



the inn

HOUSING THE HOLY

ADVENT DEVOTIONAL 2021

*Written by members of
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
in Kent and Kent United Church of Christ*

Dear friends in Christ,

As a teenager, one of my favorite worship services was the first Sunday of Advent. Over the course of a week, the sanctuary had been totally transformed. Two gigantic Christmas trees stood on either side of the chancel in the front, garland was draped along the walls, and the Advent wreath had been arranged front and center with fresh candles for the new liturgical season. The pipe organ rang out *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*, and I just felt in my bones that something sacred was taking place. As a church, we were preparing to welcome and house the Holy in our midst, the Christ child who would arrive in the most unassuming and unpredictable of ways—born to an unmarried teenager in a stable while Bethlehem was under Roman occupation.

That is what the liturgical season of Advent is all about—preparing our lives by making room for the Holy to arrive. Our Advent theme this year is, “The Inn: Housing the Holy,” so we’ll spend this season together as a church thinking about how we can become a place where the Holy might be born anew and how we could offer hope in the form of respite, care, and sustenance to those in our community seeking shelter from the onslaught of life. As we are continually bombarded with words like inflation, pandemic, and division this year, we know there are those among us who are holding out hope for good news. Maybe *you* are the one hoping for good news. How can we fling open wide the doors of our hearts, and even our physical church building, to care for our neighbors and make room for the light of hope, peace, joy, and love to shine even brighter in the world?

When we make room for the Holy, the unexpected happens. On that night long ago in Bethlehem, a baby was born. Not a future king or military leader but a baby who would grow to become a teaching, preaching, healing nomad who welcomed those who were not welcomed, touch those who were not to be touched, and listened to those who had been silenced. He made room for the Holy, and they made room for him. Will you? Will we?

In hope, peace, joy, love, and Christ,

Rev. Kim Nagy

Minister of Faith Formation

Kent United Church of Christ

Sunday, November 28, 2021

Week 1: HOPE

Rev. Amanda Moore, First Christian Church

“The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved, and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: ‘The LORD is our righteousness.’” -Jeremiah 33:14-16

Welcome to the season of Advent! Welcome to chaos and uncertainty and the question of what it means to live faithfully, here and now.

When the kingdom of Judah was about to fall to the Babylonians, God gave the prophet Jeremiah a powerful word of hope for the people: “[God] will cause a righteous branch to spring up for David, and he will execute justice and righteousness in the land.”

Who is this righteous branch? Of course, as Christians standing on the edge of Advent, we can’t help but think of Jesus, but it’s worth pointing out that Jeremiah believed that God was promising a human leader: someone who would labor according to God’s will, bringing justice and righteousness to all people.

Our God is a Creator. Even when our institutions have failed us, there will always be new Godly leaders in the world: those who serve the lost and needy, speak truth to power, and bring people together in worship and mission. And sometimes these new leaders—these raised up, righteous branches—will be us.

Perhaps we can use these weeks of Advent to think about how we can be more fully present to the world. How can we be light and good news to those who need to hear a word from God? How can we build up justice and righteousness where we are?

Almighty God, in the midst of destruction you are always raising up new growth. Help us see what you are raising us up to do and become. Amen.

Monday, November 29, 2021

Week 1: HOPE

Donna Hess, United Church of Christ

*“Those who have clean hands and pure hearts,
who do not lift up their souls to what is false,
and do not swear deceitfully.
They will receive blessing from the LORD,
and vindication from the God of their salvation.”*

-Psalm 24:4-5

For many of us these past two pandemic years have challenged us in many ways. During these trying times, it is easy to lose faith in our communities, our country, and even our God. But, during Advent, as we anticipate the celebration of Jesus's birth and God's gift to us, we have a wonderful opportunity to focus on God's deep and abiding love for us. His love gives us hope for the future. As theologian Walter Bruggeman says, “We hold onto hope so that we can continue to mold our world ‘to be on Earth as it is in heaven.’”

Dear Creator, give us strength and hope to meet the many challenges of life. Help us see the blessings of love, compassion, and forgiveness and the grace to appreciate them. Amen.

Tuesday, November 30, 2021

Week 1: HOPE

Linda Beal, First Christian Church

“How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you? Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith. Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.” -1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

Just as Timothy, sent by Paul, encouraged the Thessalonian Christians to be strong in their faith in the face of suffering, we are encouraged to grow through temptations and tough times. At some point in each of our lives, we gain spiritual awareness in hope. Keep praying!

As we journey in our faith, people of faith have influenced us, and we have been led by example. It may have been a Sunday school teacher, a neighbor, a relative, your pastor or your best friend that gave you some spiritual support just when you needed it. Thank God for these people in our lives! During this Advent season, take time to reflect when this may have happened to you. Take a moment and write to thank this person in a note tucked inside of their Christmas card.

When you are full of God’s love, it overflows in and around you and travels to all you encounter. Continue to grow in love, ask God to refill your heart if your hope seems diminished; His love is never ending. Christmas is God’s gift of love to you.

During this Advent season, as you focus on the traditions of Christmas, pay special attention to the Advent wreath. This wreath is a symbol to guide us in spiritual renewal, especially the pink candle. This is the candle that represents the hope of the coming joy—the birth of our Lord and Savior, Christ Jesus.

Soon, at some moment unknown to us, as it is revealed in this scripture, our Lord Jesus is returning to us, known as the second coming of Christ to establish His eternal Kingdom. All believers will be with Christ! This is our future; this is our hope!

Expectant God, we are filled with hope each time we remember the coming of the Christ Child. Be with us during our journey through this Advent season, taking time to be receptive to your peace, love and joy. In Your Name, we pray. Amen.

Wednesday, December 1, 2021

Week 1: HOPE

Don Bubenzer, United Church of Christ

"To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul.

O my God, in you I trust;

do not let me be put to shame;

do not let my enemies exult over me.

Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame;

let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.

Make me to know your ways, O LORD;

teach me your paths.

Lead me in your truth, and teach me,

for you are the God of my salvation;

for you I wait all day long.

Be mindful of your mercy, O LORD, and of your steadfast love,

for they have been from of old.

Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions;

according to your steadfast love remember me,

for your goodness' sake, O LORD!

Good and upright is the LORD;

therefore he instructs sinners in the way.

He leads the humble in what is right,

and teaches the humble his way.

All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness,

for those who keep his covenant and his decrees."

