

WORSHIP FOR SUNDAY, DECEMBER 4, 2022

First Presbyterian Church of Union, Missouri

2nd SUNDAY of ADVENT

GATHERING

PRELUDE

CALL TO WORSHIP *(based on Matthew 3)*

One: Do you hear the voice of one crying out in the wilderness? Will you heed the prophet's call?

All: **We will prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.**

***OPENING HYMN** "Prepare the Way, O Zion" GtG 106

1. **Prepare the way, O Zion,
your Christ is drawing near!
Let every hill and valley
a level way appear.
Greet One who comes in glory,
foretold in sacred story.
O blest is Christ who came
in God's most holy name.**
2. **He brings God's rule, O Zion;
he comes from heaven above.
His rule is peace and freedom,
and justice, truth, and love.
Lift high your praise resounding,
for grace and joy abounding.
O blest is Christ who came
in God's most holy name.**
3. **Fling wide your gates, O Zion;
your Savior's rule embrace,
and tidings of salvation
proclaim in every place.**

(continued...)

All lands will bow rejoicing,
their adoration voicing.
O blest is Christ who came
in God's most holy name.

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UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Prepare us for your coming, O Lord. We say we are ready, but we are not. Our hearts are cold, hardened in response to the need of our neighbors. Our mood is dark, for our lives are over-shadowed with so many things to do. Our hands are tightly clenched, unwilling to open up and receive what you have to offer. Forgive us, gracious God. Melt our hearts with the warmth of your love. Open our hands to receive joyfully the gift of your grace. Free us from the tyranny of busy-ness to the glad tidings of serving you. May we welcome you into our lives even as you come to us in the Child born in Bethlehem. For it is in his name that we pray. 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

LIGHTING THE ADVENT WREATH: THE CANDLE OF PEACE

One: God’s peace is the wholeness, completeness, and harmony intended for all people, for all creation. God desires reconciliation and healing where

there is brokenness and division. We proclaim the Prince of Peace has come to bring God's peace and reconciliation to our hearts and to our world.

All: We long for peace between nations and peoples, between families and friends, between you and me. So we pray and work for the day that Isaiah envisioned, when

**“The Lord shall judge between the nations,
and shall decide for many peoples;
and we shall beat our swords into plowshares,
and our spears into pruning hooks;
and nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall we learn war any more.”**

(Isaiah 2:4)

One: The first candle reminds us of the sure hope we have in Christ. Today we light the second candle to remind us of the peace Christ offers and the peace we are to share.

For “God was in Christ reconciling the world to God ... and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.” *(II Corinthians 5:19)*

Let us pray.

Unison: Dear God, we thank you for the peace you give to us in Christ, for the healing and wholeness he affects in our lives. Make us into his ambassadors in the world, to preach the good news of his peace, to share in the ministry of reconciliation. Amen.

Sing: “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” GtG 88 *(Verse 7)*

**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.**

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SCRIPTURE READING Matthew 3:1-12

MATTHEW 3:1-12 (New Revised Standard Version)

¹ *In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming,*
² *“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”* ³ *This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,*

*“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.’”*

⁴ Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵ Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, ⁶ and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

⁷ But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸ Bear fruit worthy of repentance. ⁹ Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ¹⁰ Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

¹¹ “I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹² His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON “Hung by the Chimney with Care” by Pastor Bill Vincent

Stars sprout on rooftops. Lights sprout in windows, in doorways, around trees: white, green, yellow, orange, red.

The familiar tunes of carols float over the airways through the radio and commercials, and – if you’re brave! – the intercom at the store, gradually working their way deep into our psyches.

Delicious aromas waft their way to our nose – if we’re lucky, it’s chocolate! – aromas that awaken within us faint and fond memories of good times and happiness and joy.

"It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas," and we're rushing to get ready.

You can tell by the familiar ring of the Salvation Army bells at storefronts.

You can tell by the sprouting of Santa's workshops and the profusion of Santa's helpers.

You can tell by the way houses are decorated and calendars fill with gatherings.

And you can tell by the urgent ‘beep/boop’ at the check out.

Tis the season to spend money.

