

**St Paul United Church of Christ
5312 Old Blue Rock Road**

Cincinnati, Ohio 45247

Allen M. Fluent, Transitional Pastor

Order of Worship for First Sunday in Advent

December 6, 2020

(As our congregation returns to holding worship in our building, we are conscious of the many people who will not be able to be physically present. Therefore, we will be continuing the practice of sending a worship bulletin to all who are on our mailing lists for email or hard copy. Those who will be worshipping from home and who have computer access will also be receiving a recorded version of the service that will be sent out on Sunday afternoon. We welcome your participation in any way that is convenient for you, and we encourage you to share our worship service with any person you know who may appreciate receiving it.)

Morning Announcements and Prayer Requests

Prelude (recording begins)

Advent Moment

A STAR IS A STAR IS A STAR...

Paula Weil

When the Covid virus reared its ugly head in March of 2020, a shadow of darkness seemed to fall all around the world. We shut down and were confined to our homes, not knowing what to expect. After a while, many of us were forced to examine our feelings of loneliness, being distanced from loved ones for the sake of health and maybe even re-examining our faith in God and wondering if He would get us through this.

Being enclosed around your home area often brought people out into their backyards at night. Rediscovering star gazing became a favorite pastime once again. Many places in the US and abroad could see stars clearly since the shut down, as cars were put out of commission for a while. Pollution seemed to be non-existent. I often think, what people would do if they were not guided by something in their lives that would help them to make better choices. Stars guided the Wise Men to seek out our King, Jesus. Street and car lights can be considered stars as they get us from one place to another. Family camp fires and fire pits are another consideration for brightness, warmth and a great reason to be outside gazing at the stars. The star atop the Christmas tree evokes hope and warm fuzzy feelings of family guidance during this season.

And so at this time in our lives, let's not tread around in the darkness of confusion and discouragement that this past year has brought us. Let us not wander around fearful, thinking we will not graduate from this year's circumstances. Let us look to the stars for guidance. It is this Sunday's Advent symbol on our Jesse Tree. The stars represent gleaming lanterns of the Lord's light. He is our shining way and will bring us to a better dawn of next year.

I, Jesus, have sent my angel to tell you to tell the churches all of these things. I am both David's Root and his descendent. I am the Bright Morning Star.

Revelations 22:16

Advent Candle lighting

Liturgist, Marilyn Roth

Listen for the word of faith from the First Epistle of Peter:

Without having seen him you love him; though you do not now see him you believe in him and rejoice with unutterable and exalted joy. As the outcome of your faith, you obtain the salvation of your souls.

Today we light two candles on our Advent wreath: the candle of Hope and the candle of Faith.

As Jesus restored the faith of many through actions of love, so renew our faith today in the sacrament of your love, O God, that the faith which grows from that perfect gift may be itself perfected in works of compassion for your world.

Opening Reading: Isaiah 40:3-5

Liturgist, Marilyn Roth

A voice cries out:

In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.

Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

Prayer Hymn #154 in Worship and Rejoice

***O come, o come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel,
that mourns in lonely exile her, until the Son of God appear.***

Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.

***O come, thou Dayspring, come and cheer our spirits by thine advent here;
disperse the gloomy clouds of night, and death's dark shadow put to flight.***

Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.

***O come, thou Wisdom from on high, and order all things far and nigh;
to us the path of knowledge show, and cause us in her ways to go.***

Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.

***O come, Desire of nations, bind all peoples in one heart and mind;
bid envy, strife and discord cease; fill the whole world with heaven's peace.***

Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.

Gospel Lesson - Mark 1:1-11

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

“Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.”

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

Hymn #120 in New Century Hymnal

“There’s a Voice in the Wilderness”

There’s a voice in the wilderness crying, a call from the ways untrod:

Prepare in the desert a highway, a highway for our God!

The valleys shall be exalted, the lofty hills brought low:

Make straight all the crooked places where Emmanuel may go!

O Zion who offers good tidings, to the height of the mountains dare!

Lift your voice to the cities of Judah: “Behold your God!” declare.

**Like the flowers of the field we perish, our humble works decay,
the power and pomp of nations shall pass like a dream away.**

But the word of our God is forever, our Defender’s will is strong;

God stands in the midst of nations, to render right the wrong,

Then God shall be as a shepherd, the lambs gathered to God’s breast;

And pastures of peace shall greet them, to give to the weary rest.

Sermon

One of the most interesting characters in the New Testament is John the Baptist. If we’re honest about it, most of us would have to confess that, if we saw someone who fit John’s description coming down the street, we’d probably move to the other side. We tend to forget sometimes that people in the ancient world had expectations about normal dress and behavior too. It was no more common in Jesus’ day than it is in ours to see someone wearing a raggedy-looking camel hair robe, tied together with a leather belt, or making locusts and wild honey the major source of his daily nutrition. He was odd! They knew that! That’s why we know what it

was he wore and what it was he ate, even though we don't know those things about most people in the ancient world, not even Jesus.

