

WORSHIP FOR SUNDAY, DECEMBER 6, 2020

Pacific Presbyterian Church and First Presbyterian Church of Union, Missouri

SECOND SUNDAY of ADVENT

GATHERING

PRELUDE

Lighting the Second Advent Candle

A prophet speaks, and a psalmist sings,
telling us how God will come:

Comfort my people, bring comfort to them,
says your God. . . .
Clear a road through the wilderness. . . .
Prepare a highway across the desert for our God. . . .
Then will the glory of God be revealed
and all humankind shall see it. . . .
(Isa. 40:1–11 REB)

Love and faithfulness will come together.
Justice and peace will embrace.
(Ps. 85:10 REB)

We light our second candle
as a prayer of hope and longing,
that God's glory may be revealed on earth,
through justice, peace, and faithful love.

Living God, come to our world.
Help us to recognize your presence
wherever people make peace,
show kindness, keep their promises,
and do what is right. Amen.

CALL TO WORSHIP

One: Immanuel:
All: God with us.
One: Incarnation:
All: God in the flesh.
One: Into this world...
All: ...God comes, with us, in us, for us.
One: Come, let us worship the God who comes.

OPENING HYMN "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" GtG 88

One: O come, O come, Emmanuel,
and ransom captive Is-ra-el,
**All: that mourns in lonely exile here
until the Son of God appear.
Rejoice!**
One: Rejoice!
**Unison: Emmanuel
shall come to thee, O Is-ra-el.**

One: O come, thou Wisdom from on high,
who orderest all things mightily:
**All: to us the path of knowledge show;
and teach us in her ways to go.**

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

One: O come, Desire of nations,
**All: bind
all peoples in one heart and mind;**
One: bid envy, strife, and discord cease;
**All: fill the whole world with heaven's peace.
Rejoice!**
One: Rejoice!
**Unison: Emmanuel
shall come to thee, O Is-ra-el.**

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UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION

O God of forgiveness,
we confess that we have not led lives of holiness.
With our tongues we speak evil against our sisters and brothers.
By our actions, we disobey your commandments.
Hostility is bred through our suspicion and envy;
 anger continues in spite of Christ's peace.
You open our eyes to his righteousness,
 yet we remain blind to the truth of his reconciling presence.
Forgive our deliberate misuse of your mercy,
 and in Christ hear our prayer. Amen.

SILENT CONFESSION

ASSURANCE OF PARDON *(from Mark 1, John 3, & Matthew 1)*

One: "The right time has come, and the Kingdom of God is near! Turn away
from your sins and believe the Good News!"
All: **The Good News is this: "God loved the world so much that God gave
God's only Son."**
One: Friends, let us believe the Good News of the Coming One: his name is
"Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."
All: **So let us rejoice and be glad! For in Jesus Christ we are forgiven!
Alleluia! Amen!**

THE PEACE

One: The peace of Christ be with you.
All: **And also with you.**
*(From your seat, a brief sign of peace may be shared: a wave of the hand, a nod
of the head, etc.)*

THE WORD

SCRIPTURE READINGS Isaiah 40:1-11 & Mark 1:1-8

ISAIAH 40:1-11 (New Revised Standard Version +)

¹ *Comfort, comfort my people,
says your God.*
² *Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and proclaim to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the LORD's hand
double for all her sins.*

3 *A voice cries out:*
 "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,
 make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
 4 *Every valley will be raised up,*
 and every mountain and hill be made low;
 the uneven ground will become level,
 and the rough places a plain.
 5 *Then the glory of the LORD will be revealed,*
 and all people will see it together,
 for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

6 *A voice says, "Cry out!"*
 And I said, "What shall I cry?"
 All flesh is grass,
 its constancy is like the flower of the field.
 7 *The grass withers, the flower fades,*
 when the breath of the LORD blows upon it;
 surely the people are grass.
 8 *The grass withers, the flower fades;*
 but the word of our God endures forever.

9 *Get you up to a high mountain,*
 O Zion, herald of good tidings;
 lift up your voice with strength,
 O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,
 lift it up, do not fear;
 say to the cities of Judah,
 "Here is your God!"
 10 *See, the Lord GOD comes with might*
 and an arm that rules.
 God's reward and recompense
 go before God.
 11 *Like a shepherd, God will tend the flock;*
 will gather the lambs
 and carry them,
 and gently lead those that have young.

