

# 2020 Advent Devotional



November 29 – December 24, 2020

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November 29, 2020 (aka 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Advent)

Dear beloved saints, family and friends of Messiah Lutheran Church,

This resource has been created as an opportunity for you to have daily devotions during the days leading up to Christmas.

This year we will be gathering online with our Messiah community and with the Christ the King Lutheran community in Nashua.

**Sundays of Advent** our worship will be created and led by the Christ the King community (with some participation with our folks). It will be pre-recorded and streamed as a watch party on our Messiah Facebook channel ([www.facebook.com/messiahnh](http://www.facebook.com/messiahnh)) starting at 9:30 am on Sunday and will also be archived on our YouTube channel ([www.tinyurl.com/MessiahNHYouTube](http://www.tinyurl.com/MessiahNHYouTube)). If you are inclined to join us for virtual coffee hour after worship you are most welcome and can find it at [www.tinyurl.com/MessiahNHZoom](http://www.tinyurl.com/MessiahNHZoom).

**Wednesdays of Advent** our worship will be created and led by our Messiah community (with some participation with the CtK folks). It will be pre-recorded and streamed as a watch party on our Messiah Facebook channel ([www.facebook.com/messiahnh](http://www.facebook.com/messiahnh)) on December 2<sup>nd</sup> and December 16<sup>th</sup> at 7:00 pm. On December 9<sup>th</sup> it will be a live worship service that will be hosted in our Zoom room ([www.tinyurl.com/MessiahNHZoom](http://www.tinyurl.com/MessiahNHZoom)). We will not have a service on December 23<sup>rd</sup> due to its proximity to Christmas Eve.

**Christmas Eve** we will have a live worship service in our Zoom room ([www.tinyurl.com/MessiahNHZoom](http://www.tinyurl.com/MessiahNHZoom)). This service will include an opportunity for communion. This service will begin at 7:00 pm. You will need our Christmas bag which will be pre-distributed to have all you need to fully participate.

**December 27<sup>th</sup>** we will have a casual Christmas service which will include an abundance of Christmas hymns. Feel free to join us in your jammies.

We hope and pray that these devotions will be a blessing to you as we all prepare to receive our Lord in the manger and in the manger of our hearts again this year at Christmas time.

Peace, Pastor Karl

SUNDAY NOVEMBER 29  
1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Advent

**WORSHIP WATCH PARTY AT 9:30 AM**

**PARKING LOT COMMUNION AFTER WORSHIP**

**ELW 242 Awake! Awake, and Greet the New Morn**

**Happy New Year!**

And what a year the old one has been! With a global pandemic, a presidential election lasting forever, major demonstrations all over the country, and an economy in grave danger, 2020 is being seen as one of the worst years in recent memory. This Sunday in Advent marks the beginning of a new church year. The song celebrates the coming of the Lord in the midst of terrible times. May the joy in this next year be a reality for all the world!

I remember another year in my life that was unexpectedly joyous beyond my imagination. I had helped to preside at the wedding of my cousin, Karen. Karen had another cousin, Doreen, who was also invited to the wedding. Doreen and I met once again, this time as adults, and the rest, as they say, has become our family history.

Everything that year had a new aura of joy for me. My preaching improved, my pastoral visits were fresher, and the most mundane tasks took on a new pleasure. So when I look at the words of this hymn, I am reminded of the joy of that amazing year, 1975. It changed everything! The coming of Christ during Advent is seen in three ways: the first coming at his birth, the second coming at the end of time, and the new ways he comes into our hearts in the present. This is a time of new beginnings. Happy New Year!

**Prayer:** Lord, Jesus, thank you for coming into our world over 2000 years ago. You have shown us who God the Father is. We welcome you into our hearts once again in this new year. Bless us again in a time of so many troubles that so we might be a blessing to each other and to all around us. We pray in your Holy Name, everlasting and yet always new. AMEN.

