to make sure they sing. You can't stand silent in this worship service; you can't have closed lips for this hymn. It doesn't matter whether you think you can sing or not. We need to learn the tune—the falling and the rising, the major and the minor key, that which makes us smile and that which evokes a tear. We need to sing. We might as well; our inner thoughts are revealed anyway, Simeon says so, and he ought to know. He has been listening to those inner thoughts his whole life. And now he sings the song he learned by ear.

It takes time to learn to listen, but it is worth the effort. The Spirit rested on Simeon, Luke says, *rested*. Not stirred up, not agitated or poked or prodded, but rested. Maybe if we listen more to the Spirit, the voice of God, then we might know rest, as Jesus promised. But we can also learn to sing, to play by ear.

True, singing is problematic these days. Maybe in your church, you're not singing at all, just listening. Or maybe you are singing through a mask, trying not to share those droplets. That is understandable; and good for you. But the Spirit needs to be shared. The song needs to be sung, if only in our hearts and our heads.

Isaiah doesn't talk about singing, though he could have. He talks about celebrating; he talks about rejoicing; he talks about shouting. Lots of droplets there, it would seem. "I will not keep silent," he proclaims, for Zion's sake. And what brings about all this noise, all this celebrating and shouting? Well, it's the new growth, Isaiah claims. It is what is happening in the community of faith by God's action.

When we enjoy the company that God has brought into our midst, we spend part of the time listening. Whether we are talking about the Christ who was born among us, or the guests who came because we put out the welcome mat, we need to listen first. To hear their story, to learn their song, so that we can sing with them. And then we need to teach our songs, Christ's songs, so that together we can wear the diadem. No wait, so that we can be the diadem, that's what Isaiah says. So that we can be the sign that God is in our midst, and we are listening and singing and enjoying the company.

LITURGICAL RESOURCES

This is another of those "low Sundays" that we face in the worship life of the church. We want to hold on to the joy of the season, but it has already begun to fade, and the world around us has already turned away to the next thing (New Year's Eve? Valentine's Day?) But we live into Christmastide. We seek to embrace all that God has in store for God's people by diving into the meaning and purpose of Christ. We look forward, in other words, to Resurrection even now.

Not that we begin talking about Easter just yet. But we walk with Jesus and his family through the traditions and the blessings and the promises. Isaiah 61:10-

62:3 is about celebrating the fulfillment of the promise. Luke 2:22-40 is about acknowledging the child who brings completion with him, through the words of Simeon. So, lean into the promises, continue the invitation, welcome the stranger, live into the presence of grace among us.

We want to hold on to the energy, even though we are weary. We want to acknowledge our struggles, even while we live in hope and with open eyes to see God at work in our world.

Prayer of Confession

O God, you search us out and know us,
and all that we are is open to you.
We confess that we have sinned.

***In your mercy, Lord,
forgive us and heal us.***

When we make no room for Christ,
and fail to welcome him into our lives,

***In your mercy, Lord,
forgive us and heal us.***

When we follow shooting stars
and squander our gifts in Herod's court,

***In your mercy, Lord,
forgive us and heal us.***

When we seek to cut down those
who might rise above us,

***In your mercy, Lord,
forgive us and heal us.***

When we sanitize your birth place
and erase from memory the poor and displaced,

***In your mercy, Lord,
forgive us and heal us.***

When we sing sweet sentiments over Christ's birth,
and fail to rejoice over his everyday presence,

***In your mercy, Lord,
forgive us and heal us.***

We turn to you, O Christ,
perfect union of Spirit and flesh;

***We renounce evil;
We claim your love;
We choose to be made whole.***

<http://laughingbird.net/Seasonal.html>

Prayer of Confession

Holy Friend, Savior and Healer of the world, we in your church family admit to you
the frustration we feel for our part in the evil that infests humanity.

We are called to truth

but we prefer darkness to light because our investments are there.

We are called to hope

but we slide into the negativity of the snide and lost.

We are called to grace,

but we are at times as mean-spirited as the self-serving.

We are called to mercy,

but we harbor grudges and let slip insidious innuendos.

We are called to faith,

but we live as if everything depended on us.

We are called to love,

but it rarely goes beyond loving those who love us.

God of abundant loving, please forgive your church family for our failure to
uphold and express the generosity of your ways. Forgive us for those sins of which
we are ashamed, and for the sly sins which as yet we have not recognized and

brought out into your light. Please be to us, not the God we deserve but the Savior who heaps grace upon grace. In you alone we place our trust. Through Christ Jesus our Redeemer,

Amen!