-Psalm 25:1-10

"Living in the Hope of New Light"

"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will have the light of life and will never walk in darkness." -John 8:12

I sit in darkness this morning awaiting the light of day to sneak across the land before my eyes, knowing the light of thousands of days will reveal something new to me, if only I take the time to refresh my mind and my eyes. Such is the way of Advent. Peering into the darkness and mystery of Jesus' birth with fresh eyes and with hope, a new light from an old source will shine forth, new words from old ways will appear, and new ways to live from old words will be born. Like wise-people and shepherds, we must peer into the darkness to see the way. We come to the old story curious—curious to feel ourselves change, stretching until we are no longer the tired people we have been but a renewed people.

Though our hope is spawned by the story of Jesus birth, the HOPE, the ways of life that Jesus brought to us came much later. That hope was demonstrated by the way he lived and calls us to live. He lived a deeply inclusive life reaching out to the woman at the well, to gentiles, and even to profit mongers. Jesus loved in extravagant ways, nurturing those who experienced life as stacked against them. He even offered nurturance to those who had died, given up on life. Jesus lived a life of full engagement, overturning the tables of those who took advantage of the poor, breaking bread with the broad array of people with whom he lived. Jesus lived a confronting life calling out truth to those who held power. Jesus was a healing presence in a world like ours that needed healing. Jesus lived with a generous spirit, making sure all were fed. The hope of Jesus comes from our peering into the darkness with a new light knowing that all people are our people and that our environment is a gift of God to be savored, not a resource to be used up. Part of Jesus' legacy was to offer guidance in how we should live together. The light, the HOPE of Jesus, is in our living an authentic life, committed to building the beloved community right here, right now.

Mother of light, help us to live not in straight lines, too lacking in possibility but in jagged and wavy lines reflective of our journey to find your way. Amen.

Thursday, December 2, 2021

Week 1: HOPE

Patrick Mason, United Church of Christ

“In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’ This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, ‘The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’”

Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.” -Matthew 3:1-6

When John came on the scene, he came speaking to a people who lived under occupation. Their lives were subject to the whim of Roman lackeys who kept them in line by military might and repeated taxation.

So, God sent someone to comfort and assure them, someone to drive out the oppressors...right? Nope. In camel’s hair clothing (that I can’t imagine smelled very good) and eating locusts (are you TRYING to be weird?) John appears, telling his own tribe to repent. And he had a following!

For those folks that heard and responded to John’s ‘crying in the wilderness,’ I wonder what they thought the Kingdom of the Lord, the coming realm of God, would look like.

What do I think of when I join in the Lord’s Prayer each week, asking for God’s Reign, “Thy Kingdom,” to be established? Am I prepared for crazy prophets and wonder-working Messiahs?

Personally, I would not have sent a wild-looking guy, very much on the margins of society, to deliver the HEAR YE for Jesus. But, then again, I am not God (and all creation breathes a sigh of relief). So, I trust my loving Creator/Parent to surprise me daily with depths of Grace I didn’t know I needed. Just no locusts, ok?

No matter how your voice is being spoken into the wounded world in this time, give me ears to hear You. And come, Lord Jesus. Amen.

Friday, December 3, 2021

Week 1: HOPE

Kathy Robinson, United Church of Christ

"Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching."
-Hebrews 10:23-25

I must confess that I can never see or hear the word *hope* without thinking of Emily Dickinson's lines: "Hope is the thing with feathers—that perches in the soul—and sings the tune without the words—and never stops at all." She imagines that the "bird" of hope lives within the human soul and goes on to write that hope sings throughout the toughest of times. How much tougher can our times be? We are struggling with Covid, with wearing masks, with the question of vaccinations, with attending church service, with our family and friends on how to cope with all this, and often with our own personal burdens. We are isolated, lonely, and often feel alone. Connections are difficult to maintain.

And yet this passage from Hebrews encourages us, like Emily, to hold onto to hope. And the only way we are going to do that is if we have the help of other members of our congregation. Brothers need brothers, sisters need sisters, families need families. There is no such thing as a "lone ranger" Christian. God urges us into community with one another so we can have fellowship and support each other. Our masks come off, our burdens are lifted, and our lives are shared when we do so.

Howard Henricks writes, "You can only impress people at a distance; you can only impact them up close. The general principle is this: the closer the personal relationship, the greater the potential for impact." These verses are meant to remind us to be confident, courageous, and uplifted as we live out our faith. We grow together. We can be willing to admit to the vulnerability within us. Let us keep those promises of God within our mind and remember that He always keeps His word. Hold onto that hope you profess by drawing support from our fellowship of believers.

"I've heard it in the chilliest land/And on the strangest sea/Yet never/In Extremity/

It asked a crumb/Of me." When life seems the hardest as it does right now, hope often sings the loudest. It asks nothing in return. It needs no words. We so search for it this season. Keep a firm grip on the promise of God—keep hoping. Although the *Day* mentioned in Hebrews is the day of judgment, keep in mind another *Day* that fast approaches—Christmas and the birth of the Baby Jesus. What joy and hope a newborn always brings! Let us remember, rejoice, and hope together in this season of Advent.

Prayer: God, never let us forget that you watch over us and that you always keep your promises. Let us support each other in this world that often seems so bleak. Let us keep hope singing in our souls. Amen.

Saturday, December 4, 2021

Week 1: HOPE

Kim + Fay Ann Sebaly, United Church of Christ

*"If I say, 'I will not mention him,
or speak any more in his name,'
then within me there is something like a burning fire
shut up in my bones;
I am weary with holding it in,
and I cannot."
-Jeremiah 20:9*

A hint of Christmas appeared to us earlier this autumn in an unexpected place. The re-opening opera season at the Met September 27, after its longest closure since 1883, was a welcomed gift during our times of "terror-all-around." The opera, *Fire Shut Up in My Bones*, was composed by the company's *first* Black composer, librettist, and director. It was performed by an *all-black* cast, only the second time this has ever happened (*Porgy and Bess* the first in 1985). The gift was much more than the acknowledgement on the world's largest opera stage that Black artistic imagination and talent matter too.

