

WORSHIP FOR SUNDAY, DECEMBER 18, 2022

Pacific Presbyterian Church and First Presbyterian Church of Union, Missouri

4th SUNDAY of ADVENT

GATHERING

PRELUDE

CALL TO WORSHIP *(based on Isaiah 40)*

One: Prepare the way of the Lord!
All: **Lift every valley, lift every voice.**
One: Prepare the way of the Lord!
All: **And all flesh shall see the salvation of our God.**

***OPENING HYMN** “O Lord, How Shall I Meet You” GtG 104

1. **O Lord, how shall I meet you,
how welcome you aright?
Your people long to greet you,
my hope, my heart’s delight!
O kindle, Lord most holy,
a lamp within my breast,
to do in spirit lowly
all that may please you best.**

2. **Love caused your incarnation;
love brought you down to me;
your thirst for my salvation
procured my liberty.
O love beyond all telling,
that led you to embrace
in love, all loves excelling,
our lost and fallen race.**

3. **You come, O Lord, with gladness,
in mercy and goodwill,
to bring an end to sadness
and bid our fears be still.**

(continued...)

**In patient expectation
we live for that great day
when your renewed creation
your glory shall display.**

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UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION

**O Lord, we want to meet you,
but only on our terms.
You shower gifts on your people, and forgive their faults.
We keep accounts and settle old scores.
You make peace, sending Christ as a sign of reconciliation and hope.
We make war and call it peacekeeping.
You give us a source of confidence as your Spirit is sent into our midst.
We cause others to be restless, in our anxiety and self-concern.
Have mercy upon us, O Lord.
Forgive us for failing to meet you aright.
Forgive us, even as you greet us in ways unimagined and people unexpected.
Make us instruments of your coming.
Make us pliable to your way and your working.
Make us willing and eager servants of your presence,
with hearts true to you and lives true to your way,
even in your coming as a baby.
For it is in the Christ-child's name we pray. Amen.**

SILENT CONFESSION

ASSURANCE OF PARDON *(from Luke 2 and Matthew 1)*

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

LIGHTING THE ADVENT WREATH: THE CANDLE OF LOVE

One: The first three candles remind us of the hope we have in Christ's coming, the peace we know in him, and the joy with which we celebrate, not only in this season but always. Our hope and peace and joy all grow out of our experience of God's great love. So we light the fourth candle to remind us of God's love as we see it in the coming of Christ.

All: What wondrous love is this, that God would come and dwell in our midst to save us from our sins and to give us new life.

One: The angel said to Joseph, "Mary will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." (*Matthew 1:21*)

"For thus God loved the world, giving God's only Son, that everyone who believes in him might not perish but have eternal life. For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him." (*John 3:16-17*)

Let us pray.

Unison: We rejoice in your great love for us, O God. Kindle within us the fire of your love, that we might share it with others and spread the good news of Christ's coming. Amen.

Sing: "Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming" GtG 129 (*Verse 2*)

**Isaiah 'twas foretold it, the rose I have in mind;
with Mary we behold it, the virgin mother kind.
To show God's love aright she bore for us a Savior,
when half spent was the night.**

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SCRIPTURE READINGS Isaiah 7:10-16
Matthew 1:18-25

ISAIAH 7:10-16 (Common English Bible+)

10 Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz: 11 "Ask a sign from the Lord your God. Make it as deep as the grave or as high as heaven."

12 But Ahaz said, "I will not ask; I will not test the Lord."

13 Then Isaiah said, "Listen, house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? 14 Therefore, the Lord will give you a sign. The young woman is pregnant and is about to give birth to a son, and she will name him Immanuel. 15 He will eat curds and honey, and learn to reject evil and choose good. 16 Before the boy learns to reject evil and choose good, the land of the two kings you dread will be abandoned."

MATTHEW 1:18-25 (Common English Bible+)

18 This is how the birth of Jesus Christ took place. When Mary his mother was engaged to Joseph, before they were married, she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit. 19 Joseph was a man who always did what was right. Because he did not want to humiliate her, he decided to call off their engagement quietly. 20 As he was thinking about this, an angel from the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because the child she carries was conceived by the Holy Spirit. 21 She will give birth to a son, and you will call him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." 22 Now all of this took place so that what the Lord had spoken through the prophet would be fulfilled:

*23 Look! A virgin will become pregnant
and give birth to a son,*

And they will call him, Emmanuel.

