

Come, Let Us Adore Him

Advent, Year C Worship Series

The Season of Advent is one of the highlights of the Christian Year. With this season, we launch another cycle of living into the story of Jesus and the church that emerges—of which we are a part. We sometimes think we need to find a new way of telling this story and do something fresh and unique. There is certainly space for that, but tradition and remembering the songs and stories from our beginnings can be a powerful invitation to grow as disciples as we grow closer to Christ. So, we invite your church community to consider the *Preparations* and the *Passion* of Advent so that we might embrace the *Presence* and *Promise* of the Christ who comes. And through it all, we will gather to worship. So, come, let us adore him.

First Sunday of Advent

Preparations

December 1, 2024

[Jeremiah 33:14-16](#), [Luke 21:25-36](#)

PLANNING NOTES

When I was growing up, the cartoons I watched taught me that dynamite and quicksand were going to be pretty constant concerns in adult life. You don't want to get blown up? Know what TNT stands for, keep an eye on the fuse at all times, and don't let any sparks near the fuse or the TNT box. Don't want to drown in quicksand? Read the signs, watch where you're going, and know where the large branches and/or vines are nearby. Piece of cake. Yet, in all these cartoon-based life lessons, *no one* warned me about laundry and dishes. They're relentless! You eat, then you have more dirty dishes to wash. You get dressed in the morning, and by the end of the day, you have more dirty clothes to wash. It's a never-ending cycle! And if you're like me, it took a while to figure out how to prepare for and manage the cycle of laundry and dishes, in part because several someones—real and cartoon—taught me life was about preparing for the extraordinary while living in the drudgery of the ordinary.

As we begin the cycle of the liturgical year once again, you may be feeling the relentlessness of it all. The pressure to make Advent/Christmas feel special. The crunch of finishing up end-of-year paperwork and giving campaigns. The busyness of extra rehearsals, gatherings, parties. Just as our society enters a season of ramping up activity as we head into Christmas and winter break, the liturgical calendar slows us down. *Wait*, the calendar says. *Don't rush in. Prepare.* And as amazing as the Christ child coming is, we're not preparing for dynamite or quicksand. Our preparations to greet Jesus happen in the oh-so-ordinary things of life.

So, how do we model and invite our people into this sense of preparation? Perhaps we might begin by preparing the altar as part of worship. One of my favorite rituals during Holy Week is the stripping of the altar. Think of this as a reverse stripping of the altar. Consider opening worship by singing "Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus" or "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" while a team of laity dress the altar. Cover the altar with a purple cloth, add a few candles, maybe even add the Advent wreath if you traditionally place the Advent wreath on the altar. If not the Advent wreath, place a meaningful symbol in the center of the altar, like a cross, a dove, or even part of a Nativity scene. What might it communicate to place the empty stable at the center of the altar? Whatever you do, keep it simple! There's more to come

throughout this series. Let this be a time where the congregation sings and enacts Advent preparation together.

With Advent comes, for many communities, the lighting of the Advent wreath. As you plan for how to incorporate the lighting of the Advent wreath into worship, consider what role this ritual plays in worship. Is it an extension of the call to worship? Or is it an act of praise? Does it have the character of confession? Or is it a bridge into proclamation? *The United Methodist Book of Worship* indicates that the lighting of the Advent wreath is usually part of the Entrance in the basic pattern of worship, but where we put it in the Entrance—what goes before it and comes after it—helps define its role in worship, giving it more meaning and sense of flow as part of the overall worship service.

PREACHING NOTES

This season can still surprise us. We might think we are ready. We might have been checking the calendar. We might have had plans underway for some months now. And still, when the first Sunday of Advent rolls around, we have to deal with the shock. “It can’t possibly be time for this again,” we think. But let’s be honest with ourselves; it isn’t simply a matter of calendar neglect. It is that this season of anticipation comes in the midst of life in all its fullness and its messiness. We are wrapped up in so many things, getting so many things done, so many things right, that we can be surprised that the very thing we are planning for actually comes.

This First Sunday of Advent – and let’s pay attention to the preposition; it’s “of,” not “in.” Advent is not something we endure; it is something we become, something that we are. We are people who live in anticipation, who live in hope. It is the essence of our being. So, on this First Sunday of Advent, we are heeding the call to pay attention. Our life is a life of fullness and joy, but it is also a preparation for even more fullness. In our Wesleyan tradition, we call that fullness *sanctification*, or even riskier, we say we are moving on to perfection.

We prepare for eternity, for kin-dom, for perfection by living attentively. We might not really be shocked by the arrival of this season, but we are deeply startled by our continuing need to be reminded that we are called, and we want to live in hope. Worship, then, in this season is an aid to preparation, a reminder to look up, to get ready.

Some years ago, my family was juggling so many things that preparation for Advent and the preparation of Advent got pushed down the list. We were walking with my father-in-law in the last days of his life; we had just moved houses in the appointment where I was serving and navigating some inner church resistance to change, and we were raising teenagers finishing their high school years. It was a lot, and things got missed.

One afternoon, I was in the bathroom, minding my own business, you might say. I heard my name shouted up the stairs. Now, I don’t know about you, but when someone can’t wait for you to get out of the bathroom to call you, it is some sort of crisis—maybe a good thing, but probably not. So, I sighed to myself and debated whether to respond to this summons. I debated, quickly, mind you, since the source of the shout implied that if I knew what was good for me, I would attend to the call.

“Yeah?” I shouted back, echoing in the small room.

“Did you read your email on Wednesday?” In the post-holiday haze of travel and turkey and teen-aged trauma, who remembers clear back to Wednesday? I must have, during the day sometime anyway, since I was on call to be whisked away to my father-in-law’s bedside by supper time. “Yeah” I said somewhat hesitantly. “Well,” came the voice, “did you know your sister is coming for Christmas?”

“No.”

I love my sister. We were glad she was coming. Honestly. OK, she’s a little weird, but then she lives in California, so what do you expect? But still, it is always fun to have her with us. With my brother from New York and my parents from Tennessee. Again. Really good.

It was the surprise that caught us. See, she had just made a trip to Tennessee to spend a week with Mom and Dad because she couldn’t get away from work another Christmas. So, we were planning on missing her that year. But now we wouldn’t, which was a good thing. It just meant rearranging things a bit—finding a bed to sleep in and chairs to sit on and working out a bathroom schedule. And meals, don’t even go there. But it was a good thing.

Even good things bring about changes or adjustments. Even things we long for sometimes don’t fit into the life we’ve made. Because we’ve been living without, making room is not always easy. This is why the First Sunday of Advent readings always sound so scary. We are being reminded that the world as we know it isn’t the last word. And while our hearts long for wholeness, especially for the broken in this life; while our hearts long for peace, especially for those who have only known war; while our hearts long for fullness and healing, especially for those who are hungry and hurting, if those were to come, they would unsettle us for a time.

Here is how Jesus spoke of those days that are coming in our Gospel reading for this week:

“There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.” *Luke 21:25-26*
NRSV

I’m not sure how you receive this sort of thing on the First Sunday of Advent. Sometimes, I think that folks are expecting to hear the preliminaries of the Christmas story. Maybe an angel announcement, maybe a song of transformation, maybe a dream or a journey or a royal decree. But certainly not people fainting with fear and foreboding. I’m not sure I’m up to foreboding. We just don’t forebode anymore. Do we?

Heck, we’ve got movies about the end of the world that are impressive in their special effects. And we go to see that for entertainment. So, if Jesus is trying to scare us, he’d better start doing a better job of it.

But then, a second look at those verses implies something different. Maybe it isn’t fear that Jesus is trying to instill. Maybe it is something altogether different. Maybe it is the opposite. And what is the opposite of fear? Hope. “Stand up and raise your heads,” he says to us. Our instinct when things are going badly or when the moment is difficult is to keep our heads down. But Jesus tells us to raise our heads, to look up, to trust, to have confidence, to pay attention.

Oh, that's a tricky one at any time of the year, but with all the distractions of the holidays, it is even more difficult. "Pay attention," he says. But I've all these things to accomplish. I've got my lists to fulfill. Places to go and things to do. "Pay attention," he says. But to what? To the end times? No thanks, the folks all wrapped up in that kind of thing seem a little bit ... odd. A little bit out of touch. And frankly, they seem to have their priorities all messed up. If the message is taking care of yourself, stay clean so that you come out well in the end, I'm not really that interested.