Jazz trumpeter, Terrence Blanchard, retells the story of abuse and self-loathing of writer and *NYT* columnist, Charles Blow, through his weaving of jazz, gospel and blues into lyric opera. Kasi Lemmons colors the libretto of the turmoil and loneliness suffered by seven-year-old "Char'es Baby" that threatened to become his life-long companion. Then, at the murderous moment, his mother's love and reassurance from the prophet Jeremiah high-steps with the music and cuts into the bones of his agony and troubled time. Charles bends toward the violent act but feels the "fire shut up in his bones" just in time.

The gift inside Blanchard's opera is the reminder of Jeremiah's plight and discovery that the "fire" that God gave to Charles in the face of his struggles is no different from the "fire" given to us when facing our own battles. The opera's gift is also a reminder that the terrors we face on life's journey are not ours alone, and that none are ones we alone can quickly and easily "just leave in the road." The gift from the Met this Advent season is an invitation to prepare ways to feel the "fire" and hope shut up in our bones so that, like Charles and his mother, we

too can confront the pain and injustice that too often prevents us from forgiving others and receiving the grace and resolve to move on.

Dear Lord, stoke the heat of the fire in our bones so that we may work to let go of the “terror-all-around.” Amen.

Sunday, December 5, 2021

Week 2: PEACE

Rev. Kim Nagy, United Church of Christ

*“Take off the garment of your sorrow and affliction, O Jerusalem,
and put on forever the beauty of the glory from God.
Put on the robe of the righteousness that comes from God;
put on your head the diadem of the glory of the Everlasting;
for God will show your splendor everywhere under heaven.
For God will give you evermore the name,
‘Righteous Peace, Godly Glory.’
Arise, O Jerusalem, stand upon the height;
look toward the east,
and see your children gathered from west and east
at the word of the Holy One,
rejoicing that God has remembered them.”
-Baruch 5:1-5*

Ok, I know what you’re thinking: “Pastor Kim, the book of Baruch?! Oh, you’re making things up, now! There is no book called, ‘Baruch,’ in my Bible.” Well, you’re right. The Protestant Bible you have at home probably does not contain the book called Baruch, *but* it does exist. Baruch is part of something called the Apocrypha, a collection of sacred texts once considered *too* sacred or grand for the general public to read. Some of our siblings, like those practicing the Catholic tradition, do read texts from the Apocrypha! Typically, we mainline Protestant Christians do not.

Why, then, is this our Advent reading for today? Because it offers a message of hope and peace that fits perfectly in this liturgical season we are in the midst of celebrating. Some Biblical scholars believe Baruch was the scribe of Jeremiah, the prophet of the Hebrew Scriptures, and that this text was read before the Israelites in Babylon and then sent to be read in Jerusalem during the Babylonian exile. During the period of the exile, many of God’s people were removed from Jerusalem, the temple, their way of life, and people they loved. It was a very dark time in their history, where they wondered, “where is God and what have we done to deserve this?!” Imagine, then, hearing the words of the prophet, “Arise, O Jerusalem, stand upon the height; look toward the east, and see your children gathered from west and east at the word of the Holy One, rejoicing that God has

remembered them.” What peace to know that even though God’s people were apart from one another, God still remembered those who were in exile. They were *not* forgotten, and perhaps one day the world would return to “normal.”

I don’t know about you, but there are times over the last two years where I have wondered, “Where is God and what have we done to deserve this?” The good news of Christmas is that God is right here...amidst us in the sorrow and affliction. We have not been forgotten. If that isn’t an invitation to experience righteous peace and Godly glory, I don’t know what is.

God-among-us, remember us amidst our great sorrow and affliction, and grant us the righteous peace and Godly glory that only you can give. Amen.

Monday, December 6, 2021

Week 2: PEACE

Natasha Rodriguez-Carroll, First Christian Church

*“And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.”
-Philippians 1:9-11*

A few days after I volunteered to write this entry in the Advent devotional, my father passed away from complications due to COVID. He and I had a very difficult relationship and had been estranged for the last five years. We had very similar temperaments and personalities, so when things were good, we were like best friends. He was a Seventh-Day Adventist pastor who devoted his entire life to serving his church, his congregations, and God, whereas I left the church years ago and keep my beliefs close to my chest. Ultimately our religious and political convictions were such opposites that neither of us could set them aside. I suspect many people in our country, and even in our local communities, have experienced similar rifts in their families... But I hope in time that their stories have a better end than mine.

As a child, I really preferred the Old Testament. All that history! The vengeful God striking down his foes! Something about that appealed to my younger, angrier self. Now that I'm an adult in a constant search for inner peace, I can fully appreciate the messages of the New Testament, especially the Pauline epistle to the church in Philippi that encourages us to find (pardon my cliché) the “silver lining” even in the midst of suffering and turmoil. Paul was in chains and near the end of his life, but his faith and the faith of those who joined him in “partnership in gospel” brought him comfort. In the darkest moments of his life, he found hope in hardship. He found peace.

I am really longing for peace. Aren't you?

I won't present a litany here of the things we have collectively, as a people, survived over the past year. I don't want to dwell on the things we have lost, or the list of hurts that hang so heavy in our hearts and interrupt the joy that we should feel during the Advent season. Instead, I encourage us all to be like Paul

and revel in the beauty of God's grace. There is a light at the end of the darkness. There is a beacon of hope that was lit that day in Bethlehem when the Lord humbled himself to become a baby, swaddled in his mother's arms, and that flame is what can carry us through until he returns again.

My assigned scripture was much shorter, only verses 9-11 that cover the end of the opening prayer. After reading the full prayer, I indulged in a little fantasy: my father, who loved the New Testament, reading this passage in his little office, among his books and his woodworking projects and all his computers, preparing a sermon using these words. Then: my father in the depths of his illness, reaching out to me to finally heal the rift between us, using the last of his strength to continue his ministry and embody the love of Christ that was the driving force in his life.

He is at peace now in the arms of his Savior, and despite my grief I am happy to know that he is suffering no more. This Advent I will emulate Paul and reflect on the promise of salvation and the grace of God's love for us, the love of a father for his beloved children.

Lord, heal our hearts as we mourn our losses this year and help us find peace and contentment. We are all full of sin and pride, but this is the season to humble ourselves the way you were humbled, and to appreciate the blessings we've been given even as we grieve for what is gone. Your plan is greater than the universe and you have promised us eternity. Help us remember the light at the end of the darkness. Amen.

