

WORSHIP FOR SUNDAY, DECEMBER 12, 2021

Pacific Presbyterian Church and First Presbyterian Church of Union, Missouri

THIRD SUNDAY of ADVENT

GATHERING

PRELUDE

CALL TO WORSHIP

One: The Lord has come to us in love and in grace.

All: We come in anticipation of the wonder God is birthing in our midst.

One: So come, to be touched by the mystery of God with us.

All: We come to worship and praise Christ the Lord!

***OPENING HYMN** “O Lord, How Shall I Meet You” GtG 104 (*Verses 1-2*)

One: O Lord, how shall I meet you,
how welcome you aright?

**All: Your people long to greet you,
my hope, my heart's delight!**

One: O kindle, Lord most holy,
a lamp within my breast,
to do in spirit lowly
all that may please you best.

**All: Love caused your incarnation;
love brought you down to me;**

One: your thirst for my salvation
procured my liberty.

**All: O love beyond all telling,
that led you to embrace
in love, all loves excelling,
our lost and fallen race.**

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***UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION**

We praise you, O God, for the joy of Christ in our midst. We thank you for your gift of love and grace. Yet we confess that too often we have ignored your coming to us. Too often we have turned a deaf ear to your call. Too often we have turned a cold shoulder to your presence in the needs of others. Forgive us for those times when we refuse to welcome you because it is inconvenient or risky to do so. As you have opened your heart to us, so open our lives to you, that we may know the full joy of your abiding in our hearts. In the name of the Christ-child we pray. Amen.

***SILENT CONFESSION**

***ASSURANCE OF PARDON** (from Luke 2)

One: In this is love, that God gives us the gift of Jesus Christ to remind us of the truth of Immanuel: that God is with us.

All: This is indeed “good news of great joy for all the people.”

One: So rejoice and be glad, for in Jesus Christ we are loved, in Jesus Christ we are embraced, in Jesus Christ we are forgiven.

All: “Glory to God in the highest heaven!”

***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

THE ADVENT WREATH (Mothers of Messiah): Ruth

(“Mothers of Messiah” by Tracy Sybesma. From *Reformed Worship 85* © September 2007
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God of the wom - en God of the men
God of the chil - dren too
How do your peo - ple know laugh-ter
How do your peo - ple share joy

*ROEDER (God of the Sparrow), Tune by Carl Schalk.
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SCRIPTURE READING Ruth 2:8-13

RUTH 2:8-13 (Contemporary English Version)

⁸ Boaz went over to Ruth and said, "I think it would be best for you not to pick up grain in anyone else's field. Stay here with the women ⁹ and follow along behind them, as they gather up what the men have cut. I have warned the men not to bother you, and whenever you are thirsty, you can drink from the water jars they have filled."

¹⁰ Ruth bowed down to the ground and said, "You know I come from another country. Why are you so good to me?"

¹¹ Boaz answered, "I've heard how you've helped your mother-in-law ever since your husband died. You even left your own father and mother to come and live in a foreign land among people you don't know. ¹² I pray that the Lord God of Israel will reward you for what you have done. And now that you have come to the Lord for protection, I pray that the Lord will bless you."

¹³ Ruth replied, "Sir, it's good of you to speak kindly to me and make me feel so welcome. I'm not even one of your servants."

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON "Room for Ruth?" by Pastor Bill Vincent

You go to a party, a gathering; and there're all these people...and you don't recognize a one. You feel awkward, alone; begin to withdraw; maybe you don't belong.

You know no one. No one knows you. No one speaks to you.

Until finally, the host sees you; comes over and greets you, welcomes you; "So glad you're here!" and begins to introduce you around. And you begin to open up, relax, feel a part of the group, feel like you belong.

Imagine Ruth's anxiety: would she find a place? She knew Naomi, yes; but that was all. And in some profound ways, we have all been Ruth. And hopefully, we have come to know the joy that comes with being welcomed, embraced, included, received.

And we celebrate such welcome as Ruth received, not only welcome by Naomi but also by Boaz.

But let us flip the situation. For yes, we know the joy of being welcomed. But do we also know the joy of welcoming? of being the one to welcome another?

There is a certain challenge in that. To welcome another is to put myself to the side (for the moment) and allow the other to step to the front: i.e., to put the other first.