"Pay attention," he says. Advent is a multilayered time. There is the remembrance and the desire to recapture the birth of that baby again. We really want to hear that angel song and believe that, if even for a moment, peace on Earth is within the realm of possibility. We look back to what has been done for us. But at the same time, the scriptures remind us that there is still a coming on our horizon. We do look for the coming of the kingdom, when the lion shall lie down with the lamb, when we will beat our swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, when we will study war no more. There is a Someday out there toward which we lean and for which we hope. Advent is looking forward as well as looking back.

"Pay attention," he says. What if there is one more layer? One more direction, in addition to back and forward? What if there is an around? Look around. Look up, look down, or just look. "Be on guard so that your hearts aren't weighed down..." So that you don't miss it; so that you don't miss him. That's the amazing thing about this season: there are glimpses of the kingdom that appear when you least expect it. There are sightings of the Savior in the twinkling of the eyes, in the hesitant thank-yous and the gasps of wonder. In the late-night conversations of scattered family members trying to figure out what might be next, there are prayers of hope and love, an embrace of peace that brings tears to our eyes . . . if we pay attention.

Jeremiah says it simply, "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" (*Jeremiah 33:14 NRSV*). In those days, the prophet writes, God will "execute justice and righteousness in the land" (v. 15). That would be a surprise, wouldn't it? Justice and righteousness. Almost incomprehensible, almost too much to believe, to hold on to, to prepare for. Almost. That's what Advent asks of us—to believe in what seems unbelievable; to hold on to what seems beyond our grasp; and to live, to prepare to live as though it was the way we were going to encounter every day.

This is why the prophets are a guiding image for this week. They lived preparation. They saw what was, and they heard what could be, what should be, and they lived in that tension. They were Advent people before we were. We live a prophetic existence today. We live as a witness to what could be, what is coming. Surely coming. That's our hope; that's our preparation.

The days are surely coming. Like unexpected family. Like unexpected hope. Like justice and righteousness. And it will be to you a joy.

LITURGICAL RESOURCES

Call to Worship

Children of God, pay attention! The days are coming when God's peace will reign and all creation will flourish under the reign of our Creator.

The days are surely coming!

Children of God, prepare your hearts! The days are coming and are already here when God will come near and show us how to recognize God's reign among us.

The days are surely coming and are already here!

Children of God, be alert and listen! God has come near to build the kin-dom on the earth here and now. Will you join in?

The days are surely coming and are already here! We come to prepare our hearts to pay attention, to listen, and to follow God's call to build the kin-dom of earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, June 2024.

Gathering Meditation

The Day Is Surely Coming
(Jeremiah 33:14-16)

A day, certain and on its way
And we feel it approaching
Slowly first, then in a quickened pace
Like a promise, on its way
To being fulfilled
A day when justice and righteousness
Is executed as surely as the day breaks Sun shines, rain falls, fog gathers
At foothills

A day is certainly coming
Sure as breath
A day of safety
A name of a Holy One On the lips: Branch Righteous One
Hope
Certainly on its way

Written by Valerie Bridgman in *The Africana Worship Book, Year C* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2008), 23.

Opening Prayer

God of our Expectation,

We praise you for surely-coming days when you will execute Shalom: love, peace, health, and well-being for the people who walked in darkness. We await with assurance the surely-coming days when AIDS is cured, when every gun is beaten into tools for rebuilding, when every child has the opportunity to develop God-given gifts, and when every adult sees every child as a gift from God. We desire, O God of our Hope, surely-coming days when no city fears hurricanes, no country fears nuclear bombs, and no tribe fears annihilation by another. We thank you for the surely-coming days when no person fears another because God chose to create all people in the diversity of God's image. We thank you for our hope and for your surely-coming days. Amen.

Written by Marilyn E. Thornton in *The Africana Worship Book, Year C* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2008), 162.

Prayer of Confession

(unison)

Holy God, we confess that we are busy with many preparations. We are busy with parties, with feasts, with giving. We are busy cleaning house and wrapping presents. We are busy with the stuff of the holiday. And we confess that our busyness may be misplaced, that we spend more time preparing for things than preparing for You. Draw us back to the center, which is You. Remind us that our hearts and souls have work to do, too. Enable us to let go of that which does not matter, and to see what does matter. This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Written by Beth Merrill Neel on her blog, "Hold Fast to What Is Good." Used with permission.
<https://holdfasttowhatisgood.com/liturgy/prayer-of-confession>.

Benediction

Beloved, go from this place blessed with a hope that takes root and grows, preparing us to notice, listen, and join in with God's kin-dom work among us. Amen.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, June 2024.

CANDLE LIGHTING LITURGY

Reader One: From deep in the past, Jeremiah calls to us, "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" (Jeremiah 33:14). Beloved, the days are surely coming when the yearning of the land; the longing of the sun, moon, and stars; the desperate need of the people of earth for flourishing and peace will receive their fulfillment.

Congregation: While fear, anxiety, misinformation, and suspicion surround us on every side, we choose to watch and wait in hope, preparing our hearts to notice and cooperate with God's grace already at work in our midst.

Reader Two: We light this candle of hope as a sign of our commitment to pay attention and prepare for the days that are surely coming and are already here—the days when God's kin-dom of love, justice, and mercy will reign.

Light the first candle of the Advent wreath.

Second Sunday of Advent

Passion

December 8, 2024

[Malachi 3:1-4](#), [Luke 3:1-6](#)

PLANNING NOTES

If you're reading this week's texts and thinking, "Wait, I thought preparation was last week?" don't worry. You're right where you need to be. Yes, Luke and Malachi both call us to watch for and notice the ones who "prepare the way" for the coming Messiah. We may even notice in their words a call to us to be the ones who answer the call to prepare the way. But Malachi and John the Baptist (via Luke) share something else—*passion*. Now, passion may feel like a dangerous word in the context of worship. We may be okay with strong feelings in worship, but passion? Passion sounds like something combustible, easily out of control, and uncontainable. How do you make *passion* fit in a well-ordered plan of worship?

First, you plan *so that* passion can take root. Malachi speaks of the refiner's fire in the context of refining silver, a process that requires close attention. When we speak of passion in worship, we are not talking about emotions run amok with no direction or purpose. We're talking about directing our hearts to God, whose love and grace inspires, directs, and shapes our passion. Our job as worship planners is not to manufacture emotion or whip people into a frenzy, but to craft every moment of worship in a way that calls the congregation's attention to the work of God in our midst. And then, we leave it to God. It is not ours to judge whether *passion* happened for anyone else. All we can do is discern our own passion that went into the planning, crafting, and performance of worship and evaluate afterward with other worship leaders. What do you think might happen if every worship planning or worship committee meeting included a team to discern how worship cultivates passion in the people of God? If a class or small group in your church uses this week's small group materials, follow up with them to see what they learned and reflected on about where emotions show up in the body. How might those reflections inform your approach to cultivating passion through worship?

Today's scriptures also give us a wonderful starting place for imagining visuals. As you add light to the Advent wreath each week of the Advent season, consider adding more light to the altar each week so that the altar/chancel creates a visual crescendo into Christmas Eve. This week, consider using tea lights floating in clear vases or bowls of water. Not only will the water catch and reflect the light, but the water is also a visual tie to John the Baptist's ministry of baptism. You might even consider adding silver tinsel to the water to further reflect the light and reference the refining of silver in Malachi 3.

Also, take this opportunity to consider your congregation's heart songs—not the congregation's favorite Christmas songs, but the songs that speak to the congregation about who they are and how God is at work among them. Consider how you might incorporate one or more of these heart songs into this service to inspire and encourage the congregation to remember that *we* can abide the day of God's coming because God is at work in us and among us.

PREACHING NOTES

John the Baptist. Every holiday event needs a John the Baptist. Every worship planning team needs a John the Baptist—someone who doesn't hold back, someone who says what he thinks, someone who believes with every fiber of his being, someone who is so vitally present that everyone else is just drawn

to them. But then, on the other hand, such a person might be hard to take. He might have too many rough edges to fit neatly into your corporate image. And John dresses funny.