Tis the season to be busy.

Tis the season to gather together.

Then we read the lectionary passage this morning from Matthew, and it's about...John the Baptist.

And we wonder, "What the dickens does this have to do with Christmas? Where are the shepherds? Where are the wisemen? Where are Mary and Joseph, and the star in the sky?"

And they're not there.

We're ready to rush to Bethlehem and join the others, and these words we hear this morning don't seem to apply, don't seem to have anything to do with where we're going, with its description of John's clothing of camel's hair and food of locusts and wild honey.

"Our stockings are hung by the chimney with care," and we will be ready.
Or will we?

Matthew quotes from Isaiah

*"Prepare the way of the Lord,
make [the Lord's] paths straight."*

These words of Isaiah's were familiar to the people. Yet somehow many of them weren't prepared, because so many of them didn't receive the Lord when he came (John 1:11). They anticipated, looked forward to the coming of the Messiah, yet so many of them missed it.

Will we?

"Come, Thou Long-expected Jesus," we sing, "Joy of every longing heart." That may be the key: the longing, waiting, wishing for, anticipating, expecting.

But go deeper. To long for something is also to acknowledge a lack of that something and therefore a need for that something: a void to be filled, an aid to be offered, a wound to be healed, a brokenness to be mended.

Ann Weems puts her finger on it when she asks the poignant, and to the point, question,

**When are we going to learn that Christmas Peace
comes only when we turn and face the darkness?**

(Ann Weems, "Toward the Light," Kneeling in Bethlehem, p.21)

Not all preparations, not all preparing is fun, happy, enjoyable; something we naturally want to do.

Which may be part of the reason why we so often miss the coming of the Lord, because preparing for his coming can be painful. Painful, but necessary.

Pain: You stick yourself with a pin, and you feel pain. You touch the hot burner on the stove, and you feel pain. Pain alerts you to the fact that something is wrong, that something is harming you, and mobilizes you to do something about it.

Sometimes we have to feel the pain, face the pain.

C.S. Lewis, in his book The Problem of Pain, notes that pain is sometimes used by God to get our attention. Pain can be a way of calling attention to the fact that things are not as they should be. Lewis writes,

**pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our
pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is
[God's] megaphone to rouse a deaf world.** (p.93)

Now, we may not believe that pain *always* serves as "God's megaphone." But Lewis does have a point.

Remorse by the person who has spoken angry words; feelings of guilt by the abuser, of substance or of people; pangs of inner regret by the person who has neglected a commitment –

all of these signal that a person finally acknowledges that something is amiss. Such remorse, such guilt is not enjoyable; it is painful. But it is a first step. For it paves the way for a change of heart and a change of life, and a change of behavior that better reflects the life God intends and the peace God offers.

Pain paves the way. The preparation may not be enjoyable, yet it is necessary for the coming of new life, for the coming of the Lord who, by song, is "Born to reign in us forever" ("Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus").

"Prepare the way of the Lord," Isaiah, and Matthew, proclaim.

So John *"proclaim[s] a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins"* (Mark 1:4 NRSV). Repentance: a painful, remorseful acknowledgment that we are headed in the wrong direction, that our lives are broken, our need is great. Repentance paves the way for the good news of forgiveness, and paves the way for the one who points out the right way, for he is the way.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow knew pain when he
**...heard the bells on Christmas Day
their old familiar carols play
And wild and sweet the words repeat
Of peace on earth, goodwill to [all].**

He knew the pain of this nation torn apart by the Civil War. He knew the pain personally, with his son's body wounded in that war.

**And in despair I bowed my head:
"There is no peace of earth," I said,
"For hate is strong, and mocks the song
Of peace on earth, goodwill to [all]."**

He knew the brokenness of the world, the pain of the lack of peace, that the world – life – was not as it should be.

