

**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

November 29, 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

Paula Weil

As we enter into this 1st Sunday of Advent...notice our lovely sanctuary Christmas trees – standing tall and lit. Not so the case a week ago, when Bill and I dragged them up the steps from the closet in the nursery downstairs. We wanted to make sure they would light up, be fluffed and be ready for the sanctuary decorating. They literally come apart in 3 places when you bring them up and then never stand up completely vertical. One tree sported a 45 degree angle at one point and their little fake trunks never, never fit right in their not-so-sturdy stands. For several years we had to put hymnals underneath to balance them. Sooo...after an hour of messing with them and muttering a few choice words (sorry God), Bill thought new tree stands were in order and also connecting the 3 sections together with screws would help. These tasks were accomplished the next day and “voila”, you have the wonderful sight you now behold. And speaking of trees, you will discover your own fluffing and decorating of “The Jesse Tree” Advent Booklet you picked up on your way in last week. The symbols that build this Biblical family tree will give you pause to relate your memories to the symbols they represent. Check out the bulletin board as you enter in the side entrance on Sunday mornings before worship. If I was Jesus, this might be the way he would have decorated his family tree. Today’s 1st Advent tree symbol represents a new tree shoot bringing to mind “New Life”. Our church is constantly changing, by pruning our branches, if you will, to start new life. Jesus wants us to celebrate our new life and encourages us during the Advent season to accept our new growth in him.

*And there shall come forth a rod out of the Stem of Jesse, and a Branch
Shall grow out of his roots; and the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him.*

Isaiah 11:1-2

ADVENT CANDLE LIGHTING

Jo Ann Bertram

This is the promise given by Paul to the Church at Rome:

You know what hour it is. How it is full time now for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer now than when we first believed; the night is far gone, the day is at hand. Let us then cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.

Today we light the candle of hope on our Advent wreath.

With the light of hope, you have broken the night of doubt and fear, O God. Today we promise to put our doubts aside and to seek the courage by which alone we may look to the future and see your vision of goodness and light for the world's salvation.

RESPONSE HYMN

153, vs 1

**Come, thou long-expected Jesus, born to set thy people free;
from our fears and sins release us; let us find our rest in thee.
Israel's strength and consolation, hope of all the earth thou art;
dear desire of every nation, joy of every longing heart.**

OPENING PRAYER

from the Prophet Isaiah

(We confess our human condition and open ourselves to God's guidance)

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence – as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil – to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence! When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him. You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways. But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed. We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity. Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people.

(Isaiah 64:1-9)

PRAYER HYMN

“Have Thine Own Way, Lord”

#486

***Have thine own way, Lord! Have thine own way!
Thou art the potter, I am the clay.
Mold me and make me after thy will,
while I am waiting, yielded and still.***

***Have thine own way, Lord! Have thine own way!
Search me and try me, Master today.
Pure as the snow, Lord, wash me just now,
as in thy presence humbly I bow.***

Have thine own way, Lord! Have thine own way!

***Wounded and weary, help me I pray!
Power – all power – surely is thine!
Touch me and heal me, Savior divine!***

***Have thine own way, Lord! Have thine own way!
Hold o'er my being absolute sway!
Fill with thy Spirit till all shall see
Christ only, always, living in me!***

GOSPEL LESSON - Jesus talks about the remaking of the world according to God's design on a day and in a way that will surprise us.

But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven. From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come.... Therefore, keep awake – for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.

Mark 13:24-37

SERMON

Pastor Allen

Advent, in the Christian community, is the time of year when we think about starting out new again. The season carries with it the assumption that people get tired and need rejuvenation; that people get cynical and need to find something to believe in; that people get tired of waiting and want to see light at the end of the tunnel; that people get lost and need to find the way. It is not an accident that Advent season occurs as we grow conscious of the growing cold and darkness of winter. And it seems like a bit of grace as we enter the season in the aftermath of a troubled year, still somewhat unconvinced that the coming year will restore our hope for future days.

The central lesson of Advent, though, is that we don't need to bolt and run from the time we are in – that the time of waiting is a sabbath time of opportunity for us to learn, to grow, to examine ourselves and our place in the world, and to prepare our spirits for the day of Christ's coming so that we do not waste it when it comes, as many do who celebrate the holy infant's birth but do not follow the adult he grew into, who is the savior of our souls.

What will you do with your Advent? How will you allow it to prepare you for the days to come?

Advent is the season for prophecy – a radical preacher waist deep in the Jordan drowning people to their sins; a prophet of Israel speaking both warnings and promises in the era of Babylon; a young man named Jesus, known as a sage, talking in a dark imperial time about a kingdom made in heaven that is coming soon.