Forgiveness

Sisters and brothers in the family of God, though a sinner myself, I have a commission from the Living God to proclaim to you the forgiveness of sins and the life abundant. In God you may receive the grace, mercy and peace which make renewal undeniable. Through Christ Jesus our Savior.

Thanks be to God!

(Rev. Bruce Prewer, Australian Church Resources,
<http://www.bruceprewer.com/DocB/BCHRISTMAS1.htm>)

Affirmation of Faith

WE BELIEVE

(based on Isaiah 61:10-11)

We believe.

We believe joyfully in the God of love,
with all our being we celebrate our God.
As soil after drought produces green shoots
and as garden seeds spring into new life,
so our God produces justice and praise
to spring up among all nations.

We believe in God
who dresses us in the garments of salvation;
who by the grace of Christ
covers us with the robe of righteousness,
adopts us into the holy family
and promises to make us a crown of beauty,

a royal diadem in the hand of God.

This we believe through Christ Jesus.

May the Holy Spirit strengthen our belief.

(Rev. Bruce Prewer, Australian Church Resources,
<http://www.bruceprewer.com/DocB/BCHRISTMAS1.htm>)

Second Sunday after Christmas – January 3, 2021 – Living the Celebration **[Ephesians 1:3-14](#)**

INTRODUCTION

A bit of a curve here on the second Sunday after Christmas. We've been in tandem with Isaiah and the Gospel text for the week up to now. So why shift to Ephesians for this last part of the series? Because we need the blessing. OK, also because the lectionary shifts to Jeremiah and to the prologue of the Gospel of John, which we may have just covered on Christmas Eve or Day. Since there was a change coming anyway, why not make a big change and listen in on Paul's opening words to the church in Ephesus?

We're wrapping up Christmas this week. Some may have already packed everything away; others may still be sitting in the glow of the lights and tinsel. But the goal isn't to shuffle it all away, but rather to embrace the fullness of the community that we have become – incorporating the new but becoming one in Christ.

It is not, however, about self-congratulations that we gather. Yes, indeed we are blessed. But we are blessed in order to bless the source of blessing. Paul tells us that the gift we have received, the gift of new life, is so that we might live for the praise of God's glory. That's what this worship experience is about – praising God. Yes, of course, every worship service includes praise. But this week, praise is the beginning and the end. And in the heart is the call to praise, to a life of praise.

This is what living the celebration means: living a life of praise. But now our circle is wider because of the company who have come and stayed. Maybe that company includes neighbors and new potential members. But certainly the

company is the renewed spirit of Christ who dwells among us in new and dynamic ways. That is why we need to be careful and not speak of a return to normalcy. We aren't returning to anything; we are going forward. We are embracing the new thing that God is doing in our midst. We celebrate the new community that we have become. Even if it is the same people, we are renewed and revived by our attention to the Advent and Christmas season. We didn't endure all that went before; we were transformed by it.

What that transformation looks like is still being worked out. Maybe the time apart and online has made us a new community, longing to see one another face to face. We took that for granted before. Now it is the core of our being. Maybe if we took "a sabbatical" during the pandemic and didn't meet or do very much online, now we are looking forward to becoming a new community of faith born out of separation and distance. You might even consider a name change, perhaps temporarily at least. Instead of First United Methodist Church, you can become New First United Methodist. New Trinity, New St. Paul's, New Wood Street; find a way to celebrate the newness of your fellowship.

Maybe you want to save that for next week, after 2021 begins. More on that in our next series! In the meantime, plant a seed of hope as you cling to the promise of a new community, a new blessing. Rejoice in the fellowship of one another as you live into what God is doing in your midst. And then lift your voices and sing God's praise, maybe literally, maybe spiritually, if that is still too risky. But let your hearts be glad as you live the celebration.

PREACHING NOTES

There are some texts that need to be savored; to be read slowly, almost ponderously as each word is wrung for every ounce of meaning and depth. This is not one of those texts. The beginning of Ephesians is designed to be read quickly, breathlessly as you get caught up in the emotion and the spirit of the words. This is a passage that is meant to be felt more than understood. It is to be poured out over the hearers like a fountain of sparkling wine that bubbles and foams and lightens the heart. Indeed, when Paul, or a ghost-writer, or later disciple trying to capture the essence of Paul, wrote these words, it was done without hesitation or pause. This whole text is one sentence in Greek. Clause after clause pours forth as

though ideas and thoughts and emotions were weaving together almost on their own as the words were captured like a flock of butterflies in a net. When they were written, or dictated, or dreamed, they brought with them such hope and such joy, it must be experienced before it can be believed.