Do you find it interesting that Luke doesn't seem to care about that? Matthew and Mark give a runway review of John's accoutrements, but Luke doesn't say a word. We've always assumed that Luke was writing more to the Gentile Christians, and maybe that's why he isn't as stressed about John's rugged attire. But I wonder if there is a message here—a simple one, perhaps, but a good reminder that we need to look beyond the surface to hear the voice of God coming from surprising people. It's surprising to us anyway, but not to the God who sends; the God who calls.

Luke says that John was doing what was written in the book of the words of Isaiah (Luke 3:4). John was doing the words of a prophet hundreds of years before him. He was acting on someone else's words. But a few verses earlier, we see it isn't Isaiah's words that motivate John at all. I don't know if John knew of the book of the words or not. Maybe he did; maybe he grew up in synagogue school like all the other boys his age, his cousin, Jesus, for example, who seems to know the words of the books as if he had written them himself. But I can't see John sitting still in recitation class long enough to let the book of the words sink into him.

But Luke says it isn't Isaiah's words that motivate John to come out of the wilderness with his questionable sartorial sense and unusual dietary habits. No, the Word of God came to John in the wilderness. *To John*. Luke seems almost amazed or thinks we should be amazed. We have ruler after ruler, power and authority all over the place, but the Word of God doesn't come to them. It doesn't come to places of power, to places of action and might and force, to corruption and narcissism, greed and oppression. No, the Word didn't come down there to the bright lights and big city. It came to John, in the wilderness, no less. And he got on the road, the under-construction road; he took his shovel and his dynamite and set about filling valleys and removing mountains.

No, he didn't don a hard hat and join a road crew. He let the Word become his words, and he spoke. He invited, encouraged, cajoled, shouted, begged and pleaded, pointed and accused, cried and challenged; he let the Word leak out of him in every way possible and spill out on those who gathered in front of him. The words cascaded down over them, just as assuredly as the hands full of water that he poured out on their heads. They were bathed in the words, cleansed in the words, so that they might be able to claim the Word. Because in alchemy unexplainable, his words and that water and their repentance and willingness made the Word come alive again in them. And the words and the Word together became their flesh and their bones, became their choices and their actions, their priorities and their attitudes, they lived out that Word. They became a book of the words; no, a book of the Word.

Of course, Malachi doesn't need anyone else's words. He was given his own. *Who can endure the day of his coming?* (Malachi 3:2) "You want it how clean?" Malachi was writing in the post-exilic period, meaning that people had just returned home after being exiled in Babylon. The word "*Malachi*" means "my messenger" - so it might have been that the author was telling his own story. He was the messenger who was coming before the Lord to call people into right living. He says there are still expectations; there are still standards. God calls God's people into clean living, whole and healing relationships, service that builds up rather than tears down. God's law is still a measure by which ethics, or behavior in community, is judged.

It sounds like a threat. Malachi has a supporting part in Handel's *Messiah*. Most of the text of that great choral work is Isaiah and the Psalms. But there are a few other scriptures tossed in there. Malachi

appears early in the work, setting the stage for the coming of the Messiah. “The Lord whom ye seek shall suddenly come to His temple,” sings the bass in a recitative, “ev’n the messenger of the Covenant, whom you delight in, behold, He shall come, saith the Lord of Hosts.” A recitative is sort of a mixture of speaking and singing; a straightforward, but rhythmic presentation of the text with simpler musical accompaniment—sort of a “here it is” approach, a “get ready” move from one idea to another. But then, the bass continues in an aria singing, “*But who may abide the day of His coming, and who shall stand when He appeareth? For He is like a refiner’s fire.*” An aria is a longer exposition, with repetition and elaborate musical accompaniment. And a bass voice. A deep bass voice, Darth Vader deep, that sounds ... ominous, scary; a warning or a threat. “*Who may abide?*” Not you, surely. Not me.

That is one reason we choose to skip Advent and get right to Christmas. This getting ready thing can be difficult. Painful. We don’t like the idea of being washed with fuller’s soap, whatever that is. It reminds me of Lava Soap. Remember that? You knew you were dirty if it took Lava to get you clean.

While we might be able to wriggle out of the fuller’s soap reference due to cultural ignorance, we all know what fire is. Refiner’s fire - means even hotter. It is burning away impurities. OK, we might come out better, stronger, cleaner, but still ... Who would choose such a process? Who can endure the day of his coming?

We can. That’s the message here. That’s Advent in a nutshell. Who can endure? We can. No, really. We can. Because we are not alone. Because the one who calls, the one who brings the soap and stokes the fire, is the one who walks with us. Emmanuel means God-with-us.

Someone once asked why Malachi talks more about silver than gold. Gold is more valuable, isn’t it? Gold is the best, the top of the line, the ... uh, gold standard. Yet, silver appears twice. Well, they argued, silver is more labor-intensive in the refining process. In refining silver, the smith has to stay close. You can’t put silver in the fire and leave it alone, it has to be attended. You have to stay close enough to watch. The silversmith must lean in, risking the heat, wary of the impurities spitting hot molten silver onto exposed flesh. Jewelers say you can always spot a silversmith by the scars.

God-with-us. That is the promise hidden within the threat (or what sounds like a threat anyway). Who can endure? We can because God is with us. In the struggle and the joy; in the pain and the celebration, God is with us. The birth we celebrate at Christmastime is not an ancient remembrance of a long-ago event, but a daily promise and a constant presence. Be born in us, we pray. And fit us for heaven. Fit us for heaven.

“Mom clean” is the clean that will pass the inspection, pass the judgment of Mom. That’s the definition. In practice around here, however, what it really means is the clean that happens when Mom joins in. Who can endure the day of his coming? We can, because the Lord rolls up the divine sleeves and reaches into the corners of our lives where we’ve let the clutter of our brokenness accumulate, convincing ourselves that we were clean enough. But it doesn’t measure up to those standards. So, together, we set about the business of cleaning, of healing, of repairing so that we can present to the Lord in righteousness; so that our lives can be Mom-clean, Emmanuel clean.

It isn’t easy, this cleaning process. It takes time and effort and blood and sweat and even tears sometimes. And then you wonder if you’ll ever be clean; if the task of shoveling out the detritus of living in this world will ever be done. How will we know? What will be the sign that we are Mom-clean?

The silversmith will tell you that the metal is ready to be worked into shape, to be used for the jeweler's purpose when he can see his face reflected. When all the world gives back the song, that now that angels sing: that's when we'll know. When our lives shine with the presence of Emmanuel. When the heartbeat, the passion of our worship, becomes the passion by which we live every moment of our lives. When we all sound like the prophet Malachi or the forerunner John the Baptist. When we lean into our faith so completely that it consumes us and ripples out to transform the world around us.

LITURGICAL RESOURCES

Call to Worship

Children of God, prepare the way! The Word of God is coming!

We come to listen and receive God's Word among us.

Children of God, the prophets call to us now and from generations past, urging us to prepare and refine our hearts for the coming of the Word of God. Are you listening?

We come to listen and prepare to receive God's Word among us.

Children of God, this is the mark of our preparation: that passion for God's Word would burn within us, cleansing us and renewing us to reflect God's love throughout the world.

May God ignite our passion for God's Word that has come among us as we listen, prepare, and receive all that God has for us today. Amen.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, June 2024.

Opening Prayer

Compassionate God, greet us with your grace this day, for we need you. We cannot save ourselves. Though we may be frantic with activity, our efforts do not yield peace, peace as you can give. Today we would be quiet enough to hear your voice. Today we would be still enough to feel your touch. Help us to find that place where we can receive as well as give, wait as well as act, and listen as well as speak. Our whole world needs your peace. Let us come before you and learn your ways, laying down our weapons and feeding the hungry. Come to us now, through Jesus the Christ. Amen.

Written by Ruth C. Duck in *Touch Holiness: Resources for Worship, Updated* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2012), 5.

For use in worship, using the following attribution:

Reprinted by permission of the publisher from *Touch Holiness*, ed. Ruth C. Duck and Maren C. Tirabassi. Copyright © 1990 by The Pilgrim Press.

Prayer of Confession

God of Grace,
you blow the breath of life into our lungs,
you have formed us in your image.