(Emmanuel means "God with us.")

24 When Joseph woke up, he did just as an angel from God commanded and took Mary as his wife, 25 but had no marital relations with her until she gave birth to a son. Joseph called him Jesus.

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON "Wishing for Our Want List" by Pastor Bill Vincent

I think I identify with Ahaz more than I would like to admit.

He thinks he knows what he needs to do. And, in fact, he pursues that route anyway, in spite of Isaiah and the Lord.

Isaiah tells him to ask of the Lord a sign. "This is what God says; this is what God promises. You want proof? Ask for a sign." Rarely does God invite such testing of the divine.

But Ahaz responds with all the right words. "No, I wouldn't do that. I won't ask of the Lord a sign. That would be wrong." He's right, you know. All the right words. But, we strongly suspect, all the wrong heart.

On the one hand, Ahaz really doesn't believe what he's hearing from Isaiah, so he goes with what he knows – the "proper" response.

But I suspect something deeper: I suspect that Ahaz doesn't want to bother God with a sign because Ahaz doesn't want to bother with a sign at all. He already knows what he wants to do, what he wants to happen. If God knows what's good for Ahaz and the country, God will simply go along with what Ahaz already has planned and see to it that his plan succeeds. Then everyone will be happy, everything will be hunky-dory.

But, what Ahaz gets is not what he wants.

What he wants is a military alliance.

What he gets is a pregnancy.

What he wants is power.
What he gets is the promise of weakness, both in the word of his coming defeat and in the coming of a child.

What he wants is his way.
What he gets is God's way.

It's not what he wants.
But it is what he needs.

We want power.
We are given weakness. A baby, remember?
And we are more like that baby in a manger than we want to admit. We too are helpless, in need of others – or Another – to care for us, to protect us from Herods and others who would strike out at us and knock us down and bleed the life out of us.

And so we think we need a bigger military, and a larger surveillance program, and taller walls. We need to protect ourselves.

And what do we get? A baby: helpless, weak, defenseless. A baby who relies on Another – perhaps we need to, as well.

We want force.
We are given love.
We want self-reliance – you know, stand on our own 2 feet.
We are given, 'You must rely upon me'.

Joseph had it all figured out – just like Ahaz. Oh, it was already not what he expected: Mary pregnant with not-his-child. But he had figured out what would be the best thing to happen: call off the engagement quietly. He'd be off the hook; Mary would avoid a scandal – or worse: stoning.

Then something – or Someone – seemed to speak to him in a dream: "Go ahead and take Mary as your wife; care for the not-your-own child." He had no idea what he was getting into.

It was not what he wanted to hear.
But it was what he needed to hear...and to do.

Sometimes we may get so frustrated when life doesn't go our way.
We want to be able to control others. We want to be able to dictate to others what they will do, how they will act, what they will think, how they will decide.

We want so desperately for others to change.
What we get is a call for us to change. Not that we give in to the whims and dictates of others, but that I realize – and painfully so – that the only one I have a chance of changing is me, and I'm not very good at that either.

It may not be the wisdom we want.
But it may just be the wisdom we need.

Yes, the world is a mess – much like Ahaz’.

Maybe what we want is someone who can take charge and clean up the mess and force everyone to do what is right and keep everyone on the straight and narrow and take care of everyone’s needs; and who will do all that, all the while respecting our wishes, wants, and desires, whatever they may be.

And what do we get?

An infant. Who says nothing, but gurgles and burps. And when he grows up and does speak, we don’t like what he says anyway: “Take up your cross. Lose your life. Turn the other cheek.” And we certainly don’t like what he expects of us: give up our own lives? follow him down this path of seeming self-destruction and definite self-offering?

No, this is not what we want.

But, Yes, it is definitely what we need.

How often do we want guidance in life, answers to our questions.

In the movie “L.A. Story” (1991), Steve Martin is the ‘wacky weekend weatherman’ in search of meaning in life...and love. Periodically, as he drives along the freeway, his car engine dies; and he is flashed particular, personalized messages on one of the electronic billboards lining the highway.