**INVITE: Isaiah 55:1-10 INVITATION TO THE THIRSTY**

For two weeks now I have wrestled with these passages. There is much being said, but I kept going back to the message of Spiritual Thirst and quenching AND the INVITATION. So let me share some of my thoughts.

In today's text Isaiah summons the exiles to return and be restored. 'Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters.' (55:1). But he is not speaking of physical thirst. Rather he speaking of spiritual thirst. A deep thirst / a desire / a need for God that must be quenched.

Last night it rained hard all night. It is still raining this morning – hard! I slept lightly last night, probably because I knew I needed to finish this this morning. I have written and revised this reflection several times. Something has not been right. Since November 4<sup>th</sup>, I have been reading and reflecting on compassion...I had to do something with myself! This morning I opened a book by Joyce Rupp titled *Anchors for the Soul*. Here is what I opened to:

*Thirsting* (YUP This is what I found this morning ☺)

All night a steady rain  
fell upon the autumned earth,  
moistening every dried creek  
of the bony summer,  
rinsing what lay tattered  
and soiled in the remnants  
of yesterday.

Each drop resuscitated my own dryness,  
each wet particle from November clouds  
awakened the thirsty muse inside;  
each splash of moisture softened the hard shell  
containing imprisoned words, freed them  
to breathe life upon the stagnant  
empty pages waiting for deliverance.

Today: I thirst for what is of most benefit.

**INVITE: Matthew 11:28-30**

*<sup>28</sup> "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. <sup>29</sup> Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. <sup>30</sup> For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."*

Jesus invites all who are weary to come. As we come we will be granted rest.

Jesus invites all who are heavy-laden to come. As we come he will exchange our back-breaking loads with a yoke that is easy and a burden that is light.

This year has been exhausting. The world has been beset by a pandemic the scope of which we haven't seen for 100 years. The economic strains have pushed many into tenuous places and the worries and cares of making ends meet makes many bone-weary. The racial tensions that have been festering for years and years have reached a boiling point. Are you frayed and tired and exhausted? Come to Jesus and find rest. Are you wondering where you can find energy to face the day? Come to Jesus and find renewal. Are you restless and on edge? Come to Jesus and find peace.

This year and its burdens have been crushing. The tasks keep coming with more and more constraints and concerns as we try to live our callings including foremost calling to love God with all our hearts and souls and strengths and minds. The challenges to love our neighbors as ourselves through what we do and how we do it are crucially important and live-giving yet taxing as well.

**Prayer:** Jesus, you invite us to come. We are tired and burdened. Without your help our efforts will fail us and others and we will succumb to the crushing burdens. Give us rest and ease our loads. As you heal and restore us stir us to revive and unburden our neighbors as you guide, inspire and equip. AMEN.

WEDNESDAY DECEMBER 2  
1<sup>st</sup> Wednesday of Advent

## **WORSHIP WATCH PARTY AT 7:00 PM**

**Holden Theme: Let My Prayers Rise Up Like Incense**

### **The Rising of Our Prayers**

Holden Evening Prayer is one of my very favorite prayer services. This particular part, sung in a round, is my favorite part of the service. It is based on Psalm 141, a Psalm of David. I did not grow up in a church that used incense. It wasn't until college when I knew friends who burned incense for fun. However, during most of my time as an ordained pastor, I used the green LBW, Lutheran Book of Worship. In there was another evening prayer service that used the same Psalm, on page 142, "Evening Prayer."

There were some lines that always caught my attention. "Guard the door of my lips" reminded me of the dangers of saying stupid or hurtful things. "Strip me not of my life" reminded me of my thankfulness that Doreen, our toddler son, Joshua, and I had all survived an armed robbery in our home. This Psalm is a powerful and meaning-filled prayer. The image of our prayers rising up to God Almighty as in the smoke of incense, or as in the smoke of an extinguished candle, has given me a visual to go along with our words. "...deep in my heart may the light of your love be burning bright."