In our world today, prophecy is often thought of as though it were fortune telling. But the gift of prophecy in the Scriptures has a different meaning. The purpose of prophecy is not to predict future happenings in a magical kind of way, but to discern the path that history is taking on the basis of an honest assessment of the truth. In the Hebrew Scriptures, Moses is a prophet. The first prophecy that he uttered was that God's people should be free, so that they could be witnesses to the Law of God and a blessing to all people. Moses gave the people the Torah, the Law of God, and the prophets who followed him measured the world they were living in and the world they were creating against the teachings of the Law. When a prophet saw that people were misusing the land, gaining wealth by oppressing the poor, worshipping the gods of greed, cheating people in business, refusing hospitality to the alien, or any such moral crimes, the prophet's job was to tell the truth, accompanied by a warning about the violence and disorder to come. And when the consequences of their failure to care about one another came to pass, the prophet would call the people to repentance and offer them the hope of the faithful promises of God.

Over the years, the church has mostly thought of Jesus as the Savior, and as a symbol of the God whose love is so deep that he suffers for the sins of the world. That is a treasured and valuable teaching. But during Jesus' life in Palestine two millennia ago, people saw him as a sage, a healer and a prophet. As a prophet, he saw the excesses and the injustices of his time, the collaboration of the religious leaders with the authoritarian state, and the tendency of people to pick at minor human failings while neglecting the broader themes of justice, reconciliation and love. His followers formed communities (today we call them churches) where the people applied a simple rule of practice that became a witness to their neighbors: They practiced hospitality (welcoming everybody, even strangers and foreigners and erstwhile enemies); sharing their wealth and possessions and making sure everyone had enough. They shunned violence even as they spoke against the evils of the Empire. They committed themselves to trust in God, and to be worthy of one another's trust. And they set aside a day each week when they would care for the health of their spirits and grow in faithfulness.

So, my dear, tired Advent companions, we're looking a little worse for the wear this season, this year. Like Auntie Mame in the Broadway Play, we think we "need a little Christmas, right this very minute," and we probably do. Just let's remember to take time in this waiting season to work on our soul preparation. Remember, the church has a vocation to be a prophetic community, just like it did in the beginning. Prophets always start by assessing the truth, so ask yourself how you think we're doing as a society and as a church, keeping faith with the teachings of Jesus. We're a bigger world than we were back then, so we have to ask bigger questions: Ask yourself what you think the consequences will be: will the environment sustain our constant abuse? Will the growing gap between rich and poor lead to growing civil disorder? Will the reconciling work of the churches be diminished by exclusionary attitudes and patterns of self-interest? Or will the hopeful signs of progress toward greater diversity in

public affairs, developments in renewable energy, and the barrier breaking influence of social media (once we get it right) become pathways to a more compassionate and just world?

When we've made our assessments of these things, we can turn to ourselves, asking what we've done and what we can do to bear witness to the community God has called us to be. We can do something kind that we've been thinking about for too long. We can make a gift to an organization that helps people. If we see an injustice, we can name it. Imagine expanding our circle of friends to include a few strangers. Can we learn to converse with someone who doesn't think like we do? Soon the work of Advent becomes the very spirit of Christmas; we believe in the future; we live by the calling; and when we do, the celebration doesn't end on Christmas morning; it goes on forever.

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

MUSICAL SELECTION

Jake Rizer, Musical Director

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God, as we begin the journey of Advent, may we find that the packing we have done and the mapping of our trip will suit us well for the day of Christ's coming. May the belongings we take along be gifts to share, so that our baggage becomes lighter each day.

May this holy season, God, prepare us for life in a community of hope, as we recommit ourselves to the calling we share in the fellowship of Christ.

We pray for those in our congregation who are ill or shut-in, for those experiencing loneliness and separation, for those who long for the touch of others in this time when mutual care keeps us apart.

We pray for our church and our partners in the community as we seek to bring ministry to all our neighbors. May the offerings we have brought to this morning's worship be blessed by your favor and used for ministries in accordance with your will.

Be with us on the journey, God, and hear us as we seek your guidance in the often confusing wilderness of our day.

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

"Awake! Awake, and Greet the New Morn"

#160

Awake! Awake, and greet the new morn, for angels herald its dawning.

Sing out your joy, for soon he is born, behold! The child of our longing.

Come as a baby weak and poor, to bring all hearts together,

he opens wide the heavenly door and lives now inside us forever.

To us, to all in sorrow and fear, Emmanuel comes a-singing,

his humble song is quiet and near, yet fills the earth with its ringing,

music to heal the broken soul and hymns of loving kindness,

the thunder of his anthems roll to shatter all hatred and blindness.

*In darkest night his coming shall be, when all the world is despairing,
as morning light so quiet and free, so warm and gentle and caring.
Then shall the mute break forth in song, the lame shall leap in wonder,
the weak be raised above the strong, and weapons be broken asunder.*

*Rejoice, rejoice, take heart in the night, though dark the winter and cheerless,
the rising sun shall crown you with light, be strong and loving and fearless.
Love be our song and love our prayer and love our endless story;
may God fill every day we share and bring us at last into glory.*

BENEDICTION

POSTLUDE