Now wouldn’t that be great? A clear, unmistakable sign; specific instructions, directions, guidance from God as to what to do.

But don’t get your hopes up. More often than not, what we are given is a word – or words [--Bible--] – we need to pick up and read and spend time with and talk about and discuss and pray over and debate about in order to hear and understand, to discern an answer, some guidance and direction – and even then, it may not be as specific as we would like.

What we get is a community in which to discuss and debate and share and disagree and wrestle in order to discern some suggestion as to what we are to do and where we are to go and how we are to live.

What we get is a still small voice that we have to shut up long enough and be still long enough to actually hear...if indeed we’re sure we heard it aright.

We want answers.

We are given a presence. As if that were enough ... and it may very well be enough.

And maybe in our relationship with others, it may be that that presence is the most precious gift we can give: not pat answers, but a personal presence.

Immanuel: God with us.

Not ‘God answering all your questions’.

Not ‘God solving all your problems’.

But God with us.

In our weakness.

In our chaos.

God with us.

In our questions.

In our problems.

With us. Here. In the midst of life. In the midst of our life.
With us.

God does not always answer our prayers the way we want them, with the outcome for which we so desperately plead.

But God does come – and stand by us, and stand with us, and offer us strength and love, and a presence. And sometimes I wonder if, indeed, we can face anything...as long as we know we don't have to face it alone.

And it may not be the answer we want.
But it may be the answer we need.

*For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways,
and my thoughts than your thoughts. (Isaiah 55:8-9 NRSV)*

Yes, so often, in terms of life and how to live life...
We want strength, invulnerability.
We are given weakness.
We want control.
We are given life beyond our control.
We want vengeance, retribution, punishment.
We are given forgiveness.
We want force.
We are given love.
We want victory.
We are given a cross.
We want our way.
We are given God's way.

Immanuel: God with us.

“Give up your life, and take up mine,” the grown Immanuel would say.
“Follow me,” he would say.
“Take up your cross,” he would say.

Immanuel: God with us.
A child – a mere child.

It may not be the gift we want.
But, Yes, I believe it is precisely the gift we need.

***HYMN** “What Child Is This” GtG 145

1. **What child is this, who, laid to rest,
on Mary's lap is sleeping?
Whom angels greet with anthems sweet
while shepherds watch are keeping?
This, this is Christ the King,
whom shepherds guard and angels sing;
haste, haste to bring him laud,
the babe, the son of Mary!**

2. **Why lies he in such mean estate
where ox and ass are feeding?
Good Christian, fear; for sinners here
the silent Word is pleading.
Nails, spear, shall pierce him through;
the cross be borne for me, for you.
Hail, hail, the Word made flesh,
the babe, the son of Mary!**

3. **So bring him incense, gold, and myrrh;
come, one and all, to own him.
The King of kings salvation brings;
let loving hearts enthrone him.
Raise, raise the song on high.
The virgin sings her lullaby.
Joy, joy, for Christ is born,
the babe, the son of Mary!**

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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,**

(continued...)

**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

One: God who is with us...
All: ...hear our prayer and renew your people.

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*

**You come to us with love, O Lord,
and our lives are filled with joy.
You come to us in grace,
and our hearts are filled with gratitude.
Be born in us again today,
that your life may be our life.
Receive the offering of our gifts and our hearts,
that your light might shine in our lives
to the sound of 'Glorias' and 'Alleluias'.
In Christ's name we pray. Amen.**

SENDING

***CLOSING HYMN** "Gentle Mary Laid Her Child" GtG 146

- 1. Gentle Mary laid her child
lowly in a manger;
there he lay, the undefiled,
to the world a stranger.
Such a babe in such a place,
can he be the Savior?
Ask the saved of all the race
who have found his favor.**
- 2. Angels sang about his birth;
wise men sought and found him;
heaven's star shone brightly forth,
glory all around him.
Shepherds saw the wondrous sight,
heard the angels singing;
all the plains were lit that night;
all the hills were ringing.**
- 3. Gentle Mary laid her child
lowly in a manger;
he is still the undefiled,
but no more a stranger.
Son of God, of humble birth,
beautiful the story;
praise his name in all the earth;
hail the King of glory!** *(Public Domain)*

***CHARGE AND BLESSING**

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

All: ...Amen.

POSTLUDE

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