

St Paul United Church of Christ
5312 Old Blue Rock Road
Cincinnati, Ohio 45247
Allen M. Fluent, Transitional Pastor
Order of Worship for the Fourth Sunday in Advent
December 20, 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)

Special Music

“In the Bleak Midwinter”

Diana Ridener, Tina Tuck, Paula Weil

Advent Moment

Paula Weil

*“Consider the lily, they don’t toil or spin,
And there’s not a king with more splendor than them.”*

Our symbol for the Jesse Tree today is the lily. The lyrics from that song just seem so fitting. It is also the most used symbol to represent Mary. The white petals relate to her spotless body, her modesty, innocence and purity. The golden anthers of the flower are said to be her soul glowing in the heavenly light.

What an awesome way to describe the mother of Jesus. The lily does what it is required to do ... grow where planted, reveal its inner beauty outward and give off perfume to attract people near. This exactly what Mary did. God told her what was to happen via an angel, and in her innocence, she questioned her worthiness, yet she did what was asked of her without hesitation. She was her wonderful, faithful and giving self. The perfect mother for the Son of God. Mary was the right woman to keep Jesus in check through his younger years, but she did realize in her heart that in a short time, she would have to let Jesus go to fulfill the prophesy...Redemption for all. But I am glad that she had time to enjoy Jesus and his childhood as all mothers do. To finish the lyric of the song,

“Consider the lily and then you will know”.

And she gave birth to her first child, a son, and wrapped him, set him
in a manger, for there was no room at the inn.
But Mary quietly treasured all these things in her heart and often thought about them.
Luke 2: 7 and 19

Advent Candle lighting

Diana Ridener

This is the testimony of John in his first epistle about the spirit of love among the friends of Jesus:

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God, and anyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God; for God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only son into the world, so that we might live through him.

We light the Advent candles, representing hope, faith, joy and love; and we remember that the great gift of God that we celebrate this season is the love revealed in Jesus' coming.

Teach us, God, to love one another as you have loved us, for that is all that you have ever asked us to do. Amen.

Advent Poem (*Marcus Aurelius Clemens Prudentius, 314-413 AD*)

*By the Word was all created, by the Word were all things done:
Land and air and deepest ocean, harmony of three in one.
And all growing in the luminance shed forth from moon and sun.
Bless-ed dawning of salvation as the Word is breathed in grace
Into earthly flesh receiving – God incarnate taking place;
Now the light of God revealed through the child of human face.
Now behold the One whom prophets have foretold for ages long
On the faithful page of scripture, seers and sages in their song;
Now the promised One shines forth! Let all earth its praise prolong.*

Hymn

"It Came Upon a Midnight Clear"

Blue Hymnal, #191

***It came upon a midnight clear, that glorious song of old,
from angels bending near the earth to touch their harps of gold:
"Peace on the earth, good-will to all, from heaven's all gracious King":
the world in solemn stillness lay to hear the angels sing.***

***Still through the cloven skies they come, with peaceful wings unfurled,
and still their heavenly music floats o'er all the weary world.
above its sad and lowly plains they bend on hovering wing,
and ever o'er its Babel sounds the blessed angels sing.***

***For lo, the days are hastening on, by prophets seen of old,
when, with the ever-circling years, shall come the time foretold,
when peace shall over all the earth its ancient splendors fling,
and all the world give back the song which now the angels sing.***

Gospel Reading:

John 1:1-18

In the beginning was the Word; and the Word was with God; and the Word was God.

He was in the beginning with God; all things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.

What came into being was life and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light so that all might believe through him.

He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

The true light that enlightens everyone was coming into the world.

He was in the world; and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him.

He came to what was his own; and his own did not accept him.

But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh, and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'" From his fullness we have all received grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

No one has ever seen God. It is the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

Hymn

"O Holy Night"

Blue Hymnal, #187

***O holy night, the stars are brightly shining, it is the night of the dear savior's birth.
Long lay the world in sin and error pining, till he appeared and the soul felt its worth.
A thrill of hope the weary world rejoices, for yonder breaks a new and glorious morn!
Fall on your knees! O hear the angel voices! O night divine! O night, O night divine!***

***Led by the light of faith serenely beaming, with glowing heart by his cradle we stand.
So led by light of a star sweetly gleaming, here came the wise ones from orient land.
The King of Kings lay thus in lowly manger, in all our trials born to be our friend,
he knows our need, he guards us from all danger, Behold your King: before him lowly
bend. Behold your King, before him lowly bend!***

***Truly he taught us to love one another; his law is love and his gospel is peace.
Chains shall he break, for the slave is our brother, and in his name all oppression
shall cease.
Sweet hymns of joy in grateful chorus raising, let all within us praise his holy name.
Christ is the Lord! O praise his name forever! His power and glory evermore proclaim!
His power and glory evermore proclaim.***

Sermon

It is the fourth Sunday in Advent season. Before the week has passed, the Holy Festival of Christmas will be here. On Christmas Eve, we'll listen again to the familiar story told by Luke about a young couple named Mary and Joseph, who go to the town of Bethlehem to be enrolled in the Roman census, and how Mary has her baby and lays him in a manger. We'll hear about the shepherds, too, and the angels, and a few days later, Matthew's story about the magi who come to see the child. We love the story, because the characters in it have become alive for us. We see their pictures on Christmas cards and their images carved in wood or stone or molded in ceramics. We feel the cold night, the rough straw of the manger, the worry they must have felt, the humiliation of finding no place at the inn. It is a wonderful human story that we have come to cherish.