Tuesday, December 7, 2021

Week 2: PEACE

Albert Barber, United Church of Christ

“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”-Luke 1:68-79

Our family has always been surrounded by music. A love of music was instilled in Debbie from an early age by her mother and she passed this love on to our children. Above the piano in our living room is a framed quote from a German opera house:

Bach gave us God’s Word

Mozart gave us God’s Laughter

Beethoven gave us God’s Fire

GOD gave us Music that we might pray without words

While not musically gifted myself, I have come to love the joy and peace that music brings to our lives.

Shortly after we started to attend services at Kent UCC, I was sitting in a pew listening to the organ postlude when I experienced a profound “Wesley” moment. My heart was strangely warmed. I felt as though the sound of the organ pipes entered my body, not through my ears, but through my heart. I was surrounded not only by sound, but the love and peace that comes from God.

It was a gift—a life-changing gift. And I was there in the moment to recognize and receive this gift from God.

We need to always live in the moment and listen for the small, still voice of God in our lives. This voice may manifest as words, song, or simply music. Listen and hear the voice of God.

We are so blessed at Kent UCC to have many talented musicians and speakers to share this voice with us. But for me, the most profound may be the voice of the organ pipes that reach right down to my soul and give me peace.

I encourage all to join me during the postlude each Sunday to sit quietly and listen to voice of God.

Lord help me to live in the moment and find time to be still, so that I may hear your voice. Amen

Wednesday, December 8, 2021

Week 2: PEACE

Jeff Roeger, United Church of Christ

"I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God." -Philippians 1:3-11

Paul begins his letter to the church in Philippi by saying, "I thank my God every time I remember you," acknowledging the Philippians' role as partners in sharing the good news of Jesus Christ. This good news includes Jesus' grace, love, and peace. He broke down the barrier of our original sin so that we might have peace through him. Romans 5:10 says, "For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!" Christ's peace is fundamental. It is physical, spiritual, and mental, and because of Jesus Christ, we have access to it!

The question is, do we pass it to others in all we do? Each Sunday in worship, we pass Christ's peace to one another. It is an ancient ritual act that reminds us of a truth that transcends all people, times, and places, but do we practice passing Christ's peace the other six days of the week? Imagine if all our electronic devices instantaneously around the world told us, "Peace be with you!" How would we respond? Would we share that peace or just assume we were being hacked? During this Advent season, we are reminded that Jesus Christ was sent into the world to embody peace and show us how to *live* it.

Peace be to you. Shalom.

Bringer of Peace, show us how to embody peace like your son, Jesus Christ, and pass it on to everyone we meet. Amen.

Thursday, December 9, 2021

Week 2: PEACE

Mary Homer, United Church of Christ

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

‘The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,

make his paths straight.

Every valley shall be filled,

and every mountain and hill shall be made low,

and the crooked shall be made straight,

and the rough ways made smooth;

and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

-Luke 3:1-6

Silent night, holy night

All is calm, all is bright

Round young virgin, mother and child

Holy infant so tender and mild

Sleep in heavenly peace, sleep in heavenly peace.

One of the most popular Christmas carols of all times, this song has been translated into over three hundred languages! In 1818, the original Germanic lyrics came from Austria and were written by the priest Joseph Mohr and composed by schoolteacher and organ master Franz Xaver Gruber. Against the backdrop of the volatile Napoleonic Wars, there was a deep longing for peace across the lands. Originally performed by guitar, this song’s popularity rose in the US due to the ever-increasing wave of German immigrants!

It is impossible to explore the ramifications of this carol, but one extraordinary affair happened in the trenches in World War I on Christmas Eve in 1914. Both

German and British soldiers paused hostilities for a Christmas truce to sing this carol and even met with each other for moments of peace! Featured into various films, this remarkable event is just one way that this simple carol demonstrates the power of grace, even in spite of any unimaginable violence, distress, and strife!

As you reflect on this particular carol, what lyrics resonate with you? What about its melodic musicality? How do you relate to the celebratory stanzas of the blessed birth of the Babe as an open invitation to strengthen your own faith?

Perhaps most moving of all are the lines, “Sleep in heavenly peace,” that is repeated twice for significance. The word “peace” is found hundreds of times throughout varying versions of the Bible. In this simple carol, the promises of “heavenly peace” honors God’s promises in the birth of the Babe and His infinite blessings!

Holy One, stir within us the spirit of Your peace as we travel through this Advent season and beyond. Amen.

Friday, December 10, 2021

Week 2: PEACE

Frank Hairston, United Church of Christ

“Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind. Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called—that you might inherit a blessing. For

*‘Those who desire life
and desire to see good days,
let them keep their tongues from evil
and their lips from speaking deceit;
let them turn away from evil and do good;
let them seek peace and pursue it.
For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous,
and his ears are open to their prayer.
But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.’”
-1 Peter 3:8-12*

So, on November 8, 2016, some of us were celebrating a victory in Jesus and others, devastated and turning towards Jesus to give them strength in the midst of evil. And I’m stuck, because I just don’t know whose hand I’m holding, or which Jesus is being preached. I know and believe in Jesus of the gospel. I believe in the Jesus who chose the most outcast of society to be in his inner circle. I believe in the Jesus who touched the most disgusting, sick, broken bodies that no one else would touch, and healed them. I believe in the Jesus who spoke and empowered women, broke bread with his enemies, and defended the weak. I believe in the Jesus who defeated death. That Jesus is my leader. That Jesus is my Savior and my Redeemer, and I just want the real Jesus to stand up. Will the real Jesus, please just stand up?

The reality of the deep theological, racial, and philosophical differences is being unveiled. You might be holding my hand in prayer, and while I’m praying for justice for Trayvon Martin, you’re praying for the innocence of George Zimmerman. You might be holding my hand in prayer, but while I’m praying God would provide a place for the poor, you’re praying “those people” would just go away. You might be holding my hand in prayer, but while I’m praying for the walls

to come down, you're praying the walls would go up. You might be holding my hand in prayer, but we're praying two different prayers and possibly to two different versions of who we think Jesus is. How do we reconcile THAT? I'm immediately brought back to a time when my ancestors who were slaves would gather together on Sunday morning and sing their praises, read Scripture aloud, and pray to Jesus. Right across the field in their big homes, their slave owners gathered together to sing the same songs, read the same Scripture, and pray to their own version of Jesus as well. Well, which one is it? How do we reconcile THAT?

Jesus wants us to stand up and walk over these uncertain waters, stand up and walk in hope and in faith that the real Jesus will be there to meet us on the other side.