I was at a conference where I was introduced to the process of Mutual Invitation: it is a form of welcome.

We sat in our smaller groups. And after someone had finished sharing, they would look around the group, pick someone, and invite that particular person to speak and to share. It was a way of being intentional, and saying, “I welcome your input, your ideas, your presence.”
Inviting – welcoming – someone to share in the conversation.

Can you imagine the impact that could have on some of the conversations we see taking place around us?

We open ourselves up to the other person: to their presence, to their contribution, to the gift of who they are.

And when we do that – when we welcome someone into our lives – our lives are enriched.

Is it risky? Yes.

Will adjustments need to be made? Yes.

Will it involve change? Yes.

And we will be enriched.

Like Boaz was enriched welcoming Ruth.

And Ruth was enriched welcoming Naomi and her people...including Boaz.

And so, too, were Cornelius...and Peter. You may remember their story.

Cornelius was a Roman centurion and a God-fearer (as they were called) when he had a vision that told him to send for one Peter.

Meanwhile Peter is having a vision of his own: of a sheet being lowered from heaven with all kinds of animals on it (both ‘clean’ and ‘unclean’) and a voice that says, “Rise, kill and eat.” To which Peter responds, “Nothing unclean has ever touched my lips.” And then he hears, “What God has made clean you must not call unclean.”

When Cornelius’ men arrive, Peter invites them into the house where he is staying. The next day they set out for Cornelius’ house.

When he arrives, Peter and Cornelius both go inside the house, which is amazing in itself. For Jews did not enter the house of a Gentile.

But Peter says to Cornelius and all those gathered, “I now realize that God shows no partiality.” (See Acts 10)

Instead of the norm of division and separating people, Cornelius and Peter learned to bridge the gap, to cross the line, to welcome ‘the other’.

And their lives were enriched.

And you and I (Gentiles all) might not be here if it weren’t for Cornelius and Peter learning to welcome each other.

And, from one perspective, it’s more than a matter of welcoming simply each other.

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews says,

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. (Hebrews 13:2 NRSV)

Some have entertained those divine messengers – welcomed the divine.

Like Martin the Cobbler in the story by Leo Tolstoy.

Martin is bitter. His wife has died. His 3-year-old son died of a fever. Martin has no joy. He is angry with God, denies God. Though, in the midst of his anger, he is encouraged by his local priest to read the Bible.

One evening, he has a vision: "The Lord will come to you tomorrow."

The next morning, there is excitement and anticipation in his step as he looks out his window, watching, waiting.

At one point he sees Stepanitch outside shoveling snow and sweeping the sidewalk. He looks cold. So Martin invites him in for a warm drink and a break. Much restored, Stepanitch thanks him as he returns to his work.

A little later, Martin sees a woman with a baby, in clothes not adequate for the cold. He invites her in for food and warmer clothes, and then sends her off much encouraged.

Later still, he sees a boy try to steal an apple from an old woman walking down the street, and a tussle ensues. Martin goes out to intervene, helps them settle their argument; and they end up continuing down the street together, helping each other out in their need.

The day draws to a close and Martin is disappointed, wondering why the Lord has not visited him. Until, drowsy, he has another vision in which he sees the face of each person he helped that day...and realizes he welcomed his Lord in each of them.

"For as often as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me," Jesus said (Matthew 25:40).

We think of these words at the end of Jesus' ministry. But I wonder if they are not also illustrated at the beginning of his life, when Mary and Joseph arrive in Bethlehem, and there is no room for them in the inn.

Is there room in us?

Will he find welcome in our lives?

John says,

He came to his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him – who welcomed him – he gave power to become children of God ... born...of God. (John 1:11-13 NRSV)

Will he find welcome in our lives...even in our welcome of each other?

I was also struck by one of our Advent devotions this year, that spoke specifically of prayer and our tendency to see

prayer as one more thing we must do in this hectic time of year... (from "A Season of Peace" ed. Mark Zimmermann, Creative Communications for the Parish)

Is that not often our response to prayer? "I don't have time for prayer; I have too many other things on my list to do."

