

WORSHIP FOR SUNDAY, DECEMBER 22, 2024

Pacific Presbyterian Church and First Presbyterian Church of Union, Missouri

**FOURTH SUNDAY of ADVENT**

**GATHERING**

**PRELUDE**

**CALL TO WORSHIP**

One: Not in the mighty places of power,  
but in little Bethlehem,  
in a room out back:  
**All: The Messiah is coming.**  
One: Not born in nobility and wealth,  
but of Mary and Joseph,  
who pondered and planed wood:  
**All: The Messiah is coming.**  
One: Not announced by prophets, priests, and kings,  
but by two women,  
who were the first to know:  
**All: The Messiah is coming.**  
One: Nothing will be impossible for God,  
but when and where we least expect it,  
look among the straw and the stars:  
**All: The Messiah is coming.**

**\*OPENING HYMN** “Angels, from the Realms of Glory” GtG 143

- 1. Angels, from the realms of glory,  
wing your flight o'er all the earth;  
you, who sang creation's story,  
now proclaim Messiah's birth:  
come and worship, come and worship,  
worship Christ, the newborn king!**
- 2. Shepherds, in the fields abiding,  
watching o'er your flocks by night,  
God with us is now residing;  
yonder shines the infant light:**

*(continued...)*

**come and worship, come and worship,  
worship Christ, the newborn king!**

**3. Sages, leave your contemplations;  
brighter visions beam afar;  
seek the great desire of nations;  
you have seen his natal star:  
come and worship, come and worship,  
worship Christ, the newborn king!**

**4. All creation, join in praising  
God the Father, Spirit, Son,  
evermore your voices raising  
to th'eternal Three in One:  
come and worship, come and worship,  
worship Christ, the newborn king!**

Words: Stanzas 1-3, James Montgomery, 1816, 1825; stanza 4,  
*Salisbury Hymn Book*, 1857  
Music: REGENT SQUARE, Henry Thomas Smart, 1867  
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#### **UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION**

**God our Savior, we ask for your mercy.  
We are grateful for the love you have shown us  
in sending your Son, Jesus Christ;  
yet we admit that we fail to share that love  
as it has been shared with us.  
Though we have heard Mary's song,  
we still seek security in pride and power and possessions.  
Though we know your story,  
we resist the costs of following you.  
We pass by those considered lowly in this world.  
We turn away from hungry people who still wait to be filled.  
Forgive us, we pray, for being distrustful  
and for withholding your love from others.  
Help us to work for the justice you intend.  
Make us messengers of the peace you bring.  
Remind us that, as we do not deserve your love,  
so we are not to put conditions on our own love.  
Teach us to care for others  
with the same boundless grace you demonstrate to us.  
And let the spark of your love be born again within our hearts.  
We pray in the name of Jesus Christ, Emmanuel. Amen.**

## SILENT CONFESSION

### ASSURANCE OF PARDON *(from John 3 & 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: **The Good News is this: “God loved the world so much that God gave God’s only Son.” 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.
- 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 OF THE ADVENT WREATH: **The Candle of Love**

- One: We celebrate this season the expectant hope that we have in the coming of the Lord. We rejoice in the peace we can know in him. We share his joy with angels and others.
- All: **The shape of our hope is the small form of a baby and the promise of new life. The beginning of our peace, and our wholeness, is the confession of our brokenness. The foundation of our joy is in the sorrow of a cross.**
- One: But what of the love? For without love we are nothing but "a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal." (I Corinthians 13:1) What is the substance of our love?
- All: **The substance of our love is in giving – self-giving – and our obedience unto death.**
- One: "For God loved the world so much that God gave" to us the Son, Jesus the Christ. (John 3:16) Jesus loved us so much that he gave his life for us, "humbling himself and becoming obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross." (Philippians 2:8) So we are to love him so much that we will "take up our cross and follow him." (Mark 8:34)
- All: **With the birth of the Child of Bethlehem, love blossoms in the world.**