**And yet we acknowledge that sometimes
we are not who you would have us be.**

You challenge us to embrace the refining fire of your love,
to meet you on the threshing floor of life, to be washed as with fuller's soap.

**But in our heart of hearts
we would rather keep those things
that would be removed in such an encounter.**

Through your Grace, life-giving God, accept us as we are,
Unrefined, unwashed, the chaff mixed in with the grain.

And help us to move into a new way of being

...time of silence...

Listen! For this is Good News!
God's Grace is wider than our wildest imaginings.
God's Grace embraces us as we are and where we are
and draws us out to be the people we were created to be.
Thanks be to God! Amen.

Written by Rev. Gord Waldie on his blog, **Worship Offerings**. <http://worshipofferings.blogspot.ca/>. Re-posted on the re:Worship blog at <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2013/08/prayer-for-grace-malachi-3-1-4.html>.

Benediction

Go, now, blessed with a passion that refines, molds, and shapes each of our hearts to reflect God's glorious love that transforms despair into hope, violence into peace, and distress into flourishing. Amen.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, June 2024.

CANDLE LIGHTING LITURGY

Reader One: The prophet Malachi calls us to watch for the messenger God will send us, a messenger who burns with a passion for God's coming salvation. "For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness" (Malachi 3:2b-3).

Congregation: In a world driven by a passion to maintain the status quo, we choose to live with a passion for God's peace, to listen to those who call us to righteousness, and to submit ourselves to God's grace, that we might be refined and purified until we reflect God's love throughout the earth.

Reader Two: We light this candle of peace as a sign of our commitment to passionately pursue the work of making peace in our hearts, our families, our communities, and throughout the earth until God's kingdom comes on earth as it is in heaven.

Light the second candle of the Advent wreath.

Third Sunday of Advent

Presence

December 15, 2024

[Isaiah 12:2-6](#), [Luke 3:7-18](#)

PLANNING NOTES

Gaudete Sunday holds a special place in many congregations with a gathering full of music, joy, and light as we get closer and closer to the darkest night of the year. Whether your choir will sing a cantata, or your children will perform a pageant, or all the music ensembles will offer special music—let the joy ring forth! Embrace the traditions in your community for this Sunday. That is part of what *presence* is about—being in the moment together and honoring who we are past, present, and future.

Whether you choose to preach this Sunday or not, find ways to highlight that even though it is Gaudete Sunday, the joy we live into this day is different from the joy of Christmas Eve, because on this third Sunday of Advent, we are still waiting for the fulfillment of our joy. Gaudete Sunday, then, is a day to rehearse joy in the midst of waiting. So, if this is typically a Sunday where music ensembles take the lead, find ways to involve the whole congregation in the music-making, praying, and even proclamation. It is not only the choirs or liturgists or preacher who get to practice joyful presence—we all do!

As you prepare the visual for this Sunday, further increase the light on the altar. Add levels to create different heights on the altar to place candles or lamps. Investigate whether the church or a congregant has pink or purple candle holders to add color to the altar. Include pink cloth amid the purple to tie in the pink candle of the Advent wreath. There are so many options for adding color and light and joy to the visual space of worship this Sunday!

Consider, too, how presence calls us to corporate prayer. In all the music and rejoicing, remember that rehearsing joyful presence together also means being present to the burdens, suffering, worries, and challenges we carry with us into worship. So, create space for prayer that is radically present to the needs in the church, the community, and our world. Sit with how the offertory prayer written for this week calls us to connect presence with generosity. Weave song into your prayers. Pray together as a practice of radical presence in which we share the joy of God's work among us by being the presence of God with one another.

PREACHING NOTES

Wait, wait, wait! Isn't this Gaudete Sunday? Isn't this the joy celebration, the pink or rose-colored candle, the bit of brightness in the dark of the blue or the purple? Why are we still hearing John the Baptist? Why does our Gospel reading for this week start with "You brood of vipers"?! Something is seriously out of sync here. To which the only appropriate response is yes. Something is seriously out of sync. Something has gone awry. Something is gone askew on the treadle (and only serious Monty Python fans will recognize that declaration and then be poised to not expect —because nobody expects—the Spanish Inquisition!) ... Forgive me.

Where was I? Yes, something has gone wrong, that is the message of Advent. Well, ok, it is the prelude to Advent. Something has gone wrong, but there is hope. Something has gone wrong, but a remedy exists. Something has gone wrong, but you are not far from the kingdom, or the kin-dom, or both! Here

is where the joy resides, not in the denial of the brokenness, but that brokenness is not the last word. It is not the defining word. Joy resides in the promise of redemption.

After John excoriates his listeners (perhaps not the best technique for preachers to emulate), the response is surprising. Instead of pushing back or pouting or writing him off as out of touch with reality, they ask an important question – “What then should we do?” The word *sun* (pronounced *soon*) in Greek here is important. Greek scholars tell us that this word is a conjunction and is inferential – which means that it is a word that indicates a logical transition. It’s like *therefore* (though it doesn’t appear at the beginning of the sentence), in that sense. The point here is that his listeners agreed with John, at least to a degree. All that stuff about axes and ancestors, all that about wrath and fruits, they bought into that. They saw, or perhaps felt the truth of that. So now what, John? That’s what they were asking. When then should we do? Given all of that, all that fearsome truth, what should we do.

How do we make sure we get on the right side of history? Is that too big a question? Well, it is, and it isn’t. John’s answer to their plea seems to be somewhat mundane; maybe too simple. Maybe we’d take it more seriously if he had said, “Make the world a better place.” Or “share the gospel.” Or “work for justice.” Or ... Maybe the problem is we have made things too difficult, or at least too vague. We want to give space for people to respond in their own creative and dynamic ways, which is great. But sometimes people need something they can start with; some small first step; something doable yet challenging at the same time. “Give away a cloak,” says John, “treat your clients fairly; don’t use your power to your own advantage; don’t lie; don’t grumble.” Simple and yet world-changing things.

Really? World-changing? Yeah. Because there is something underneath all these simple instructions about how we prepare for the coming Messiah. There is an invitation at the root of the call to beware. And that invitation is to be present. John is telling his hearers, shaken by the rhetoric of the wild man from the desert, to be fully present. He is telling those who are doing ok to pay attention to those who aren’t. He’s telling those who are collecting taxes to see those from whom they collect as people with stories and lives and relationships and not simply sheep to be fleeced. He is telling the soldiers, the wielders of physical power, to acknowledge that those weaker and more vulnerable have a place in their world too. He is asking those with power to see others as people and not as victims. That is a radical reorienting of the world, to be honest. But it had a small start, an individual start that leads to a corporate or a relational start.

That’s what Isaiah’s song is all about in our text for this week. There is this designed move from the individual to the corporate; from the one who with joy draws water from the wells of salvation to telling the whole world, inviting the whole world to join in praise for the one who comes. Joy is contagious. Joy is meant to be shared. To fully experience joy, there needs to be a relationship, a community, a world that can be called to share in the glory of joy. It is a call to be present.

Advent is not a secret that we can keep to ourselves. It is an announcement that we – together – live in a way that issues an invitation, a call a new way of living in the world, a new way of being. And it begins with being present to and with one another.

LITURGICAL RESOURCES

Call to Worship

Children of God, our world is full of the fruit of humanity's greed, apathy, and neglect for the love of God, neighbor, self, and all creation.

What, then, should we do?

Our world is also full of the fruit of God's love that wells up all around us, sustaining us, saving us, reviving us to live as the people of God.

What, then, should we do?

God encircles us on every side, Love divine present with us in creation, in community, and in the anticipated arrival of the infant Emmanuel. What then, children of God, should you do?

We will live in joyful presence with God and neighbor, turning away from sin and toward a life with God and one another marked by joy, justice, and mercy. Amen.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, June 2024.

Opening Prayer

Eternal Creator, with you each moment of life is full of wonder and surprise. We pray you to make us watchful as we await the coming of Christ. Grant that we may not be found sleeping in sin, but awake and rejoicing in your newness of life. Through the same Jesus Christ our Savior, Amen.

Written by Margaret Gay MacKinnon Godfrey in *Touch Holiness: Resources for Worship, Updated* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2012), 5.

For use in worship, use the following attribution:

Reprinted by permission of the publisher from *Touch Holiness*, ed. Ruth C. Duck and Maren C. Tirabassi. Copyright © 1990 by The Pilgrim Press.