And it occurred to me: Is not prayer an opportunity to welcome God into our awareness, our attention span? to welcome God into our focus, our hearts, our lives? to be aware of and

present with and commune with God in my life, here and now, whatever is happening, whatever the situation?

It does take time.

But what would actually motivate me to take the time for prayer? What would actually motivate me to take the risk to welcome others?

Think back to our start: that party/gathering, and our being welcomed.

Ultimately, the primary motivation for us to welcome is the joy we know in being welcomed...by the Lord.

Quite honestly, it is at the focus of what we celebrate this season: not so much our welcome and embrace of the Christ-child (though that is important), but primarily our being welcomed and embraced by him.

For the Child of Bethlehem would grow up and come to say,

"Let the children come to me" [and] take them up in his arms. (Mark 10:14,16)

And he would say,

"Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy-burdened, and I will give you rest." (Matthew 11:28)

In his words and in his way, we know his welcome.

And in that welcome *by* him, I catch the vision, I know the joy, and I find the courage to welcome another.

So our first hymn this morning asked,

**O Lord, how shall I meet you,
how welcome You aright? ...
Love caused your incarnation,
love brought you down to me....
O love beyond all telling,
that led you to embrace
in love, all loves excelling,
our lost and fallen race.**

("O Lord, How Shall I Meet You" Words by Paul Gerhardt, 1653. Trans. Catherine Winkworth and others, 1863; alt.)

Knowing how he has found room in his heart for us, we can find room in our hearts for him...and for every Naomi and every Boaz and every Ruth that we meet...and welcome.

***HYMN** "O Little Town of Bethlehem" GtG 121 (*Verses 1, 3, & 4*)

**1. O little town of Bethlehem,
how still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
the silent stars go by.**

**Yet in thy dark streets shineth
the everlasting light;
the hopes and fears of all the years
are met in thee tonight.**

**3. How silently, how silently,
the wondrous gift is given!
So God imparts to human hearts
the blessings of his heaven.
No ear may hear his coming,
but in this world of sin,
where meek souls will receive him, still
the dear Christ enters in.**

**4. O holy Child of Bethlehem,
descend to us, we pray;
cast out our sin and enter in;
be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels
the great glad tidings tell;
O come to us; abide with us,
our Lord Emmanuel!**

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***AFFIRMATION OF FAITH**

**We trust in God,
whom Jesus called Abba, Father.
In sovereign love God created the world good
and makes everyone equally in God's image,
male and female, of every race and people,
to live as one community.
But we rebel against God; we hide from our Creator.
Ignoring God's commandments,
we violate the image of God in others and ourselves,
accept lies as truth,
exploit neighbor and nature,
and threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care.
We deserve God's condemnation.
Yet God acts with justice and mercy to redeem creation.
In everlasting love,
the God of Abraham and Sarah chose a covenant people
to bless all families of the earth.**

**Hearing their cry,
God delivered the children of Israel
from the house of bondage.
Loving us still,
God makes us heirs with Christ of the covenant.
Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child,
like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home,
God is faithful still.**

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

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Pastor: God of grace...

People: ...rejuvenate us in your joy and love.

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*

Thank you, thank you, loving God, for gifts of grace and the gift of Christ. Accept the offerings we bring; use them to help feed a world hungry for healing and hope. Enter our grateful hearts, and use us to embody your presence and proclaim your glory. In the joy of Christ we pray. Amen.

SENDING

***CLOSING HYMN** “Joy to the World” GtG 134

1. **Joy to the world, the Lord is come!**
Let earth receive her king;
let every heart prepare him room,
and heaven and nature sing,
and heaven and nature sing,
and heaven, and heaven and nature sing.

2. **Joy to the earth, the Savior reigns!**
Let all their songs employ,
while fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains
repeat the sounding joy,
repeat the sounding joy,
repeat, repeat the sounding joy.

3. **No more let sins and sorrows grow,**
nor thorns infest the ground;
he comes to make his blessings flow
far as the curse is found,
far as the curse is found,
far as, far as the curse is found.

4. **He rules the world with truth and grace,**
and makes the nations prove
the glories of his righteousness
and wonders of his love,
and wonders of his love,
and wonders, wonders of his love.

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***CHARGE AND BLESSING**

Pastor: ...And let the gathered people of God say...
People: ...Amen.

POSTLUDE

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