The Evening Prayer in the LBW (p. 153 – and also in the Evening Prayer of the ELW on p. 317) ends with this, my most favorite of all composed prayers in print: Lord God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN

**INVITE: Psalm 34:8-14**

<sup>8</sup> Taste and see that the LORD is good;  
blessed is the one who takes refuge in him.  
<sup>9</sup> Fear the LORD, you his holy people,  
for those who fear him lack nothing.  
<sup>10</sup> The lions may grow weak and hungry,  
but those who seek the LORD lack no good thing.  
<sup>11</sup> Come, my children, listen to me;  
I will teach you the fear of the LORD.  
<sup>12</sup> Whoever of you loves life  
and desires to see many good days,  
<sup>13</sup> keep your tongue from evil  
and your lips from telling lies.  
<sup>14</sup> Turn from evil and do good;  
seek peace and pursue it.

What are you thinking about this Advent season? Presidential election? On-line shopping? Ah yes. COVID-19. Chances are this Christmas will be like no other. The usual holiday gathering not happening due to loved ones or ourselves not being able to travel. Will we have a virtual gathering? No invitations to Christmas parties. But David's Psalm 34:8-14 is an invitation that we hopefully accept.

I can remember reading a Max Lucado writing where he said that our God is an inviting God. Mary was invited to birth His Son, the disciples were invited to fish for men, the adulterous woman was invited to start over, and Thomas was invited to touch His wounds. Yes, Our God is an inviting God. What is He inviting you to or do?

This psalm of David reminds me that during this Advent, I need to do a deep dive into my relationship with the Lord. I "taste" by feeding on the Lord through His Word and drawing nearer to Him and enjoying His presence...not just His gifts. I am blessed when I put Him first in my life. Remembering what is most important can be a struggle. I let worry sometimes prevail yet I know He will provide all that I need. He does not force me to love Him. He *invites* me to open my heart to Him. This Advent will be a time for me to reflect on the promise that He gives me what is good for me and He causes all things to work together for good (Romans 8:28). Yes, this Christmas will be like no other. I will seek and be His peace, not just wish it. Virtually or in the flesh.

**Prayer:** Dear Lord, please help me to stay focused on you and who you are—my refuge. Help me to truly and deeply internalize that sending your Son to die for me is the most important gift I could ever receive. I am invited to believe and accept eternal life. Bless all my loved ones with safe being and love of you. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, AMEN.



## **ELW 257 O Come, O Come Emmanuel v. 1**

### **Ransom Captive Israel**

This is my favorite Advent hymn. For most of my life, this was the song we sang, adding another verse each week, as we lit the Advent wreath. As a child, I wondered who “Ransom Captive Israel” was, especially what it meant to be “ransom captive.” As an adult I came to understand that the word “ransom” was not an adjective, but rather a verb. The prayer in the song is for God to come and to ransom the people of Israel who were captive to the Babylonians in an exile that lasted about 80 years. During the time of exile in Babylon, the people of Israel learned to wait for God’s blessing in a new way. During the exile, they had lost the land that God had promised them, they lost the temple that Solomon had built, they lost the kingdom of David’s dynasty, and they had lost, in short, their identity. However, with words of hope from the prophets of their time, they came to realize that being God’s people would no longer be tied to the land, the temple, nor the kingdom of David. They developed a religion that had faith in God no matter where they were, no matter where they worshiped, no matter which country in which they found themselves. In short, they discovered a world religion that has lasted thousands of years while other religions of their time in exile are all but forgotten.

Their troubled times gave birth to a hope that could not be extinguished. I take great hope in this history during times when I feel like everything is falling apart. In many ways, 2020 has been a year like that. Yet, no matter how bad things may be in our present circumstance, nationally or personally, God continues to be with us. Just as God eventually ransomed captive Israel to a new and more precious life, so too, we have in Jesus the promise of new life even in the face of death. “Rejoice, Rejoice, Emmanuel.” God is with us!