Not, it must be stressed, that there isn't anything worth wrestling with intellectually in these verses. There is certainly profundity to be found here. And time should be spent digging deep into the themes and promises and hopes tucked away behind the lines and phrases. It's just that you can't move toward understanding, full understanding, until you enter into the spirit. This text is a song that has to be sung before it can be examined, before it can really be understood.

It is first a song of blessing. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us . . ." (1:3). It is praise to the source of blessing. It is an acknowledgement of the blessings that have poured down over us. Us? The church, the chosen, the children of God. Many commentators (*such as Thomas R. Steagald, **Feasting on the Word**, Year B, Volume 1, p.185*) point out that this text is like the Jewish *berakah*, the formal language of blessing of God that is common in Jewish worship and prayer. Paul presents us liturgy, an act of worship, as we read these verses. Not only that, but there is a table of contents here for the rest of the letter—topics that he will return to later appear here in summary form. Ideas like the mystery revealed, the gift of the Holy Spirit, the will of God, are all touched on in this prelude of grace.

What is remarkable about this text is that it is wholly God-directed, God-inspired, and God-drenched. Yet, it also manages to invite us to explore the blessing placed within us. It celebrates the God who is at work in us and around us. We were blessed, chosen, destined for adoption, redeemed, forgiven, lavished with grace, taught the mystery, given an inheritance, so that we might live for the praise of God. It is about living a life of praise, of celebration for what God has and is doing in us.

It is worth dwelling on a few things in this amazing list of blessings. You can choose which ones speak to you most deeply as you seek to live the celebration of the company who have come. But consider these first. The mystery: Paul speaks of the mystery seven times in this short letter. It is obviously central to the

thinking in the Epistle. In fact, it is a mystery that is no longer a mystery. *Musterion* in Greek has a variety of meanings, but for Paul it refers to the supreme redemptive revelation of God through the gospel of Christ, (according to the Freiberg Lexicon in *Bibleworks*, version 10). Paul presents it as a gift to us, as the knowledge that will lead us through this life, that God is working through Christ to gather all things up in God, things in heaven and things on earth.

Sit with that for a moment. Gather all things up in God. In the fullness of time, writes Paul, God will gather all things up. This has the meaning of unifying, making one under a single leadership, God in this case. In 2 Corinthians, Paul tells us that we have been given the ministry of reconciliation. Laid alongside this passage, we now know that we are working God's purposes out when we are in the business of reconciliation, making one, uniting. It's not a mystery because we don't understand it. Or that it waits to be revealed. It is *musterion* because it is the source of all that we do, the knowledge that drives us. Above all else, we know that it is our calling and our joy to bind together, to bring together things of heaven and things of earth. Or as Jesus puts it, to love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

The second word that could stand some reflection is *believe*. Paul concludes our text by saying, "remember how this worked?" Remember how you came to faith? You heard the word of truth, the gospel of salvation and you believed in him, and were sealed by the Holy Spirit. You believed in him. Too often, we have reduced this word to the barest minimum of meaning. You made an intellectual assent to the idea of Christ. You agreed with an argument. You accepted a fact or a truth. Alongside the thousand other things you believe that you have picked up from living in this wonderful but broken world.

There is a weight to this word that many of us have lost. What Paul argues here is that when you heard this word, when I brought you this story, this person and handed him to you like a gift from above, you changed everything about who and what you are. You put your life in his hands. You secured your future to his grace. You wrapped yourself around him like he was now the air that you breathe and the bread that sustains you. We cannot be satisfied with an intellectual nod of the head to some cliché about salvation.

We conclude our Advent/Christmastide series with this idea that we are called to live our faith, not just accept it. Not just think about it, but to live it fully and wholeheartedly. Christ has come, and we've opened our doors to the wider community because we are called to gather all things together in God as a precursor to the gathering that will be done. We live each day in celebration of that mystery, that hope. Company has come.

LITURGICAL RESOURCES

You may choose to celebrate Epiphany on this Sunday, as it is only a few days before January 6. However, the Worship Team is recommending that you wait and allow Christmastide the full expression this year. Our next series, titled "Follow Me," will begin with an Epiphany/Baptism of the Lord combined observance that will follow the beginnings of Jesus' ministry and the calling of the disciples.