**Sing** “Lo, How a Rose E’er Blooming” GtG 129 (*Verses 1-2*)

**1. Lo, how a rose e’er blooming  
from tender stem hath sprung,  
of Jesse’s lineage coming,  
by faithful prophets sung.  
It came, a floweret bright,  
amid the cold of winter,  
when half spent was the night.**

**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.**

Words: German carol; stanzas 1, 2 trans. Theodore Baker, 1894, alt.  
Music: ES IST EIN’ ROS’, *Alte Catholische Geistliche Kirchengesang*,  
1599; arr. Michael Praetorius, 1609  
*Public Domain*

**SCRIPTURE READINGS** Micah 5:2-5a  
Luke 1:39-56

MICAH 5:2-5a (New International Version)

<sup>2</sup> “But you, *Bethlehem Ephrathah*,  
though you are small among the clans of Judah,  
out of you will come for me  
one who will be ruler over Israel,  
whose origins are from of old,  
from ancient times.”

<sup>3</sup> Therefore Israel will be abandoned  
until the time when she who is in labor bears a son,  
and the rest of his kindred return  
to join the Israelites.

<sup>4</sup> He will stand and shepherd his flock  
in the strength of the Lord,  
in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.  
And they will live securely, for then his greatness  
will reach to the ends of the earth.

<sup>5</sup> And he will be our peace.

LUKE 1:39-56 (New Revised Standard Version, updated edition)

<sup>39</sup> *In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country,* <sup>40</sup> *where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.* <sup>41</sup> *When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit* <sup>42</sup> *and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.* <sup>43</sup> *And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?* <sup>44</sup> *For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy.* <sup>45</sup> *And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."*

<sup>46</sup> *And Mary said,*

*"My soul magnifies the Lord,  
<sup>47</sup> and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
<sup>48</sup> for God has looked with favor on the lowly state of God's servant.  
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;  
<sup>49</sup> for the Mighty One has done great things for me,  
and holy is the name of the Lord;  
<sup>50</sup> indeed, God's mercy is for those who revere God  
from generation to generation.  
<sup>51</sup> God has shown strength with God's arm;  
and has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.  
<sup>52</sup> The Lord has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;  
<sup>53</sup> has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty.  
<sup>54</sup> God has come to the aid of God's child Israel,  
in remembrance of God's mercy,  
<sup>55</sup> according to the promise God made to our ancestors,  
to Abraham and to his descendants forever."*

<sup>56</sup> *And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.*

## **PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION**

### **SERMON "The Look of Love" by Pastor Bill Vincent**

Love. what would we do without it. We found families on it. Start friendships with it. It is so central to our lives and our way of thinking.

And we think we know what love looks like. And we have plenty of help in painting our picture of love. Numerous images from popular culture bombard us as we put together our portrait. We know what fragrance love wears. We know what clothes it wears. What food it eats. What stores it shops at. What brand name jeans it wears. We know what cars it drives, and

where it spends its vacation. Love has names like Prince Charming – or even Prince Harry – Cinderella...or, you pick a name.

Yes, we think we know what love looks like.

But compare that picture with the portrait found in the story of God's dealings with God's people, and the look of love is very different – surprising in its difference. Indeed an important element in the whole story is that sense of surprise on the part of the people as they catch a glimpse of the look of God's love.

And God's love still catches us by surprise, off guard because it is so unexpected. It catches us off guard for several reasons.

The first, if not most important one, is that we know deep down that God's love is undeserved. It is the basis for that

**Amazing grace, ... that saved a wretch like me.** ("Amazing Grace, How Sweet the Sound" words by John Newton, 1772)

*For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, (Romans 3:23)*

writes Paul.

*But God shows God's love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8)*

The amazing grace: that even though we do not deserve it, God loves us anyway. And that is entirely unexpected.

More than that, though, we find evidence of God's love in the most unexpected places and people. In a motley band of refugees fleeing from the iron-fist of Pharaoh. In a shepherd boy crowned king. In Elizabeth: a woman past her prime, pregnant beyond all believing.

*"God so loved the world..."* We recite those words with a certain, almost contemptible familiarity. But we forget what that love actually looked like. To us, like a foreigner – olive skinned, dark haired. Embodied in someone from the other side of the tracks – or the world. With a pregnant, unwed teenage mother of about 14 or 15 years of age. She a peasant girl, and her 'significant other': a quiet, unassuming carpenter.