John was a wilderness person who seems to have spent little time in polite society. But odd as he was, his strange costume and habits reminded people of someone they had heard about before. Many years ago, another wilderness man named Elijah served as a prophet in the nation of Israel. Like John, the prophet Elijah did not serve in the court of the king as other prophets did. He was as different from those other prophets as he possibly could be. He took unpopular positions and offended the royal household. The only time anyone wanted to call upon him was when they wanted or needed the unvarnished truth, because he alone would tell it. And so it was that many generations later, the authority of Elijah was remembered by the people; and when they saw John the Baptist, his appearance and the food he ate reminded them of that ancient prophet and caused them to think about the prophet's integrity, as well as his peculiarity, so that, when John spoke, it felt to them like the ancient truth of Elijah was being spoken once again.

So John, the wilderness prophet, came out of the desert to tell his truth to people. He did not come with credentials, and he was not sanctioned by either the temple or the state; but he came with authority nonetheless. His authority came from the God of the Exodus, who had led the people out of slavery to freedom, through the wilderness of Sinai and into the promised land. John bore witness to the truth that was contained in a tradition of prophecy that spanned the whole history of the Jewish people. He had come to them in a cynical time, bringing good news that people had stopped believing in, and that many in the government and in the temple did not want to listen to. He said that the righteous God was coming soon to destroy the powers of injustice and bring God's people into a new set of relationships replacing Caesar's Empire with what he called the Kingdom of God.

If John's message had been one of simple optimism, he would not have been alone. There have always been prophets of easy grace, in the ancient world as well as our own. But John was a prophet of the God who calls us to account, and he understood that there is a difference between the happy future of no consequences preached by the faithless prophets, and the future that is accomplished by people who are blessed by the God of steadfast love when they turn away from fear and self-interest and commit themselves to the Kingdom's ways.

The valuable truth that John knew was that people are not saved by just hearing a message, no matter how good the message may be. The salvation of God relies upon an action of commitment. So he had to get them down into the water. Repent and turn toward the Kingdom, he said, so that God can get through to you. "Every valley must be lifted up, every mountain and hill be made low; the rough places made plane." Examine yourselves and the world you are making, and remove the obstacles in your common life that get in the way of

God's love and justice. That is the advent work that we are given even now, as we clear the way for Christmas.

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Let us take some time for meditation with our musical interlude for today.

Musical Selection

Jake Rizer, Director of Music

Our Time of Spiritual Communion

It is the usual practice of our congregation to serve the Eucharistic meal every first Sunday of the month and on the Holy Days of Christmas, Lent and Easter. We will next be receiving Holy Communion on the day before Christmas, to celebrate the Festival of the Incarnation. This morning, we celebrate our spiritual communion with God, not in a meal of bread and wine, but in a ceremony of discovery, as we search in our gathered and virtual fellowship for the signs of Christ's presence in our midst.

These are the words of Jesus, recorded in the Gospel according to St John on the night of his betrayal, when he spoke to his first followers about how they would share his Spirit in the mutuality of their love. Let us say them together:

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

Holy and gracious God, in this sacred moment, we hold one another in prayer. We remember the times we have spent with you – the times of celebration, the times of mutual care, the times of fear and hopefulness, the times of sorrow and rejoicing. Out of all these moments, gifted by your grace, let each of us remember a time when we caught a glimpse of your perfect love in the common bond we felt within this fellowship, in an act of kindness or a moment of truth. Grant the gift of holy peace to all those today who are distraught because of worldly cares, all who suffer illness, loneliness or grief; and bring us into deeper understanding of any who find themselves set apart this day because of argument or anger or mistrust. God, may your blessing fall on all who return your love in acts and words and gifts of care, so that the fellowship of your love may grow in witness and in truth to fill the hidden places of the earth.

As Jesus has taught us, so we pray:

Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors,
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

Closing Hymn #389 in New Century Hymnal "Jesus a New Commandment Has Given Us"

Refrain:

*Jesus a new commandment has given us:
that we should love each other just as our God loves us.*

Verses:

*The clear sign of all true Christians is the way they love each other.
Those who do not love their neighbors do not truly love their savior. Ref.*

*Christ the Light, the Truth and true Life, bids us share our love and pardon.
Let us all forgive each other as by God we are commanded. Ref.*

*We are truly friends of Jesus if we freely give our pardon.
In our living and our dying, God is ever there to love us. Ref.*

*In true charity and loving God is present here among us.
Let us come to Jesus' table with our love for one another. Ref.*

*Glory be to the Creator; glory be to Christ, our Savior;
Glory be to God, the Spirit, Holy Trinity forever. Ref.*

Benediction

Now may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.

Postlude