Prayer of Confession

Creator of the universe,
we stand amazed at your power and glory.
We are eager to worship you and offer our praise,
but we are often reluctant to answer
when we hear you calling our name.
We sing our songs of tribute in the sanctuary,
but shy away from the river,
lest we be baptized
with the fire of the Holy Spirit.
Forgive us when we forget your promise
to be with us always, O God.
Renew us with the power of your ever-present love,

and strengthen us to proclaim your justice throughout the world. Amen.

Written by Laura Jaquith Bartlett, posted on the Ministry Matters website <http://www.ministrymatters.com/>. Re-posted on the re:Worship blog at <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2013/01/confession-epiphany-1-c.html>.

Benediction

Advent invites each of us into a new way of living in a world to which the kin-dom of God has come and is yet coming. Go, now, blessed with the gift of togetherness, for it is only in being truly present with God and one another that we live as followers of the coming Messiah. Amen.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, June 2024.

CANDLE LIGHTING LITURGY

Reader One: No matter what troubles overwhelm us today, Isaiah reminds us that in all of our preparation and passionate pursuit of God's coming kin-dom, we must not forget that God's salvation has come and is coming. "With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation" (Isaiah 12:3). With joy you will remember that God's salvation is already present among us.

Congregation: Faced with the troubles and the suffering of the world, we choose to live in joyful presence to God and one another. We will not turn away from the pain and the hurt in our world, and we will not stop rejoicing in God, whose salvation fills us to overflowing that God's love might flow through us and flood our troubled world with hope, peace, and joy.

Reader Two: We light this candle of joy as a sign of our commitment to be present to ourselves, our friends, our families, and our neighbors that in sharing our vulnerable lives we might share in the glorious joy of God's salvation together.

Light the third (pink/rose) candle of the Advent wreath.

Fourth Sunday of Advent

December 22, 2024

[Micah 5:2-5a](#), [Luke 1: \(26-38\), 39-45](#)

Promise

PLANNING NOTES

There's a particular feeling evoked by the word *almost*. We're *almost* on vacation. Dinner is *almost* done. Christmas is *almost* here. For me, *almost* brings this sense of leaning in, straining forward, holding out just a little longer. Depending on what I'm waiting for, *almost* can make me lean in with anxiety or hope or a mix of both. What is it about *almost* that makes us lean in? What's on the other side that makes us hold out a little longer? More often than not, it's the promise that what we've been waiting on will come to fruition.

On this Fourth Sunday of Advent, we receive promise with the hope of fruition—not hope as a wish but hope actively moving toward fulfillment. Mary is pregnant with the Messiah, and Elizabeth witnesses the promise coming into being right in front of her. Micah shares whispers, not abstract promises but a promise springing forth in the quiet town of Bethlehem, a promise of provision, security, and peace. These are not pie-in-the-sky, theoretical ideas. Mary, Elizabeth, Bethlehem, *us*...we are all recipients of a real, tangible promise—the promise that is already here and not yet. The promise that is *almost*.

Contained within the *almost* of Advent is the promise that our work is vital. By grace, we participate with God in making the *almost* a reality in our homes, neighborhoods, and communities. So, as we plan for this last Sunday of Advent, how might the visual and aural space declare our work of preparation, watching, waiting, and cooperating with God? You might represent the *almost* of the promise symbolically, perhaps by placing an empty manger in the center of the altar surrounded by more candles, purple cloth, and flowers. You could also take a more literal approach by including in the altar or chancel space a visual representation of service your church does in the neighborhood, either throughout the year or specifically at Christmastime. What are the signs of God's kin-dom work happening in and through your church and neighborhood? How might you include those on the altar as an offering and as a promise to keep responding to God who includes us in the work of bringing the kin-dom on earth as it is in heaven? What might you sing to call to mind the promise of God's kin-dom among us? The Fourth Sunday of Advent is always a wonderful time to sing hymns based on the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55) like "My Soul Gives Glory to My God" (*United Methodist Hymnal*, 198) or "Tell Out My Soul" (*United Methodist Hymnal*, 200) that remind us of the nature and work of God's kin-dom. Or you might sing songs of remembering and noticing God's coming and promises to us, like "People, Look East" (*United Methodist Hymnal*, 202), "Toda la Tierra (The Earth Is Waiting)" (*United Methodist Hymnal*, 210), or "Like a Child" (*The Faith We Sing*, 2092).

PREACHING NOTES

"Greetings, favored one!" "But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah..." We're being addressed. Well, not us, *per se*. After all, the first one addressed is Mary; we'll get back to her in a moment. And then there is a whole people of a community called Bethlehem of Ephrathah, and we'll get back to them in a moment. So, we're not being addressed—except we are. We are the ones being called out, being included, being invited. The *us* is humanity. It's us; we're here in these texts. We are present or represented or recognized or however you want to understand being read into this story. There is an invitation this week—an ongoing invitation to the party that is the kin-dom of God, the celebration to be of the Realm

of God. What is clear in our texts this week is the incredible news that God has chosen to include us in this process.

Now we could question the wisdom of this prerogative from the Divine mind if we would dare to do such a thing. We could wonder why God wouldn't simply snap the divine fingers and make kingdom happen. We could wonder why there wasn't an inevitable, assembly-line process toward kin-dom that we might be invited to watch unfold. We could wonder why the Holy One didn't just start here with completion already in place. Oh, wait. We could wonder. And that's another of the gifts we have been given: the capacity to question the way things are.

The tragedy of this capacity to question is the unfortunate possibility of missing the invitation. We might think the invitation doesn't include us, but others more directly involved. Or we might think these are ancient stories and therefore not really directed toward us except as something to remember and appreciate.

"Greetings, favored one." There's an angel in our living room, a shining presence inviting us to acknowledge that God has chosen to use us in this kin-dom-building exercise called incarnation. Please, we don't diminish Mary when we do this. We stand with her in wonder and awe. "How can this be," we wonder. We aren't equipped; we aren't resourced; we aren't prepared to bring to life this Christ-presence in our world today. We are too fallible, too uncertain, too busy with our own lives.

Mary asked the question too. It was all too much for this young woman, betrothed to be married. She knew that as things usually worked, she was not prepared to be a mother to a savior. And frankly, the angel wasn't much help. The instructions were frighteningly vague: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you" —before rushing on to talk — with some relief on the angel's part, it seems — about the child to be born. The invitation seems to be about being the center and not the center of this event; to be the means of grace incarnating in the world, but it is not about you in the end. *Overshadow*? That seems to be the antithesis of self-actualization and self-centeredness that this world seems to want to focus on. It is both an elevation and a diminution of the person. It is both a blessing and a burden.

And it all hinges on the acceptance of this overwhelmed young girl trembling before an angel in her living room. What an amazing thing when you think about it! I wonder if Gabriel was just as nervous as Mary on that day—nervous that she had more power, more agency than he was used to dealing with. God chooses to invite and not force. God chooses to wait for our willingness and doesn't bend our will with power beyond our resistance.

"Why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?" (Luke 1:43) Yes, OK, here's the [real passage for this Year C](#). It is about Elizabeth. Except, Elizabeth wouldn't say so. She redirects; she looks beyond. She has her role in the drama but is willing to move from center stage so that another might stand in the promise of which they are both a part. Now Mary hears another greeting. This one is a bit more human. And yet there is a taste of the divine in it. There is a promise in the greeting and the question that follows. Elizabeth, glowing from her own miracle, points the light on Mary—on the One she carries, the hope of the world, the promise to which the people of God had clung for centuries.

"Blessed is she who believed" (Luke 1:45), Elizabeth says at the end of her welcome to Mary. But who is "she"? Mary, of course, Mary believed. But then didn't Elizabeth believe as well? Or if she did not believe ahead of time, didn't she believe in process? How else could she now come to greet Mary with such

conviction and certainty? Elizabeth is living the promise. She is a sign, like Mary is a sign, that God is with them. She who believed includes Elizabeth. And? Who else is included in the affirmation of faith, this creedal greeting at the door of Elizabeth's house?