MARK 1:1-8 (New Revised Standard Version)

¹ *The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*

² *As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,*

3 *“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,’”*

⁴ John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ 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. ⁶ Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ 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. ⁸ I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON “The Cost of Comfort” by Pastor Bill Vincent

Let me tell you a story of the good news, the gospel, the glad tidings of comfort!

The comfort – the ‘comfort and joy’, as the carol puts it; the peace, the calm, the serenity – is genuine and real in the hills and valleys, the mountains and rough places of life that we experience.

But a question must be asked.

Why – especially thinking of our passage from Isaiah – Why were the people in need of comfort?

Well, they were in exile: taken from their homes and forced to live in a strange and foreign land.

And why were they in exile?

Because they had turned from God and God's ways.

Comfort. I was reminded of the carol with which we are (probably) all familiar:

**God rest you merry, gentlemen,
let nothing you dismay,
remember Christ our Savior
was born on Christmas day,
to save us all from Satan's pow'r
when we were gone astray.
O tidings of comfort and joy...**

(traditional English carol, 18th century)

The dark, difficult valleys we have fallen into.
The steep, craggy mountains standing in our way.
The hills and mounds that have fallen on top of us.

How often is it that the very reason we are in the dark, difficult valley is because of poor choices we have made and unseemly paths we have taken.

How often is it that the reason the mountain has fallen on us is because we chose to go our own way (come hell or high water) or explored uncalled-for means to an end we desired.

And so John comes “*proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*” – a message that will soon enough be echoed in Christ’s own words.

Repentance. As one translation puts it – very accurately, I believe – “*changing our hearts and our lives*” (Common English Bible).

Because we’re headed in the wrong direction to start with.

Maybe not all the time.

But let’s be honest. Much of the time, aren’t we in our predicaments because of what we have done? Because of our errant ways, and, in the broader picture, because of the sinful human condition that we a part of: the sinful human condition that turns inward upon itself (and only itself) and not outwards toward God and others.

Yes, we seek comfort – and rescue – from these our predicaments in life.
And God offers comfort.

But though the offer of comfort is free – genuinely free, due to the grace and goodness of the Giver – still, let us not lose sight of this truth:

The comfort is free.

It is also very costly.

Costly to us in our pride.

We like to think that we can do it all on our own. We like to think we can pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. We like to think that our way is the right – and only – way.

And instead we have to admit our need: admitting we can’t fix life – our life – on our own; admitting our guilt.

And then we come to realize that this comfort costs God even more.

Not God’s pride, but God’s heart ... and God’s Son.

We said it in today’s Assurance of Pardon:

his name is “*Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.*” (Matthew 1:21)

And he did so by taking on the cross...and the grave.

Finally, then, once again, it costs us, this comfort does.

For it costs us our very lives. “*Take up your cross and follow me,*” he would say (Mark 8:34).

You see, the only way truly to embrace this comfort and engage this comfort and know this comfort fully is to embrace his way and engage his life and know him in all his glory and all his love and all his giving of himself.

And so to receive this comfort (this life, this way) we must give up – that's the cost – we must let go of our lives: our way, our control, our insistence, our demands, our clutching to the way we are oh-so-certain life has to be.

Is it comfort? Yes.

Is it free? Yes.

And costly.

That is the story we hear today.

But what's the point? What difference might this story make in my life...and in yours?

Well, I think that maybe if I took this story as true and I counted the cost to myself I just might be a little more tolerant and gracious toward others. You know, 'Good will toward all' and all that.

Yes, the person who fell into that hole because of that stupid mistake sure deserved what they got.

And yes, that person who had their whole world fall down around them and on top of them sure got what was coming to them because of their foolish choices and despicable ways.

But I've been there, too.

And just because you're in a hole of your own making doesn't mean it sucks any less (pardon the phrase).

So maybe I can be a bit more forgiving and gracious and understanding toward others, especially in the predicaments they find themselves in that I, too often, have also found myself in.

And I think I could be more grateful for the cost that it costs God.

The gift – of comfort and joy, of peace, of life (and new life) – is priceless ... and equally as costly...to God.

And I could say 'Thank you!' a bit – a lot – more.

And I could say thank you not only with my words, but also with my actions and my choices and my very life.