How beautiful to worship with one another in Christ. There is no "this church" or "that church," we are one church and one body.

God is still speaking!

God of us all, as we read in Galatians, let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Remind us of this encouragement from the Psalms, that we might cast all our cares on You, and You will sustain us. Amen.

Saturday, December 11, 2021

Week 2: PEACE

Russ Buckbee, First Christian Church

*“Ascribe to the LORD, O heavenly beings,
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.
Ascribe to the LORD the glory of his name;
worship the LORD in holy splendor.
The voice of the LORD is over the waters;
the God of glory thunders,
the LORD, over mighty waters.
The voice of the LORD is powerful;
the voice of the LORD is full of majesty.
The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars;
the LORD breaks the cedars of Lebanon.
He makes Lebanon skip like a calf,
and Sirion like a young wild ox.
The voice of the LORD flashes forth flames of fire.
The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness;
the LORD shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.
The voice of the LORD causes the oaks to whirl,
and strips the forest bare;
and in his temple all say, “Glory!”
The LORD sits enthroned over the flood;
the LORD sits enthroned as king forever.
May the LORD give strength to his people!
May the LORD bless his people with peace!”
-Psalm 29*

We celebrate, with expectation, Jesus’s birth. We light candles for the emotions of hope, love, joy and peace. These *are* emotions, but more than that, attitudes that we can take in expectation of Jesus’s birth and life. Attitudes that we can develop, which have thoughts and behaviors beyond simple emotions.

What right do we have to expect all of this from a baby? Why should we feel all of this? Because we have his words when he proclaimed his mission. They give us reason for all these emotions and attitudes.

HOPE: The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has chosen me to bring good news to the poor. Luke 4:18a

LOVE: He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind...

JOY: ...to set free the oppressed. Luke 4:18b

PEACE: and announce that the time has come when the Lord will save his people. Luke 4:19

Holy One, help us respond not just with emotion but also with attitudes that proclaim your presence in this world by our actions. Amen.

Sunday, December 12, 2021

Week 3: JOY

Rev. Jodi Stillisano, First Christian Church

“Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the LORD GOD is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation. With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. And you will say in that day: Give thanks to the LORD, call on his name; make known his deeds among the nations; proclaim that his name is exalted. Sing praises to the LORD, for he has done gloriously; let this be known in all the earth. Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.” -Isaiah 12:2-6

Today, the third Sunday of Advent, we light the candle of joy to celebrate that Jesus is the JOY of the world. At the First Christian Church in Kent, we have often celebrated the third Sunday in Advent by presenting the children’s Christmas program. As we get ready to celebrate the mystery of Christmas, the children show us the way. Their joy and anticipation can hardly be contained! Christmas pageants never disappoint. The best prepared programs, the rehearsed lines, the beautifully ironed costumes, and the careful staging cannot compete with the rogue angel dancing in the aisle or the toddler dressed as a cow running off with the baby from the manger. Children and youth sharing their developing gifts of music, shy children reading the Scripture, youth giggling in the background... joy finds ways to shine through the children and youth in the most unexpected ways!

Isaiah 12 is a song of thanksgiving. Because God, the Holy One of Israel, is great, all the world should know. We sing for joy to share of God’s greatness, and we sing for joy because God is present with those who sing God’s praises.

Let the children lead the way as we journey toward the mystery of Christmas. Let’s not contain our joy. Let’s share our joy in unexpected ways!

Thank you, God, for the joy we feel during this season as we prepare to celebrate your greatest gift of love. Help us to share our joy in unexpected ways, so that others may also feel and celebrate your presence in the world. Amen.

Monday, December 13, 2021

Week 3: JOY

Sue Otterson, United Church of Christ

“And the crowds asked him, ‘What then should we do?’ In reply he said to them, ‘Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.’ Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, ‘Teacher, what should we do?’ He said to them, ‘Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.’ Soldiers also asked him, ‘And we, what should we do?’ He said to them, ‘Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.’” -Luke 3:10-14

As I’m preparing for the Christmas season, I start by making a list of all the things I need to get done, and other than making that list, I often feel so overwhelmed by all the “stuff” that I have trouble knowing where to start. Which start will ignite the most productivity? Which start is the most important? Which start won’t just become undone and need redoing before I even finish a quarter of all the other things? I’ve learned, over the recent years, that I have some problems with anxiety and attention deficit. And this is where these verses from Luke touch my mind.

The crowds are asking what they should be doing to gain the Kingdom of God, and the answers seem different for each group of people: the general crowd, the tax collectors, the soldiers. But looking closely, we can see that what Jesus wants us to do is to change our thinking. He wants us to not only focus but CHANGE our focus. We need to shift our thinking from what gain we will achieve to how our actions will not only affect others, but to how those actions will deeply help others.

I’ve put the tasks I need to do on a decision-making app. Each job takes up a wedge on a colorful wheel, and to start, I click, the wheel spins, and then it stops at what activity I should start on. So now, I have a wheel to spin instead of just spinning my wheels! Just getting that start takes so much of the overwhelming feeling away from the season. Jesus gave the crowds their instructions as to where to start to change their hearts, and he’s given me a better focus on how to prepare and make room for him in mine.

Focusing Lord, thank you for calming my hurry. Thank you for showing me where I have so much to share with those who have so little. Help me to stay on track in preparing to welcome your joy into the world. Amen.

Tuesday, December 14, 2021

Week 3: JOY

Marilyn Freeman, United Church of Christ

“Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! The LORD has taken away the judgments against you, he has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more. On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak. The LORD, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival. I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it. I will deal with all your oppressors at that time. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. At that time I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the LORD.” -Zephaniah 3:14-20

The prophet Zephaniah was speaking to the people in the sixth century B.C. when Israel had fallen into grave rebellion against God. Previous kings had perpetuated evil, hate, and idolatry. Josiah, the new king, tried to bring spiritual reform, but the people were already immersed in their sinful ways of life, and they didn't want to change. “But evil men and women, without conscience and without shame, persist in evil,” Zephaniah proclaims in earlier verses. Does any of this sound familiar?

The pandemic, catastrophic weather events, political and social upheaval have been wreaking havoc in all parts of the world. The very foundation of our lives seems to be rattled, shaken, and uncertain.

In these last verses the prophet reminds the people that God is still with them. God interrupts with a message of joy. But what is joy? Where do we find it? What does it look like?