"And you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah." What about this village? Where is their agency? What does prophecy mean, in the end? Inevitable? No matter what? Perhaps. But this prophecy is coming true, says Luke, through the agency of a young woman. Fulfillment is a choice, an invitation, a participation in the working out of the workings of God. We are citizens of Bethlehem of Ephrathah; we are Mary standing before the angelic messenger. We are part of what God is doing and continuing to do in our midst. The invitation here is to respond like Mary, "Here I am, let it be to me." Here we are, let it be to us. Let us be the ongoing incarnation of God at work among us.

Is this the promise of this fourth Sunday of Advent? That we promise to be God-bearers as we work and walk as disciples of Jesus Christ in the world and in our communities? That would be a powerful expression of our faith as we worship together. It would be a glorious entry into a Christmas observance. In the end, we are saying that there is room for the Savior to be born among us. We will make room. We will be the room. We will be the sign that God is present; Emmanuel is the expression of this God we worship.

That is the real promise here. Our response is vital, God claims. Our work is integral to the working out of the kin-dom. But the promise is that we do not do this alone. The Savior will stand and feed the flock, says Micah; the Savior will be with us. "Greetings, favored one," says the angel in Luke's Gospel, "the Lord is with you." Even the initial response is supported by God's presence. We call that prevenient grace. The promise we celebrate, the promise we live into is that God will be, God has been, God is with us. Let us move into the Christmas season embracing this promise and seeing God at work in us and around us. Amen.

LITURGICAL RESOURCES

Call to Worship

Children of God, the arrival of the Promised One is almost here!

We wait as people of God's promise.

The message of the prophets and the expectation residing in Mary's womb call to us today.

We listen as people of God's promise.

Mary's "yes" and Elizabeth's faithfulness guide our path, showing us that we too have a role to play in bearing God's good news into the world.

We follow as people of God's promise.

This is the promise Mary, Elizabeth, and the prophets bore that we continue to carry even today—God is with us!

God is with us! We are not alone. Thanks be to God!

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, June 2024.

Opening Prayer

God of the impossible and unlikely,
God of pregnant old women and virgins,
you turn our conventional world upside down,
where the hungry are fed,
and arrogant rich are turned away.
Instill in us unthinkable marvels.
Make us pregnant with wonder
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God for ever and ever. Amen

Adapted from Bob Eldan. Posted on the Pilgrim Uniting Church website at <https://pilgrimwr.unitingchurch.org.au/?p=677>.

Prayer of Confession

(in unison)

Holy God, you promised to do great things for us,
yet we do not trust you.
You extend your mercy to us,
yet we do not trust you.
You lift up the humble,
you fill the hungry with good things,
and yet we still do not trust you.
Forgive us, and help us to trust in the promises you have given us.
In the name of Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.

Posted on *Waiting for Water: Liturgy for The Easter Journey 2013*
<http://storage.cloversites.com/waitingforwater/documents/Liturgical%20resources%202013%2010%2018%2012.pdf>. Re-posted on the re:Worship blog at <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2013/08/confession-luke-1-46-55.html>.

Benediction

Go, now, in the blessing of God's promise and in the assurance that our expectant joy will find its fulfillment in the God who was, who is, and who will be with us always. Amen.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, June 2024.

CANDLE LIGHTING LITURGY

Reader One: When the people were looking for deliverance, the prophet Micah declared, "But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah...from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient day." (Micah 5:2). But what if Micah is also talking to us, proclaiming, "But you,

O [*fill in name of church or community*], from you shall come forth for me..." What? What might God be calling forth from us?

Congregation: God invites us to receive the promise of God's salvation and the sustenance of God's mercy and grace, enabling us to live the promise as God-bearers to the world. As Christ was born in Bethlehem, so too we answer God's invitation to have Christ born among us today and every day.

Reader Two: We light this candle of love as a sign of our commitment to live as people of God's promise, a promise of salvation and flourishing for all people that springs forth from God's love for all creation.

Light the fourth candle of the Advent wreath.

Christmas Eve

Joy

December 24, 2024

[Isaiah 9:2-7](#), [Luke 2:1-14, \(15-20\)](#)

PLANNING NOTES

Friends, we made it! Through the preparations and the passion, our presence with another as we receive God's promise—we made it! We have arrived at Christmas, the arrival of the Light of the world who brings joy to the people living in great darkness. Do you identify with those people? On this eve of the birth of the Savior, do you feel like the people living in great darkness? Do your congregants?

If your answer is yes, you are not alone. And this of all days is not the day to ignore the darkness, to pretend that all that hurts and harms in our world doesn't exist. That's not the message of Christmas. No, if you feel like the people who live in great darkness, Christmas is especially for you. Because on this day, in the city of David, the Light has come. The Light who persists and spreads in the darkness. The Light who continues to thrive within the darkness. The Light who does not hide what is wrong but makes what is wrong known. The Light who does not erase all that is wrong but redeems what is wrong with the joy of God's persistent Love. The Light who shows us how to discern the difference between darkness that does harm and darkness that reaffirms the beauty of our humanness, the darkness of evil versus the darkness of reacting to a world in which we do so much harm to one another. Author Glennon Doyle talks about life as "brutiful," the simultaneous beauty and brutality of living as humans who feel pain and yet find beauty in pain. Joy resists evil and persists in the "brutifulness" of life.

One of the ways we express the joy of Christmas is to embrace our traditions. If you always sing "O Come, All Ye Faithful" at the beginning of the Christmas Eve service, do it! If you always end the service turning down the lights, giving everyone a candle, and spreading the light across the dark space while you sing "Silent Night"—go for it! Both of these are not only beautiful traditions, but also entirely appropriate to this worship service and to this worship series as a whole. As you shift from purple to white paraments, consider how you might maintain some consistency between the Advent and Christmas altarscapes. Maybe you keep some of the candles, add a bit of purple to the white, or bring back the empty stable from week one, now full of all the usual characters. Keep in mind that Christmas does not erase or reverse Advent—how we wait in Advent ties directly to what we receive in Christmas. So, what are the ways you make this connection in visuals, music, and rituals for your congregation?

Finally, consider what moments in worship will allow your people to wonder and to ponder just as the shepherds wondered and Mary pondered in Luke 2. The connection between joy, awe, and reflection is almost palpable in today's text. How will you bring those actions and postures to life for your congregation? Perhaps you will begin with loud and joyful hymns, move into the proclamation of the story, and end with meditative prayer and hymn singing. Or maybe you will flow in and out of joy and reflection, awe and quiet before ending the service with a joyous rendition of the final verse of "O Come, All Ye Faithful": *Yea, Lord we greet Thee, born this happy morning...!* There are so many choices we can make as we plan and lead our congregations as we rejoice at the arrival of the Christ Child, the Light of the world.

PREACHING NOTES

"But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing good news of a great joy for all the people" (Luke 2:10). You know this. "You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest..." (Isaiah 9:3). You've heard this. It's on the decorations you bought at Wal-Mart. It is on the cards that pour through the mail. Even the ecards that sing a song and paint a picture. Joy is at the heart of this celebration. It rings in our ears and trips from our lips. Joy. It brightens our countenance and lifts our steps. Joy. It is undeniable and unavoidable. Joy.

Except for those for whom it isn't. Undeniable and unavoidable. There are those who gather for worship this day who carry a hurt so deep that joy seems like an alien land. There are those who grieve so profoundly, perhaps silently and perhaps not, for whom joy seems like a slap in the face. It seems like an overlooking or forgetting of the loved one missed. There are those who face an uncertain future, who weep for injustice, who aren't allowed to participate in the bounty of a wealthy nation; there are those for whom joy is a foreign language, unintelligible to their ears. And let's be honest, in time, we will all travel those barren joyless lands. Joy seems such a fleeting thing, such an individual thing, such a temporary thing. We are all grown up enough to recognize joy is fleeting at best.

All of this begs the question, "What is this joy of which we speak?" Do we understand joy when we speak of it as powerful or temporary? Have we heard the angelic and prophetic message clearly in its entirety well enough to fully grasp the transformative power of joy? Not only do we, but can we? Is this joy something so beyond our human understanding that we can only aspire to comprehension in part? Maybe.