**Prayer:** Lord, God, Almighty, thank you for your presence throughout all of history, restoring your faithful people to lives of hope and love, even in the worst of circumstances. Remind us again of your love, so that we might never fall into despair. We pray in your name, one God, now and forever. AMEN

**ELW 257 O Come, O Come Emmanuel v. 2**

There is a powerful difference between knowledge and wisdom. There are the things we know (bits of trivia, factoids, tidbits from Wikipedia, assorted Google searches and watching Jeopardy!). Knowledge and trivia have their place but they only go so far. If we were to dub a cultural figure as the patron saint of knowing trivia perhaps it would be Cliff Clavin—the mailman on Cheers (or perhaps Ken Jennings). It is possible to amass all sorts of knowledge but lack what is truly needful—see 1 Corinthians 13:2.

Wisdom is very different than knowledge. Wisdom has more to do with what you do with the facts than the facts themselves. Wisdom is something lacking these days. We are stuffed to overflowing with factoids, sound bites and obscure quotations but can't always find the ways forward that reflect wisdom, discretion and prudence. What we could all use is a little help (well, a lot really) in knowing God's will and being guided along God's ways. We would be wise to call out for and celebrate wisdom.

There is another sense of the word “know” that comes into play in scripture. It is a relational word. It connotes intimacy and deep love. Sometimes it reflects sexual love as can be found in Genesis 4:1 (Adam knew Eve). The knowledge that the world purveys is not the same sort of knowledge that God has of us. Surely God knows all there is to know about us even the very number of hairs on our heads. But God's relational love transcends the trivial to be much more cherishing and intimate. God comes to embrace us and love us—see John 3:16. And not just us who are near but those who are far and cutoff and estranged too (“embracing all things far and nigh”).

Verse 2 of our hymn calls out for God's Wisdom to come. To guide and to teach us. To embrace us and others. God comes to be Emmanuel, God with us, to bring light and healing, love and acceptance.

**Prayer:** O Come, O come Emmanuel. Bring your wisdom and love. AMEN.

SUNDAY DECEMBER 6  
2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent

**WORSHIP WATCH PARTY AT 9:30 AM**

**ELW 256 Comfort, Comfort Now My People**

**What Brings You Comfort?**

At a recent virtual meeting of an interfaith group, I was in a breakout room where we were asked to reflect on the question, "What in your faith gives you comfort in difficult times?" My friend Farook, who is a Muslim from India, spoke of the oppression of the Hebrews in Egypt before the deliverance through Moses. He was speaking from stories in the Qur'an, but he might just as well have been speaking of stories in the Biblical book of Exodus. He stated that no matter how bad things have been in our lives, they are not as bad as what the Hebrews suffered, and God was still with them. Therefore, we can take heart in our troubles today.

The hymn, *Comfort, Comfort, Now My People*, has many allusions to the prophecy of Isaiah, and to John the Baptist. The references speak of God's people in many difficult times, and ends with the comforting words, "... all flesh shall see the token that God's word is never broken." I have been greatly comforted by knowing that Muslims also share many of the same comforting promises from God, told in the same stories, and by the same prophets, as I love from the Bible. While our politics often tell us to hate those who are different from us, our faith shows us ways to love each other in spite of our differences. The comforting words of the prophets were not just for the people to whom they were written around 2600 years ago, but also for the Jews, Christians, Muslims, and "all flesh." God's Word calls all humanity together in words of comfort and hope.

**Prayer:** LORD God, you are known by many different names in the Bible and in the Holy Scriptures of other people. Comfort all of those who worship you in our difficult times so that we can all be a blessing to each other and to all the world. We pray in the name of Jesus, through whom you comfort us with the knowledge that you "...so loved the world...." AMEN

**CARE: John 3:16**

*<sup>16</sup>For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*

When you saw "December 7<sup>th</sup>" did your thoughts go to Pearl Harbor Day? It is hard not to think about it since that date continues to live in infamy ("well known for a wicked act") and its anniversary is always publicized and remembered. But today, we are celebrating a different theme. Love. Advent means "coming" and His Love is coming.