But today is not yet Christmas, so we have the opportunity today to spend a little time before the day is here, considering what this story means to us and to our world, and for that we have some guidance provided by the Gospel According to John.

Our Gospel lesson for this morning is also a Christmas story, but it is an unusual one. There is no infant in a manger, no mother and father, no shepherds or magi, no innkeeper or camels or sheep. There is no stable, no manger, no star, no angels singing. But it is a Christmas story nonetheless.

Instead of the familiar tale of the holy family in Bethlehem, St John the Evangelist gives us instead a cosmic vision that takes us back to the very beginning of time, when the primordial world was born a formless chaos, waiting to be summoned into being and life by the Word of God. God spoke, and there was light, and then day and night, sky and water, dry land and sea, and the multitude of living things appeared. According to John, this living world that began to grow in response to God's imaginative Word is still in the process of being summoned into being – not yet complete - and the summoning power of God's Word to blend the world into a harmonious whole is what we know as the love of God.

This then takes us to what the Scriptures mean by the incarnation – the Word become flesh among us – the story of Christmas. The Word – the imaginative energy of love that John's Gospel describes – inhabits God, and is God's very being. But no one has ever seen God, though sometimes in the beauty of the universe we feel we've seen the evidence of what God's love has made. It is the Son, who is close to the Father's heart, whose grace and truth has made God known. For Christians, this is our essential truth – that we have seen Jesus: we have

seen him in the record of his ministry and teachings; and in the testimonies of those who have gone before us; but more than that, in the eyes of one another in the fellowship of those who gather in his presence and work for the reconciliation and wellbeing of people and nations that his Gospel commands. In Jesus, the Word has been revealed in a way that we can understand, because in him God's grace and truth and reconciling love are lived out in the creaturely and human way God wants us to live.

Musical Selection

Jake Rizer, Musical Director

Our Time of Prayer

Holy Word, Gracious God, in whom we find the peace that puts our souls at rest, we thank you for the gift of Christmas as we anticipate its coming. On this shortest of days that becomes this evening the longest of nights, remind us of the gifts of peace and stillness in which we may seek your presence and your encouragement in the dark. And as the light returns tomorrow morning, let it remind us of the light of Jesus Christ that flows into the world as a witness to your love.

This will be a hard year for many, as we express our love for family and friends by staying apart to protect their health. It will be a difficult season also for those who are hard at work in health care facilities, and those who are suffering the financial strain of unemployment, lack of adequate housing, and worries about the future this year. We pray for all who are struggling, and we ask you, God to show us ways that we can help.

We lift up before you the churches and other houses of worship in our community, and all the people who are eager to express their faith in gatherings for song and prayer. We pray that we may glean important insights from this time that will help us know what our true values are and how to praise you and love one another in difficult times.

There are those among us who are sick, recovering from surgery, feeling the effects of grief, and lonely. May we be family with one another and offer words and acts of kindness that are reassuring in times of need.

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.

Looking toward the Solstice

The ceremony of lighting the Advent wreath for the four weeks leading up to Christmas stems from an older tradition than even Christianity itself. All over the world, for centuries, communities have gathered to light fires and offer prayers that light may return to the darkened world at this darkest time of year. Tonight, at the winter solstice, our northern hemisphere of earth tips away from the sun to create the year's longest night, but before daybreak, the pattern begins to reverse, and every day afterward is brighter than the last until summer is here.

Tonight, if you are able, step outside for a moment and look at the stars, then go inside and light a candle as a solstice fire, giving thanks for the Light of Christ whose coming we celebrate at this time of year. In the candlelight, you can sing this hymn for God's protection throughout the night.

Closing Hymn

"All Praise Be Yours, My God This Night"

#100 in New Century Hymnal

***All praise be yours, my God, this night, for all the blessings of the light;
Keep me, kind Maker of all things, beneath the shelter of your wings.***

***Forgive me, by Christ's victory won, the ill that I this day have done,
That from the fear of sin set free, I, ere I sleep, at peace may be.***

***O let me on your love repose, let welcome sleep my eyelids close,
Sleep from whose balm new strength I take to serve my God when I awake.***

***Praise God who gives all blessings birth; praise God all creatures of the earth;
Praise God who makes, sustains, sets free; one holy God in persons three.***

And then tomorrow evening, as though the heavens have granted us a special blessing, if you go out again at about 6:45, and, if the sky is clear, you may see a phenomenon that is rare and will not come again until the year 2080. In the southwestern sky, the planets Mars and Jupiter will appear to move close to one another, forming a glow that is known as the "Bethlehem Star." If you see it, sing the hymn again, giving thanks for heavenly signs that remind us of our savior's birth.

We hope you will join us for Christmas Eve worship, in whatever way works for you. We'll be gathering in the sanctuary at 10:30 on the morning of December 24, for a candlelight service of Christmas Communion. Since we will be recording the service, it will be sent to your home by email in time for you to experience it on Christmas Eve. We wish you all a joyful Christmas holiday!

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