Maybe. But let's listen again and see what we might say about joy on this night. The angels spoke to shepherds. We've all heard the stories of who the shepherds were in that culture. They might have been seen as outcasts, marginalized, unclean. But they might also have been businesspeople, making a living, providing an essential service. Either way, the angelic presence implied that there was divine inclusion of even these. "I bring you good news of great joy." I bring you. Yes, you in your particularity. You in your grief or in your contentment, or maybe even both. You in your brokenness and wholeness, overlapping with overwhelming regularity in our lives. You who are the center of attention and you who don't feel like you belong, even when that is the same person. I bring you great joy.

The first gift of Christmas: a proclamation not from a Santa at the north pole, but from heaven itself. The first gift of Christmas is joy. "I bring you great joy." And you aren't required to feel a certain way about it. You can, but you don't have to. The gift is given just the same. It is yours. This wrapped parcel under the tree, or in the stocking, or just handed over with a breathless grin. Joy. It's yours, but not yours alone.

See, that's the thing about this gift. It comes with attachments. Batteries are included. The angelic announcement was, "I bring you good news of great joy for all the people." *For all the people.* Attached to this joy is something else, a world. Unity. Peace. Justice. Equality. Hospitality. Whew.

Joy is felt, but also lived into. Joy is gifted, but also aspirational. The message tonight is Emmanuel, God is with us. And that truth, that reality, imparts joy even to those who haven't heard it yet. Joy is not our exclusive property. Acceptance is not our exclusive right. Justice is not just for people like us. Peace is not just that we are safe. The light is shining upon all, says the prophet. The world is brighter. We don't all see it right now, just as they didn't all see it then because there are some who want to block the light and keep exclusive rights to brightness. Some are so cast down that they can't see the brightening sky. The light has shone, nonetheless. And people rejoice, will rejoice, can rejoice – sometimes prophets write in multiple tenses.

I know, I cheated. I left out the uncomfortable bit, "as people exult when dividing plunder." What are we going to do with that? Not to mention the boots and warriors and garments rolled in blood. I'd rather not mention it. Except Isaiah did. It's almost like the prophet can see the news we watch each day. It's like the prophet can see the images of children, rolled in blood, and warriors marching, and boots stomping. The prophet can see what we see yet still proclaims joy. Maybe it's a future joy. That at least would make some sense. Except the words are "have seen" and "have multiplied" and "have increased" and "they rejoice." That doesn't seem like the future. It seems like now, like this night, this moment.

Maybe joy isn't an emotion or a feeling. Maybe joy isn't elation or happiness but something much more profound. Maybe it is an act of faith. Maybe it is a prayer and a hope and an act of will. Maybe it is indeed that gift we are given and around which we wrap our hands and our lives, individually and corporately. It is a gift that we embrace with quiet acceptance and joyous proclamation. Emmanuel, God with us, is the great joy for all people. Thanks be to God. Amen.

LITURGICAL RESOURCES

Call to Worship

For you who are filled to the brim with happiness,
Jesus Christ, the joy of the world, is born.

For you who are mourning the loss of family and friends,
Jesus Christ, the joy of the world, is born.

For you who feel like you are tripping about in darkness,
Jesus Christ, the joy of the world, is born.

For you who rest in gratitude and contentment,
Jesus Christ, the joy of the world, is born.

For you who feel the ache of loneliness,
Jesus Christ, the joy of the world, is born.

For you who are surrounded by unlikely yet beautiful companionship,

Jesus Christ, the joy of the world, is born.

Come, let us worship the birth of our Savior!

Come, let us worship God who came to dwell among us!

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, June 2024.

Prayers of the People

We have waited for a long time
for your hope, your joy, your love
to shine in the darkness of this world, Almighty God.
Even now, in our gathering here, we await you.
In our hearts, we still hope that your light will blaze forth,
banishing the shadows of this world
and guiding all the people back to you.

**Yet you did not come into this world
in a show of power and glory.
You did not shine forth for all of creation to behold.**

**A tiny spark –
a newborn baby,
visible to parents and curious animals.**

**A host of angels –
away from the populated areas,
singing to migrant workers.**

**A sparkling star –
guiding foreigners to see what neighbors could not.**

Open our hearts, merciful God,
to the sparks of your presence still in this world,
that we might behold your presence in the least likely of places,
and among the least likely of people.

**God with us,
kindle your spark within us,
that together we may shine forth your light,
we might banish the shadows of this world,
we might be the continuation of the Christmas miracle:
Emmanuel is in this world,
God is with us, now and evermore.**

Illumine our hearts, gracious God,
that we might speak anew the words your Son will teach us...

Adapted from Rev. Eliza Buchakjian-Tweedy, Pastor at First Church Congregational in Rochester, NH.
Posted on the re:Worship blog at <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2018/12/christmas-opening-prayer.html>.

Prayer of Confession

God of Light,
we confess that we have gone astray and have left Your light.
We follow the dim lights of the world of success and fortune.
We follow the dim lights that call us
to be more religious by following rules.
We follow the fading light of personal salvation.
Forgive us for not seeking the true Light
of Your love for all the world.
Forgive us for not following the ways of Jesus,
who commanded us to love one another.
Call us to be light-bearers of love, compassion and justice,
in which the Mystery of Your Love is revealed.
In the name of Jesus the Messiah, we pray. Amen.

Written by Rev. Mindi on the Rev-o-lution website. <http://rev-o-lution.org/>. Re-posted on the re:Worship blog at <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2016/12/prayer-of-confession-seeking-light.html>.

Benediction

Beloved, may you go in the blessing of Emmanuel, God-with-us, the joy of the world, and may you carry this gift of joy everywhere you go, working for peace, unity, justice, and mercy for all people. Amen.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, June 2024.

CANDLE LIGHTING LITURGY

Reader One: Beloved, today we welcome the Christ Child, the fulfillment of our joy, as we proclaim with the prophet Isaiah, "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" (Isaiah 9:6).

Congregation: Christ our joy has come near. Emmanuel, God with us, has come to dwell with us as a tiny baby. "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 9:7).

Reader Two: We light this candle as a sign of Christ coming to dwell with us, to live in the neighborhood of vulnerable humanity as a vulnerable child. May the light of Christ warm our hearts and light our way as we share the joy of God's salvation wherever we go.

Light the center candle of the Advent wreath.

First Sunday after Christmas Day

Home

December 29, 2024

[1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26](#), [Luke 2:15-21](#)

PLANNING NOTES

“I’ll be home for Christmas...” Sorry, I couldn’t help myself. Here we are on the Fifth Day of Christmas and the First Sunday of Christmastide, and you’re probably either tired of being home or loving it. Or both. The idea of home conjures immediate feelings in each of us, whether those feelings are warm and comforting or anxious and uncertain. So, the first question this Sunday raises for us is: “What kind of home do we want church to feel like?”

If you will bear with me for a moment of theological musing, I’m struck by how when we talk about the identity and role of the church in the world, we rarely talk about the sensory experience of church. We say the church is the Body of Christ in the world. What does being part of that Body feel like? We say that the church is called to fulfill God’s mission in the world. What does the mission of God sound like, look like, smell like? We say that the church is a place where we are formed as Christians in community with one another. What does the experience of making life-giving community together in Christ feel like in our bodies?

This First Sunday in Christmastide is a wonderful time for us to consider these questions. We’ve come all this way through the waiting of Advent into the joy of Jesus’ arrival. Now what? It’s a bit like when new parents bring their baby home from the hospital. After all that anticipation and effort, the baby is here, and the new normal of family life begins—or in the case of the church, begins *again*. At home.

So, what kind of mood and feeling do you want to bring to worship this week? What might evoke a sense of home as a place of safety, belonging, and support? For many people, the sense of smell can evoke strong emotions and memories. Perhaps this is a Sunday to bake bread or cookies in the kitchen and let the aroma waft into the sanctuary. This is certainly an excellent Sunday for a hymn sing of all your congregation’s favorite Christmas carols and for extended moments of fellowship and connection before, during, and after the worship service. You might even consider declaring it Slipper Sunday, inviting everyone to wear their most comfortable slippers and bring their favorite blankets to church. Whatever you choose, get the congregation involved in making this Sunday a time to celebrate and rest in the home that you create together as the Body of Christ!