So, if you are still dwelling in Christmas this final week, you may find that folks have moved on in their heads and hearts. After all, we are in the new year and therefore ready for something new. In that case, we recommend that you look at the Wesley Covenant Service as the order of the day. This service, which has historic Methodist roots, is a powerful way to both end the Christmas observance and launch a new year. If you have targeted this Sunday as the full return to in-person worship, then the Covenant service would be a great way to get everyone back on board with the faith life of the church.

Here is a simple service a previous worship team created:

<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/covenant-renewal-service>.

You'll notice, however, that the recommended texts do not include the Ephesians text from the lectionary offerings. Yet the blessing provided in the first chapter of Ephesians fits well with the covenantal prayer of Wesley.

And if you choose not to use the whole service, then at least look at the full covenant as outlined in the service above. There is more than the simple prayer, which is found in *The United Methodist Hymnal*, 607. If the full covenant proves too unwieldy for your congregation, then that prayer can at least draw attention to the reception of the blessing and the promise to be the followers of Christ that

we claim to be. It is an appropriate reminder of who we are. Some like to include a remembrance of baptism during the covenant service. But this could also be done next week as we remember the baptism of Jesus.

Wesley Covenant Prayer

I am no longer my own, but thine.
Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt.
Put me to doing, put me to suffering.
Let me be employed by thee or laid aside for thee,
exalted for thee or brought low for thee.
Let me be full, let me be empty.
Let me have all things, let me have nothing.
I freely and heartily yield all things
to thy pleasure and disposal.
And now, O glorious and blessed God,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
thou art mine, and I am thine. So be it.
And the covenant which I have made on earth,
let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.

United Methodist Hymnal, 607

Call to Worship

Blessed be God! Praise to the Father of Lord Jesus Christ!
In Christ we are blessed, in Christ we are chosen
to live in the praise of his glorious grace!
In Christ we belong in the family, adopted
to live in the praise of his glorious grace!
In Christ the great mystery of God is revealed;
to live in the praise of his glorious grace!
In Christ we are called to be blameless and free,
to live in the praise of his glorious grace!
Blessed be God! Praise to the Father of Lord Jesus Christ!

<http://www.conversations.net.nz/ephesians-worship-resources.html>

Call to Worship

Based on Ephesians 1

Leader: To the Father who has given us every spiritual blessing in Christ.

People: We give praise and glory

Leader: To the Son through whom we have redemption, forgiveness, and the riches of God's grace.

People: We give praise and glory

Leader: To the Spirit that seals us in His promise, the guarantee of our inheritance until we possess it.

People: We give praise and glory.

[\(https://cardiphonia.org/2010/04/18/call-to-worship-ephesians-1/\)](https://cardiphonia.org/2010/04/18/call-to-worship-ephesians-1/)

Prayer of Confession

Friends, as we gather our thoughts into quietness,
we confess our sins to the One who knows us best.
We know ourselves chosen, adopted as children of God.
We dare to believe that you and I are part of a plan
conceived before the foundation of the universe.
But are we living as God's children?
Are we honouring our inheritance?
We know ourselves called, but we're so easily distracted.
We know ourselves loved, but we balk at the cost.
Come, friends, let us confess our sins to the Lord.

(silence)

Friends, our God has poured out grace upon grace,
freely, in great abundance,
even on you, even on me.
though we never earned it and don't deserve it.
In Christ we are made new through his blood;
all your sins and mine crumble away.

In Christ we are forgiven, signed with the Spirit,
lavished with gift upon gift,
released into hope to live for praise and for glory.
Amen.

<http://www.conversations.net.nz/ephesians-worship-resources.html>

New Year's Litany

One: A new day has begun!

Many (Congregation claps with joy and enthusiasm)

One: Are you ready to give God praise?

Many: We ARE ready!

One: Are you ready to leave behind the baggage? Are you ready to step out on faith?

Many: We are ready!

One: Are you ready to forgive? Even the one that hurt you the most?

Many: We are ready!

One: Are you ready to release your doubts and fears?

Many: We are ready!

All: O Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! We are yours and we are ready!

(B. Kevin Smalls, The Africana Worship Book for Year B, Discipleship Resources, 2007, p. 79)

Pastoral Benediction

The Word has become flesh and dwelt among us. Let Christ's light shine in the darkest corner of your life. Let Christ's love shine in the darkest corners of our world. God is with us. Alleluia. Amen.

(Ruth Duck, Bread for the Journey, Pilgrim Press, 1981, p.26.)