Love's coming does not take place in one of the great cities of love, like Paris or Rome. In fact, it does not take place in one of the great cities, period. But in Bethlehem, the smallest of towns.

*But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,  
though you are small among the clans of Judah,  
out of you will come for me  
one who will be ruler over Israel...*

In Bethlehem. Like having it come in Dittmer MO, or Catawissa.

With the Christmas story – especially with the Christmas story – we tend to sanitize the look of God's love and dress it up, filling in the details with sweet smells and pretty backdrops.

Yet the love found in the manger is rough, unkempt, and unnerving. It is so unlike what we thought it would be. With birth today, we think of a sanitary hospital. Or, if at home, a clean, comfortable place. But Jesus was born with the animals looking on. One Church School class talked about the mice and manure most likely present: not the most sanitary place for the birth of a child. And he was born in a day and age when children were doing well to survive past the first few years, let alone live to be an adult; a day and age when the infant mortality rate was high.

God's love does not come to us in a palace but in a stable. It does not walk on dance floors with glass slippers but in sandals on dusty roads. It does not sit upon thrones but hangs upon a cross.

The look of God's love catches us off guard because it comes to us in ways we do not expect. And then it turns our world upside down, overturning our standards in life and radically reshaping our lives.

We measure success by the one who gets ahead in life. God measures greatness by the one who serves the most.

Our judgments have the guilty punished in order to protect the innocent. God's love has an innocent man die on behalf of the guilty. As Isaiah spoke of it,

*he was wounded for our transgressions,  
he was bruised for our iniquities;  
upon him was the chastisement that made us whole,  
and with his stripes we are healed. (53:5)*

And as Paul said it,

*While we were yet helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. (Romans 5:6)*

The reversal of our standard of measuring seen in the rising of the lowly and the lowering of the high and mighty; in the filling of the hungry and the sending empty away of the rich. And in the salvation of them all.

And though it does not come in the way we expect, still love comes, transforming all with whom it comes into contact. To those who reject it, love, in many ways, transforms them into an angry mob that cries, "Crucify him!" To those who accept it, love transforms them into its own rough, unexpected image. But transform it does. And forces upon us a decision: to choose its strange ways, or the misguided way we have chosen before.

A young man came to Jesus and asked what he needed to do to inherit eternal life. And hearing how well the man had done in following the commandments,

*Jesus, looking upon him, loved him, and said to him, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you have, and give to the poor,... and come, follow me." (Mark 10:21)*

The man went away sad, for he was rich. Jesus turns to the disciples and says it is easier for a camel to go through eye of a needle than a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. The disciples are amazed and ask, "Who then can be saved?" To which Jesus responds, "With people? Impossible! But all things are possible with God."

The look of love: met in the incredible demand to send a camel through the eye of a needle...and then in God doing it for us.

To those who accept such love and receive it in their hearts, the transformation is itself astonishing. Like the look of love found in the man Paul, knocked to the ground from his horse and blinded by the light. The one who persecuted the early church with all his energy, only to be transformed into the one who championed the very cause he had sought to snuff out.

What is the look of love? It is the sights, the sounds, the heartbeats known when God moves in that wondrous, mysterious way God has of moving.

And the look of love is not only a look. It is a sound, a touch, a taste, a whiff, a feeling, an experience. But it is mostly a person.

Harvey Estes, in a short piece "To My Wife at Christmas" writes,

**I do not know how to love honesty, strength, compassion. I admire them greatly, strive to possess them, but I do not love them. Yet when I see them in your face, I know I love you.**

**And so it was long ago, that God, knowing that we cannot love ideas, instead decided, "Let love become a person." (Alive Now!**

November/December 1984, p.51)

We see it in the newborn child lying in a manger.

We hear it in the man dying on a cross, saying,

*Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.* (Luke 23:34)

We feel it in the astonishment – and yes, even in the fear – of the women as they are greeted by the angel in the garden, and told,

*He has been raised, he is not here.* (Mark 16:6)

God's love is so astounding because it is not what we expected; yet it is all – and more than – we had hoped for. For in God's love we find strength and endurance in a tiny infant. In God's love we find wholeness through a broken man on a cross. In God's love we find new life through death.