And so I think I could be more serious, and more committed, to giving of my all in order to follow in Jesus' footsteps, and his giving of himself.

For to know this comfort – this calm, this peace – is to walk in step with the One whose steps lead to a cross...and new life.

You see, it is a strange experience, this comfort, this joy, this peace.

Truly to embrace it and follow it – and follow him – is to walk against the current; is to run in opposition to the world and its way, its choices and its priorities.

So it is not easy.
It is not a piece of cake.
It is no comfort.
It is simply the only comfort worth having.

I remember a hymn I learned many years ago: “They Cast Their Nets in Galilee.” It speaks of those first ones who heard his call and followed in his way, and the impact that had on their lives – on their ‘comfort and joy’ and their peace.

1. **They cast their nets in Galilee
just off the hills of brown;
such happy, simple fisherfolk,
before the Lord came down.**
2. **Contented, peaceful fisherfolk,
before they ever knew
the peace of God that filled their hearts
brimful, and broke them too.**
3. **Young John who trimmed the flapping sail,
homeless, in Patmos died.
Peter, who hauled the teeming net,
head down was crucified.**
4. **The peace of God, it is no peace,
but strife closed in the sod.
Yet, Christians, pray for but one thing –
the marvelous peace of God.**

(words by William Alexander Percy, 1924; alt.)

Embracing this comfort, engaging this joy, living this peace is to walk the way of God and walk with God, to abide in the very presence of God: to be where God is, to go where God leads, to be who God needs us to be.

It may not be peace as the world thinks of peace.

But it is the only peace worth having: “*the peace that passes understanding*”
(Philippians 4:7).

And that is comfort – comfort and joy – indeed.

***AFFIRMATION OF FAITH**

In life and in death we belong to God.

**Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God,**

**and the communion of the Holy Spirit,
we trust in the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel,
whom alone we worship and serve.**

**In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit,
we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks
and to live holy and joyful lives,
even as we watch for God's new heaven and new earth,
praying, "Come, Lord Jesus!"**

(from *A Brief Statement of Faith*, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Book of Confessions)

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Pastor: God of comfort and peace...

People: ...hear us in our prayers.

THE LORD'S PRAYER *(Traditional)*

**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.**

OFFERING

Invitation

Reflection

Unison Prayer of Dedication

While we wait and prepare for Christ to come, we seek, O God, to act as faithful followers. May our offerings extend the promise of peace to those whose lives are broken by neglect, abuse, bad choices, and sinful ways. May our gifts offer hope to all whose suffering and loss seem too heavy to bear. May our church be a listening, caring presence for all whom we meet. In the saving grace of Christ we pray. Amen.

SENDING

CLOSING HYMN “It Came Upon the Midnight Clear” GtG 123

One: It came upon the midnight clear,
that glorious song of old,

**All: from angels bending near the earth,
to touch their harps of gold:**

One: "Peace on the earth, good will to all,
from heaven's all-gracious King":

**All: the world in solemn stillness lay,
to hear the angels sing.**

One: Still through the cloven skies they come,
with peaceful wings unfurled,
and still their heavenly music floats
o'er all the weary world:

**All: above its sad and lowly plains
they bend on hovering wing,
and ever o'er its Babel sounds
the blessed angels sing.**

One: Yet with the woes of sin and strife
the world has suffered long;

**All: beneath the heavenly hymn have rolled
two thousand years of wrong;**

One: and we at war on earth hear not
the tidings that they bring;

**All: O, hush the noise and cease the strife
to hear the angels sing!**

One: And you, beneath life's crushing load,
whose forms are bending low,
who toil along the climbing way
with painful steps and slow,
look now,

**All: for glad and golden hours
come swiftly on the wing:**

One: O, rest beside the weary road,

All: and hear the angels sing.

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

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CHARGE AND BLESSING

One: Announce the good news of Jesus Christ.
All: Prepare the way for Christ's witness to be heard.
One: Christ brings hope for true peace to all people.
All: God is patiently waiting for us to claim this gift.
One: We turn our hearts and minds toward God.
All: We rejoice that we can be servants in Christ's name.

One: And may the blessing of God,
Eternal Majesty, Living Word, and Holy Comforter,
be with you now and always.
And let the gathered people of God say...

All: ...Amen.

POSTLUDE

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