It just so happens there are people who have studied joy. One study focused on the senses. Round, colorful, bright, lights, airy things bring us joy. Think bubbles, confetti, Christmas lights and decorations. Certain smells invoke joy. Think bread, cookies, favorite holiday meals. Sights and sounds—crackling fire in the

fireplace, candles, our favorite music, the sound of a familiar voice. Touch—a warm, cozy sweater, a warm mug of coffee, tea, soup. Connections also bring us joy. Gathering with friends and family (safely) brings joy. Reaching out to that lone person who might need to hear a kind voice, sending cards and letters, porch drops of baked goods, or meals not only creates joy in the receiver, but also in the giver. An attitude of gratitude creates joy.

A song of JOY! God is in our midst! Exactly the message we need to hear, as we anticipate the birth of Jesus, yet again. Come, Emmanuel.

Surprise us with JOY yet, again, O God. Fill our darkness with your light, our hearts with your love, and our souls with your JOY! Amen.

Wednesday, December 15, 2021

Week 3: JOY

Humberto Carro, United Church of Christ

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” -Philippians 4:4-7

It's easy to think about JOY during this time of the year. JOY when our family are all together to share Thanksgiving Dinner, JOY when we receive and give Christmas presents and see our beloved's face when they open them, JOY to celebrate Christmas Eve singing carols, JOY watching the snow through the window, enJOYing a hot chocolate with a furnace working at its best. But rarely, we stop to think what makes Jesus JOYful. Through our actions, we can make Jesus reJOYce; we can make him happy. It's great to feel JOY, but also, we have to create Jesus's JOY. I invite you to pray, to talk to the Lord and ask Him what makes Him have JOY. He will let you know; He will give you the answer. You just have to listen.

My JOY is the JOY of my wife and the JOY of my two-year-old daughter. My JOY is to receive at the beginning of next year our new baby, Denali Marisol, who will bring JOY to my wife and to my daughter, Sonia. And their JOY will be also my JOY. It's hard to feel JOY when part of me is not here anymore. My Mom's passing vanquished the JOY in my heart like a gust of freezing wind. So, when I can't find my JOY, I talk to our Lord Jesus, and He lets me know how I can make Him JOYful. And He helps me to find my JOY. It's not that difficult. Why can't we have JOY if the scripture says it all: "The Lord is near?" That's the most beautiful JOY of all.

Lord Jesus, please let me know what makes You have JOY. Let me know what I can do to please You, what I can do to make You happy. Command me, Lord, because Your JOY will be my JOY. Amen.

Thursday, December 16, 2021

Week 3: JOY

Nancy Thomas, First Christian Church

*“Clap your hands, all you peoples;
shout to God with loud songs of joy.
For the LORD, the Most High, is awesome,
a great king over all the earth.
He subdued peoples under us,
and nations under our feet.
He chose our heritage for us,
the pride of Jacob whom he loves.
God has gone up with a shout,
the LORD with the sound of a trumpet.
Sing praises to God, sing praises;
sing praises to our King, sing praises.
For God is the king of all the earth;
sing praises with a psalm.^[a]
God is king over the nations;
God sits on his holy throne.
The princes of the peoples gather
as the people of the God of Abraham.
For the shields of the earth belong to God;
he is highly exalted.”
-Psalm 47*

Every year since I was a child, I have looked forward to setting up the nativity scene. I loved to arrange the figures around the manger. When I got married, I carefully picked out a nativity scene for our new home and later taught our children its symbolism. My favorite figures are the shepherds.

Luke tells us that when the angels appeared to the shepherds while watching their flocks, they were terrified. Reassured by the angels, they set off to find Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus. They then spread the word to others.

Returning to the manger, the shepherds were” glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen,” just as the Psalmist tells us to do.

As Rich Mullins, Christian artist of the 1980s wrote:

*Our God is an awesome God,
He reigns from heaven above,
With wisdom, power, and love
our God is an awesome God!*

Lord, help us remember to praise You with joy and with music! Amen.

Friday, December 17, 2021

Week 3: JOY

Pam Quellhorst, United Church of Christ

"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." -Romans 15:13

This week is the theme of joy, and what better verse to represent joy than this one. This verse is a powerful suggestion about what God can do in our hearts and minds. If we trust in God, our faith will bring joy and peace. Our joy is from God. It is not the happiness of a pleasure moment. It is a happiness that runs deeply through our souls. This joy through God is the joy that motivates all our action, service, and worship.

When do you feel a spiritual joy and peace? I feel it watching a beautiful sunset or a sunrise over the beach, and it reminds me God is in charge, and I should trust God to fill me with the Holy Spirit to do acts of service and do God's will. I feel it when participating in groups like our Social Justice Ministry to strive for a just world for all; it helps me know that God is working through our group to do God's will. I feel it when listening to our United Youth Force describe their experiences on a mission trip as God works through their hands and hearts to create a better place. And I feel joy and peace in my soul when I am sitting in our church pews masked up and alone in worship listening as Pastor Amy remind us of God's all-powerful love for us.

May you find joy and peace in your heart and soul this Advent season and may we all be filled with the faith to work toward action, service and worship.

Dear God, help us to open our hearts to your unconditional love so that we might let you in and feel the overwhelming joy and peace in our hearts, minds and bodies. Amen

Saturday, December 18, 2021

Week 3: JOY

Lori Babbey, United Church of Christ

"I will extol you, O LORD, for you have drawn me up, and did not let my foes rejoice over me. O LORD my God, I cried to you for help, and you have healed me. O LORD, you brought up my soul from Sheol, restored me to life from among those gone down to the Pit. Sing praises to the LORD, O you his faithful ones, and give thanks to his holy name. For his anger is but for a moment; his favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning. As for me, I said in my prosperity, 'I shall never be moved.' By your favor, O LORD you had established me as a strong mountain; you hid your face; I was dismayed. To you, O LORD, I cried, and to the LORD I made supplication: 'What profit is there in my death, if I go down to the Pit? Will the dust praise you? Will it tell of your faithfulness? Hear, O LORD, and be gracious to me! O LORD, be my helper!' You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, so that my soul may praise you and not be silent. O LORD my God, I will give thanks to you forever." -Psalm 30

Psalm 30 is filled with highs and lows, just as our lives are. When things are going well in our lives it is tempting to slip comfortably into the feelings of "I did this," not recognizing or reflecting on God's role in our lives. Yet when things go wrong, illness or death strike, we cry out for help: "Why me?" It is so hard to recognize the hidden gifts of our situations. Sometimes it takes years to acknowledge those gifts.