And "face[ing] the darkness" (Weems) prepared the way to hear the grace-filled news:

**Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
"God is not dead nor doth [God] sleep
The wrong shall fail, the right prevail
With peace on earth, goodwill to [all]."**

So, too, Edmund Hamilton Sears. Sears wrote before the Civil War, but he saw the dark clouds forming

**O'er all the weary world...
And [you,] beneath life's crushing load,
Whose forms are bending low,
Who toil along the climbing way
With painful steps and slow....**

It reminds me of words that Jesus spoke:

"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." (Matthew 11:28 NRSV)

We cannot hear the grace of rest unless we first understand our own weariness – and that is more than just being tuckered out at the end of a long day of shopping. It is the weariness of the soul that tries to earn love and knows it cannot; the weariness of the heart that yearns for it-knows-not-what and finds no satisfaction. When we understand that weariness about ourselves, when we sense that weariness, then the way is paved to hear the good news of the rest that the Coming One offers.

For only those who know of their need to be delivered can rejoice in the coming of a Savior.

Only those who know of the warring within can celebrate the coming of the Prince of Peace.

Only those who know the pain of their own – and the world's – brokenness will be touched by the amazing message that we are healed through his wounds (Isaiah 53:5).

And maybe our biggest need comes in regards to our sense of self-reliance, thinking we can do it on our own, we don't need anyone else: we can build our own bridge into heaven, we can pull ourself up by own bootstraps, we can heal ourselves.

But we can't. And we have to face that truth first, acknowledge it.

And maybe that's why a baby. How a baby can make even the biggest, gruffest, burliest, most self-reliant of people tremble, and feel uncertain and unsure.

Tracey and Gordon are owners and operators of the service station in the comic "For Better or For Worse." They are expecting their first child. They've shared the news with the main characters (Jon and El). Tracey confides to El,

Besides not being able to work like I used to, I guess my biggest concern about having a baby is...I'm scared. What if something goes wrong? What if we can't handle it? You can listen to all the advice and read all the books – but how do you know if you're going to be a really GOOD parent?!!

To which El responds,

You don't, Tracey.

Then, putting her arm around Tracey's shoulder, El assures her,

...But WANTING to be is a good start! ("For Better or Worse" by Lynn Johnston, 12/6/96)

Acknowledging that she was not up to it was a good place to start – a good preparation.

It is when we come to the painful realization that, despite all our plans and energy and effort (the lights and the trees and the stars and the gifts and the parties), we really are not ready – it is then when we are most ready.

Most ready to go to Bethlehem to witness the birth of the Christ-child.

Most ready to have him be born within us.

***HYMN** “On Jordan’s Bank the Baptist’s Cry” GtG 96

1. **On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry
announces that the Lord is nigh;
awake and hearken, for he brings
glad tidings of the King of kings!**
2. **Then cleansed be every life from sin;
make straight the way for God within,
and let us all our hearts prepare
for Christ to come and enter there.**
3. **We hail you as our Savior, Lord,
our refuge and our great reward;
without your grace we waste away
like flowers that wither and decay.**
4. **Stretch forth your hand; our health restore,
and make us rise to fall no more.
O let your face upon us shine
and fill the world with love divine.**

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***AFFIRMATION OF FAITH** *(The Apostles’ Creed - Contemporary)*

**I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.
I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to the dead.
On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come again to judge the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.**

(Today’s translation of the Apostles' Creed is reprinted by permission from Book of Common Worship, copyright 1993 Westminster/John Knox Press.)

RECEPTION OF NEW MEMBER

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

One: Hear us, O God...
All: ...your mercy is great.

THE LORD'S PRAYER *(Contemporary)*

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and forever. Amen.

OFFERING

Invitation

Reflection

**Unison Prayer of Dedication*

Lovingly you give to us, O God. Graciously may we receive. Freely
may we give. Turn our offerings to your good will, and turn us always to you
in gratitude. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

SENDING

*CLOSING HYMN "It Came Upon the Midnight Clear" GtG 123 *(Verses 1-2, 4-5)*

1. It came upon the 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.

(continued...)

2. **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.**
4. **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, for glad and golden hours
come swiftly on the wing:
O, rest beside the weary road,
and hear the angels sing.**
5. **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 the whole world give back the song
which now the angels sing.**

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***CHARGE AND BLESSING**

One: ...And let the gathered people of God say...
All: ...Amen.

POSTLUDE

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