The incredible, unexpected miracle of God's love: in a child in a manger; in a man on a cross; in an empty tomb.

We see it in the flames of candles dancing and the faces of gleeful children. We see it in the eyes of those we love and who love us. We hear it in words of kindness and caring. We hear it in songs of Joy to the World with Herald Angels Singing. We hear it in an awe-filled Silent Night. We experience it in a warm embrace and the company of loved ones.

Be touched by this God's unexpected love, and let it transform your life.

And then touch someone with it, and be joined with them and the angels in a lived-out chorus to the Prince of Peace.



**\*HYMN “Love Has Come” GtG 110**

**1. Love has come: a light in the darkness!  
Love shines forth in the Bethlehem skies.  
See, all heaven has come to proclaim it;  
hear how their song of joy arises:  
Love! Love! Born unto you, a Savior!  
Love! Love! Glory to God on high.**

**2. Love is born! Come, share in the wonder.  
Love is God now asleep in the hay.  
See the glow in the eyes of his mother;  
what is the name her heart is saying?  
Love! Love! Love is the name she whispers.  
Love! Love! Jesus, Emmanuel.**

**3. Love has come and never will leave us!  
Love is life everlasting and free.  
Love is Jesus within and among us.  
Love is the peace our hearts are seeking.  
Love! Love! Love is the gift of Christmas.  
Love! Love! Praise to you, God on high!**

Music: BRING A TORCH, French melody. *Public Domain*  
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**\*AFFIRMATION OF FAITH**

**One:** How do you understand and live for the love of God?

**All:** **I love because God first loved me.  
God loves me in Christ with a love that never ends.  
In his life of compassion,  
his death on the cross,  
and his resurrection from the dead,  
I see how vast is God's love for the world  
– a love that is ready to suffer for our sakes,  
yet so strong that nothing will prevail against it.**

*(continued...)*

**Amazed by grace,  
I no longer live for myself.  
I live for the Lord who died and rose again,  
triumphant over death,  
for my sake.  
Therefore, I take those around me to heart,  
especially those in particular need,  
knowing that Christ died for them no less than for me.**

(from *The Study Catechism: Full Version*, Copyright ©1998  
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### **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*

**Holy God, with Mary we seek to magnify you  
in our worship and in our deeds.  
Accept these gifts  
and bless them for Christ's ministry.  
Use them, and use us,  
to lift the lowly and fill the hungry;  
to reveal your glory,  
and to tell the world of the "good tidings of great joy"  
which is born to us in a manger. Amen.**

## SENDING

**\*CLOSING HYMN** "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing" GtG 119

1. **Hark! The herald angels sing,  
"Glory to the newborn king.  
Peace on earth and mercy mild,  
God and sinners reconciled!"  
Joyful, all ye nations, rise;  
join the triumph of the skies;  
with th'angelic host proclaim,  
"Christ is born in Bethlehem!"  
Hark! The herald angels sing,  
"Glory to the newborn king!"**
  
2. **Christ, by highest heaven adored,  
Christ, the everlasting Lord,  
late in time behold him come,  
offspring of the virgin's womb.  
Veiled in flesh the God-head see;  
hail th'incarnate deity,  
pleased in flesh with us to dwell,  
Jesus, our Emmanuel.  
Hark! The herald angels sing,  
"Glory to the newborn king!"**
  
3. **Hail the heav'n-born Prince of Peace!  
Hail the sun of righteousness!  
Light and life to all he brings,  
risen with healing in his wings.  
Mild he lays his glory by,  
born that we no more may die,  
born to raise us from the earth,  
born to give us second birth.  
Hark! The herald angels sing,  
"Glory to the newborn king!"**

Words: Charles Wesley, 1739, alt.  
Music: MENDELSSOHN, Felix Mendelssohn, 1840;  
arr. William Hayman Cummings, 1855  
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**\*CHARGE AND BLESSING**

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

**POSTLUDE**

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