As I was nearing "my" ideal retirement age, I suddenly lost my job to a massive layoff. I was shaken and lost for a while. But the first person I went to see after it happened was my mom. Due to my newfound free time, I was able to spend more quality time with her until her unexpected death six months later. Ultimately, my early retirement allowed me to be able to help care for two other loved ones until their deaths. I never would have been able to be present for them if I had been working. My prayers of "why" changed to "thank you" for the gift of time to be with those who mattered most to me.

We cannot move through life without some type of mourning. Yet if we continue to pray with gratitude and hope, our mourning will turn to joy, just as David's did.

Creator, thank you for each and every blessing you bring into our lives. May we bring hope and joy to others this day. Amen.

Sunday, December 19, 2021

Week 4: LOVE

Rev. Amy Gopp, United Church of Christ

“But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel. And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; and he shall be the one of peace.” -Micah 5:2-5a

I couldn't believe my eyes. My dear friend Marko sent me a message through Viber, an international messaging app. The text was so strange that I thought it was a joke. “What's happening in Washington? Be careful!” I had no idea what he was talking about, so I sent back a quizzical text. He responded immediately, “But the Proud Boys? They're taking over the Capitol?!?! Turn on your TV!!” There was no way this could be real. How could it be that my Bosnian friend, with whom I spent years during the brutal war in the former Yugoslavia, would be the one to inform me of what looked, to him, like a war erupting in the capital city of the United States? It was one of the most surreal moments of my life.

January 6, 2021 will haunt our memories as a day to forget. And yet we must confront that we now live in a society so entrenched in our different perceptions and perspectives on truth and freedom that something as unfathomable as what took place inside the U.S. Capitol could actually happen. The progress achieved by the Civil Rights Movement was only a beginning. The time is now to confess our original sin of racism and dismantle the system of white supremacy that is fueling the violence in our midst—not only that which was unleashed in the Capitol, but that which has been unleashed in our hearts and minds.

To add fuel to the fire, nineteen states have enacted new laws that will make it harder for many Americans to vote since January 6. I had hoped the pandemic could bring us closer together as a global family and an American nation. I had hoped that it would break us open so we could truly see and hear and honor one another. Instead, it exposed the underlying pandemics of our unjust world and infected us with even more fear.

But in every challenge there is the possibility for transformation. Engulfed by incessant bad news, do we have the eyes to see, and ears to hear, and hearts to receive the Good News—the countercultural, radical, life-saving news—of the One of Peace? We long desperately for peace, uncertain of how to pursue it, often not listening for the Prince of Peace, “the one of peace” the prophet Micah envisioned so long ago. During these hope-filled days of Advent, let us focus our minds and hearts not on what divides and threatens us, but on the journey that is ours to embark upon with Mary and Joseph to new life. The Christ Child is both our journey and our destination of reconciliation; He is our One and Only True Security and Peace. May you embrace that Peace so fully that you can proclaim new life even in the midst of violence and death.

Prayer: Prince of Peace, may we place our complete trust in You. Remind us that You and You alone offer us the security and peace that passes all understanding. Amen.

Monday, December 20, 2021

Week 4: LOVE

Judy Mendenhall, United Church of Christ

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

Mary’s song! Can I tell you how getting this scripture to write about was thrilling for me? Growing up female, it has always been relatable, and I find it so even in my old age.

I’ve been fairly silent during the pandemic, mostly out of a need to keep myself defended from the possibilities that were outside my door. I, like you, have never lived through such a time, so I had no resources to fall back on, choosing the darkness of isolation for safety. I have no power, no might; I am small and insignificant in this world we now live in. Not unlike Mary in Nazareth.

Pastor Amy changed me a few years ago when she preached about darkness. She said the darkness has always been there. God was in the darkness before light was created. For the first time, instead of believing that there was only black inside of me, I was able to think that God is inside too. In the darkness. And that’s amazing! Miraculous!

Amy preached just recently encouraging us to recite each morning, each evening, whenever we need to, the scripture: “I love the Lord with all my heart, with all my mind and with all my strength.” Wow! Perfect validation as I have long said this as my just-before-sleep prayer.

As I always turn to King James at Christmas, there is no better way of saying it than, “My soul doth magnify the Lord.” In my self-imposed darkness, God is with me. Peace, love, joy and hope to all my church family this Advent Season.

Dear God of all, let us sing whatever song we cherish, whether in light or darkness, that upholds the truth that you are present in our lives. Amen.

Tuesday, December 21, 2021

Week 4: LOVE

Barb Hanniford, United Church of Christ

“If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.” -1 Corinthians 13

This chapter from 1 Corinthians may be one of the most familiar in the Bible. You probably recognize at least parts of it from weddings you’ve attended. My husband recently used verses from it when he officiated our niece’s wedding. It is a meaningful passage and one which is easy to embrace in the context of a wedding. (Of course, we know that it’s not always so easy to live by these words no matter how much we love another person.)

Paul wasn’t writing to couples who were about to marry. He was writing to the church in Corinth, giving instructions on how to be a church. But these well-known words can go beyond a church setting; they also speak to how we live our daily lives. They speak to how we act in relationship with others and to the love that should motivate our actions. Without love, our actions lack meaning and authenticity, but love without action is also lacking.

Love can be hard to come by these days. This Advent, perhaps we can continue our stewardship theme by considering the question posed in our bulletin: “What

would need to change in our lives for us to be fully rooted in love?” How can Paul’s words and Jesus’s example deepen the love we feel and the actions we take?

God of love, help us to know—really know—your love for us and to express that love to others through our words and actions. May this Advent season be a time of faith and hope, and most of all, of love. Amen.