How appropriate that this Advent day's Scripture is known as "the Gospel in a nutshell." The most important act of love ever. God cares. We remember it and proclaim it to the world (even viewed at sports events with someone holding the sign in the bleachers). Why? In short, it states God's entire plan for salvation. Out of God's great love for us (beyond human understanding) He sent "his one and only Son" to suffer and die for us on the cross. All we have to do is believe. By God's grace we are saved through faith.

God is love. If God loved us so much that He sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins (1 John 4:10) then we ought to love one another. That means the most despicable person I know; I am to love him. I am to see all with eyes of equality and to see them as no different than I. I am to love not just those that align to my world of thinking or feeling, but also those who do not.

The celebration of Christmas, the incarnation of Christ is how this great act of love begins; with a baby. God cares.

When I was a small kid, I never truly understood what Advent was for or how Christmas actually began God's plan of love. Christmas was good times and presents. As Christians we are called to share "the Good News" and to reflect Christ in all we do. Love one another.

**Prayer:** Heavenly Father, I am grateful for your love in sending your one and only Son to me, so that I will have eternal life. Let my heart always be filled with your Holy Spirit and with courage to be able to profess Jesus in all I do and with all I encounter. Please open the door for engaging your people with the "Good News" but Lord, please help me to love all I meet. I know it's possible because you did it for me. Through Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. AMEN.

**CARE: Isaiah 40:11**

*He will feed his flock like a shepherd;  
he will gather the lambs in his arms,  
and carry them in his bosom,  
and gently lead the mother sheep.*

This gives us a glimpse into the heart and ministry of Jesus.

Jesus calls himself the good shepherd. He knows his sheep and the sheep know him and know his voice. When his sheep stray from the flock he will leave the others and go and find the wayward one. He will carry that sheep in his bosom and restore the sheep to the fold.

Are you hungry in body or in spirit? Jesus will feed you. Jesus is the bread of life. Jesus teaches us to pray for daily bread. Jesus knows we, his flock, are hungry and he will feed and care for us as a shepherd does with the flock.

Do you need a hand up? Do you need a loving embrace? Have you wandered away and strayed from the flock? Do you need a loving father to run up the driveway and greet you with a welcoming embrace and a shout of joy and a ring and welcome home party? Jesus gathers us in his embrace and will cling to us tenaciously.

Are you feeling unloved or unlovable? Are you feeling cutoff? Are you longing for community and acceptance? Jesus carries us close to his heart. God so loved the world, held us so close to God's heart, that Jesus came as a baby and grew up to bear the cross. God loves and cherishes you.

As a loving parent God will gently and lovingly lead us all.

**PRAYER:** God heal us with your loving care. Help us continue to breathe and inhabit the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. AMEN.

WEDNESDAY DECEMBER 9  
2<sup>nd</sup> Wednesday of Advent

**ZOOM WORSHIP AT 7:00 PM**

**Holden Theme: God of Mercy Hold Us in Love**

There are many attributes of the quality of mercy. You may recall that I was a Sister of Mercy when I was a Roman Catholic nun. This word has a special place in my heart and soul.

forgiving	compassionate	patient	to spare
kind	humane	humanitarian	to pardon
gracious	lenient	tolerant	to be lenient on/to
mild	mild	easygoing	to go/be easy on
softhearted	kindly	magnanimous	to deal leniently with
tenderhearted	sympathetic		

The opposite for me is simply to be cruel and harsh.

To have mercy is to be willing to give relief from suffering. For me, to have mercy means I go beyond myself and reach out compassionately to another. And today, to think of God's mercy is to know something great and loving understands my suffering and is there holding me.