Addendum to Preaching Notes

“Why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?” (Luke 1:43) Yes, OK, here’s the [real passage for this Year C](#). It is about Elizabeth. Except, Elizabeth wouldn’t say so. She redirects; she looks beyond. She has her role in the drama but is willing to move from center stage so that another might stand in the promise of which they are both a part. Now Mary hears another greeting. This one is a bit more human. And yet there is a taste of the divine in it. There is a promise in the greeting and the question that follows. Elizabeth, glowing from her own miracle, points the light on Mary—on the One she carries, the hope of the world, the promise to which the people of God had clung for centuries.

“Blessed is she who believed” (Luke 1:45), Elizabeth says at the end of her welcome to Mary. But who is “she”? Mary, of course, Mary believed. But then didn’t Elizabeth believe as well? Or if she did not believe

ahead of time, didn't she believe in process? How else could she now come to greet Mary with such conviction and certainty? Elizabeth is living the promise. She is a sign, like Mary is a sign, that God is with them. She who believed includes Elizabeth. And? Who else is included in the affirmation of faith, this creedal greeting at the door of Elizabeth's house?

PREACHING NOTES

It's time to go. The holiday has come and gone; we've gathered, some from a long distance, others from somewhere closer. But we've gathered together to celebrate somehow. Maybe with excitement and enthusiasm, maybe with quiet consolation and a passing of peace. And even if our home was the locus of the gathering, we've been in a new space as we host the gathered loved ones. This gathering unsettles all. It can be and hopefully often is a joyous unsettling, but unsettling, nonetheless. Schedules are changed, routines are upended, and expectations are shifted regularly.

But now it's time to go home. The shepherds, who rushed to the side of the manger with the angelic announcement still ringing in their ears, now take their leave. They go back to their flocks left grazing on the hillside in the surrounding countryside. They fulfilled their commission to go and see this thing that had been made known to them, and now they returned. It's what we do, part of the rhythm of how we live in this world. We come and we go.

Hannah and Elkanah went home too. They went to the temple, like everyone went to the temple, and then they went home. It's what we do. Except they didn't come as everyone else came. Yes, they came to worship; it was part of their faith, part of the ritual practice. But they also came for Samuel. Their little boy whom they delivered to Eli as the result of a promise made to God was there working in the temple. They came to make a connection, to hope he remembered them, his parents who had given him up to the Lord. Hannah made him a new robe every year and brought it to him. Maybe got him to try it on so she could adjust it, take it in here, let it out there, so that he could wear it longer; so that he could wear it proudly; so that everyone who came to the temple would know that he wasn't abandoned, but that he was loved and a part of a family who loved him. Then they went home. With broken hearts? With pride as they saw Samuel taking his place in the temple of the Lord? Both? Something else?

Mary and Joseph also went home. Not only were they changed, but home was changed too. It is an odd little story tucked away here in the gospel of Luke. A rare glimpse of the childhood of Jesus. But even in this little story we have a reordering of how we think about the world and our place in it. You know the story; Jesus gets lost along the way on the Passover trip to Jerusalem. The parents among us want detailed information as to how such a thing could happen. We don't know. It happened and there was panic and consternation. Mary lets him have it, and then is given a glimpse into a whole new way of seeing. A whole new way of being. "Did you not know I must be in my father's house?" (Lk 2:49 NRSV). Must be? I must be, he says. The boy says, the boy Jesus, who Luke implies had an inkling of who he was or was becoming. Like Hannah and Elkanah, Mary and Joseph left their son at the temple because he must be in his father's house. And though in this case, the boy is not left behind again, they all go home changed. Jesus goes and, Luke says, is obedient to his earthly parents, even as he grows in wisdom and years and in divine and human favor. And we can assume, Mary and Joseph did their share of growing too.

Here's a reality to embrace today. We go home transformed. We go home changed. I know it isn't Luke's story, but we go home by a different way. Even if the road is the same one we took to get there, the way is different. Because we are different. Something happened in the gathering. Maybe we grew closer,

maybe we overcame differences that have kept us apart longer than they should have. Maybe new rifts grew between us as we realized that we are different people and unable to understand and be understood. Maybe we became aware of the passing of time and now have learned to love in new ways, to see with new eyes, to appreciate with new determination. Maybe we realized that our circles of connection don't overlap like they used to, and we now have choices to make.

We go home changed. That's the message of this grand celebration, this holy holiday. Incarnation comes to bring transformation. The shepherds returned glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen. They didn't just return to their work, they returned with glory. They returned with praise. It makes you wonder what it was like in those fields in the region around Bethlehem. Was there spontaneous singing breaking out at unusual times during the day? Was there more laughter than usual, or laughter that lifted up instead of knocked down? Was there a larger vision that didn't ignore the needs of the sheep, but saw serving sheep as somehow holy work now, God-infused work, instead of a dirty, smelly chore fit only for the folks on the margin? We don't know, except that we know how we look at our work, our rituals, and our habits when we have gathered together in the light of love and joy of the Lord. We know how we are impacted by a significant event, transformed by connection and by hope.

Hannah and Elkanah went home transformed every time, you can count on that. And when it came time to return to the temple, they didn't go reluctantly. They went with anticipation and with joy. Because they weren't going to perform some common rituals and join in religious observance. Or rather they weren't going only to perform some common rituals. No, they were going to connect with family as well. They were going to see someone they loved, to see someone who belonged to them and to whom they belonged. The time and distance did not diminish the relationship and the love. They carried it with them at home and in the temple and on the journey there and back home again.

It's time to go home. But we go home transformed and being further transformed. We go home and carry a part of our gathering – love of family, shared worship, traditions, and new observances – with us as we go. Emmanuel goes with us; it is what the name means after all. Encountering Emmanuel in this glorious Christmas season has a transformative effect. Our gatherings have changed; our homes have changed; we have changed. And it is still time to go home. Let us go in hope; let us go in joy; let us go glorifying and praising God.

LITURGICAL RESOURCES

Call to Worship

Children of God, Jesus Christ is born!

God has come to make a home among us!

Yet the story is not over. After birth comes the ordinary and mundane growing, maturing, and discovering, even for the Christ Child.

In the ordinary and mundane, God has come to make a home among us.

And sometimes, in the midst of the everyday, something surprising happens, and we discover anew just what God is up to in our midst.

In the surprising and spectacular, God has come to make a home among us.

Children of God, let us worship the God who dwells with us in all things and all seasons.
We come to make our home with God who makes a home among us. Amen.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, June 2024.

Pastoral Prayer

Loving God
may we be found
and may we find
a place called home,
a place where faith holds us
and grace renews us
where forgiveness longs for us
to be who you will us to be

may we find a place called home
where we are accepted as we are
where we are taken in
and loved unconditionally

a place called home
where we belong
and our souls fit
and our questions are allowed
and our anger is heard
and our needs are recognised
and our pain is held
and our names are known

and may this
be that place, O God,
this community
this group of travellers and doubters
and companions on the way

this home
where your place
is our place
and place isn't a building
but a way of being together
in relationship
held together
by love

Loving God
Homecoming God
may we make this a home

to all who still yet seek
a place of grace-filled sanctuary
and gracious welcome

So be it
Amen

Written by Roddy Hamilton and posted on **Mucky Paws**. Re-posted on the re:Worship blog at <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2019/03/prayer-reflection-place-called-home.html>.

Prayer of Confession

Most Loving God,
because you knew how twisted
and corrupted our humanity had become,
you sent us your Holy Son—

**We name him Jesus, our Savior,
for he has saved us from our sins.**

Because you have stood in our shoes
and understand how difficult it is to live
by the rule of law in an often cold,
unfeeling, and ruthless world—

**We name him Jesus, our Savior,
for he is this very day saving us from all our sins.**

Because you have given us a gracious spirit,
forgiving those who sin against us,
and you call us to a ministry of reconciliation
in a fractured world—

**We proclaim him Jesus, our Savior,
for he will save our world from its many sins**

Assurance

God of Christmas, God of unspeakable grace,
forgive and renew us all,
that our lives may declare
the wonders of that Holy Love
that has called us out of darkness
into glorious light.

Amen!

Adapted from Bruce Prewer, <http://www.bruceprewer.com/DocC/C06xmasd.htm>.

Benediction

Beloved, may God bless you with transformation, because together we have encountered the incarnate Christ who makes a home among us and sends us home never to be the same again. Amen.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, June 2024.