Wednesday, December 22, 2021

Week 4: LOVE

Renee LaCombe, United Church of Christ

"Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

*'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel,'*

which means, 'God is with us' When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus." -Matthew 1:18-25

As we draw closer to the day of celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ, we reflect on the journey leading us toward this glorious moment and the true meaning and purpose of Christmas. Love. We are celebrating the unconditional love of God. We are celebrating the most precious gift God gave to us, his beloved son Jesus Christ. God must love us very much to send us this heavenly gift! One way for us to show our appreciation for this life changing gift is to devote ourselves to a lifestyle that centers around love. We open our hearts and receive His everlasting and abundant love. We celebrate the amazing birth of baby Jesus on that very first Christmas. We strive to love others as God calls on us to do. After all, the most wonderful and meaningful gift we can give is the gift of love. Let's be examples of love! Like the excitement and anticipation children feel leading up to Christmas, we too prepare and recall the journey that brought God's gift of love to us. Like the thrill children have on Christmas morning receiving a gift they wanted so much, we too rejoice in knowing that God gave us the perfect gift. The gift of love.

As Christina Rossetti wrote...

Love came down at Christmas,
Love all lovely, Love Divine,
Love was born at Christmas,
Star and Angles gave the sign.

Dear Heavenly Father, please get us excited to give the meaningful gift of love during this advent season, on Christmas day and beyond, as we strive for a lifestyle that centers around love. Thank you, Lord, for your love! Amen.

Thursday, December 23, 2021

Week 4: LOVE

Jen Case, United Church of Christ

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined. You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.”
-Isaiah 9:2-7

Whenever I see a familiar passage like this one, I take a little time to find it in “The Message” interpretation. It was refreshing to read the first couple verses: *“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. For those who lived in a land of deep shadows— light! sunbursts of light! You repopulated the nation, you expanded its joy. Oh, they’re so glad in your presence! Festival joy! The joy of a great celebration, sharing rich gifts and warm greetings.”*

I feel like I say it every year, but Advent and Christmas is such a sweet time after a hard year. This year seemed like 2020 2.0 in a lot of ways, and honestly, I don’t know where it went, but I am so ready for the cozy days of Advent! We have all felt a blanket of darkness; we have been walking in deep shadows for so, so long, and most days it doesn’t feel like there is a light at the end of the tunnel. But Isaiah tells us there is indeed Light! Sunbursts of Light! Or Sonbursts?

This passage has long been recognized as predicting the birth of the Messiah whom we recognize as Jesus. The prophet talks about the presence of God bringing *festival* joy, characterized by celebration, sharing, gifts, and warm greetings! Sounds like Christmas alright! God’s very Presence, Love Incarnate, is

what puts us in the Christmas mood this year. Jesus and His ever-shining Love Light comes back to us every Christmas even in the darkest of times.

Jesus, Love Incarnate, shine on us this Advent season. Let us see your Light and feel your warmth in an extra meaningful way this year. Amen.

Friday, December 24, 2021

Christmas Eve

Rev. David E. and Becky Brown, First Christian Church

“In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.’ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

*‘Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!’*

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.’ So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.” -Luke 2:1-20

“O Little Town of Bethlehem”

O Little Town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie.
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep, the silent stars go by.

Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light.
The hopes and dreams of all the years are met in thee tonight.

When lives of humble service preach the good news to the poor,
When troubled minds or bodies find a welcome at the door,
When healing hearts and hands lift the lowly from the dust,
Then ring the bells and sing Noels: for Christ is born in us.

No longer dreamless, Bethlehem, you bear the wounds of war.
Can words of peace make conflict cease when freedom is no more?
No! Therefore, work for justice, let swords thrust none apart.
When all are free, the world may see Christ born in every heart.

Teach us to live the trusting life, to act in humbleness;
To rid our souls of pride and hate, in all things thee to bless.
Make us in thine own image, to serve our human race,
Fair stewards of the priceless things, true justice, hope and grace.

From Christmas Carols with Justice - SimpleLiving, USA

Verse 1: Phillips Brooks, 1868

Verse 2: John Becker

Verse 3: Rae E. Whitney

Verse 4: Edward Blumenfeld

Friday, December 24, 2021

Christmas Eve

Sandy Roeger, United Church of Christ

Mary gave birth to Jesus in a stall in a barn. Scripture doesn't tell us much about it, though. Was she in labor long? Who helped her? I was in labor with my first born, Jeff, for nineteen hours, and it wasn't fun even though I was in a nice, clean hospital with plenty of caring people. Mary was in a smelly stall!

Mary and Joseph weren't even married. That seems common now, but what about them? Were they shunned? Is that why they couldn't get a room in the inn?

As a baby, did Jesus cry much? After all, he left his heavenly home with his father where everything was perfect. Was he hard to potty train? Was he ornery as a little boy? Remember when he was twelve, he wandered off from his parents to start preaching! When they couldn't find him, they were worried sick.

Did he have other kids to play with? What was his favorite food? Remember macaroni and cheese or pizza wasn't even thought of then. We don't know much about his life as a child, but we do know he was human just like you and me. He understood us and still does as no one except his father ever could.

The shepherds and the angels knew what they were doing when they went to see him and worship him.

He came to save us from our sins so all we must do is turn to him and ask for forgiveness. What love he has! He is our father's son.

Hallelujah!

God among us, as we reflect on your son's birth and life, we praise you that he was human just like us who loved like us, got into trouble like us, and felt like us. Amen.

Saturday, December 25, 2021

Christmas Day

Louise Neubert, First Christian Church

“As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” -Colossians 3:12-17

Today is Christmas Day, the day we celebrate Jesus' birthday. Humble as it was, it is a birthday like none other—it is celebrated around the world every year—and has been for over 2000 years! We still read the messages God has sent to us through the writers of the Bible. In today's scripture He's telling us what God has chosen for us to wear. See above. It's quite a list.

It's different from the advice your mother gave you, things like: it's better to be over-dressed than to be under-dressed. You can't wear white shoes before Memorial Day or after Labor Day. A lady never goes out without a hat, gloves, a purse, and stockings. Fortunately, those rules are obsolete; you may even be laughing at them.

But the new order of living that Jesus brought us through that first Christmas tells us we need to change our appearance; He tells us to be clothed with love, inside and out. Hmmm. I'm wondering how these new clothes will fit. It seems to me that these won't fit very well. They will be too big. I'll need to grow into them. I find it hard sometimes to forgive like God does, but Paul says I must. I keep praying God will help me with that. I will need to use some of that tenderhearted mercy, kindness, and patience to help with the forgiveness. Fortunately for us, Emmanuel means, "God with us." Since God is with us, we can depend on Him to help us to wear this new wardrobe with grace. After all, anything is possible with God.

Thank you, God, for the best Christmas present ever—your son, Jesus. Amen.

MERRY CHRISTMAS!