Things seem messy these days. I know there is a Power that is with us and ready to forgive us for the mess we have created. But we must ASK for MERCY! That means we must let go and receive MERCY. We must admit we need Mercy. We are hungering and thirsting for Mercy. That is the spiritual thirst we reflected on a few days ago. Maybe, just maybe, as we are aware of our suffering we can consider the suffering of others. Put down our differences. Unite in the suffering and give and receive Mercy.

**Prayer:** Loving God, hold us mercifully and help us to hold others mercifully. Let us love mercifully... AMEN.

**CARE: Matthew 23:37**

*37 "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing."*

Jesus spoke these words of lamentation as a sincere expression of His love for Jerusalem. "Jerusalem" refers to the entire nation of Israel. The leaders of the nation were guilty of rejecting the messengers of God. They even killed some of them. Jesus came to gather the people and save them. Many ignored or rejected what they were seeing and hearing. But God would not force His salvation on the people. He is actually grieving. He, of course, cares.

The image of a mother bird gathering and covering her chicks is one that resonates protection. It is a picture of love, tender care, and a willingness to die to protect others. Just like Jesus.

Have I truly accepted Jesus as my Lord and Savior? Does my life reflect that I have Him foremost in priority? Do I live it? Am I taking this time of Advent and looking within my heart and longing to know Jesus all the more? Many questions that I should answer but also know what the answers are and I feel a sense of guilt.

I have long suffered work addiction. I am asked what are my most important priorities. I respond "that's easy...God, my family, and my friends." Then I am asked to account for every hour of every day for a week. Where I spend my time is what is most important. I am embarrassed and ashamed that work came out as number 1. God and my family had a minimum amount of time, and friends did not even place. I sought counselling and I believe have successfully shifted my priorities. Trudi (my wife) has much patience, love, and her many prayers to God had an impact on me more than I can describe. Where and how do you spend your time?

**Prayer:** Lord our God, you have sown in us your Word, given us your Son. He, who was broken and died for us, is bread and life for the world. We ask you to let us find strength to tread His path, to let us be for each other as fertile as seed. Nourishing as bread and thus lead a happy life (from "Your Word is Near" by Huub Oosterhuis). Please help me to always put you first. AMEN.

**ELW 257 O Come, O Come, Emmanuel v. 3**

God came in power and might to Moses on Mount Sinai. God gave decalogue (the 10 Commandments). In those laws God gave guidance as to how to live in relationship to God (the first table of the Law) and as how to live in relationship with others (the second table of the Law).

God came in power and might and inspired awe—a deep seated fear and respect of a power much bigger than the observer. Moses came down from the mountain with a unearthly glow that scared the people. God's expectations in the law and the countenance of God's messenger were unbearable for people of Moses' time. We haven't done so well living out the Law either.

God sent another messenger: Jesus, God with us. At the Transfiguration Jesus ascended a mountain towards another holy and unbearable encounter with God. Peter, James and John encountered the meeting of Jesus, Moses and Elijah. Jesus came into the world to fulfill the Law and the Prophets. Jesus came to live the life we could not and would not.

As they descended from that holy moment Jesus told them not to speak of it until he had been killed and raised on the third day. Jesus comes to be with us and to be for us and to do what we could not and would not.

Having been freed from the Law we are set free to love God (live out the first table of the Law) with all our hearts and souls and minds and strengths. Having been freed from the Law we are set free to love our neighbors (live out the second table of the Law) as ourselves.

**Prayer:** O come, o come Emmanuel. Come be with us and come be for us. Free us from burdens and expectations we cannot bear. Free us to love God and love neighbor. AMEN.



## ELW 257 O Come, O Come, Emmanuel v. 4

O come, O come, O Branch of Jesse, free  
your own from Satan's tyranny;  
from depths of hell your people save,  
and give them vict'ry o'er the grave.

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel  
shall come to you, O Israel



Each Verse of this Advent hymn brings us through the cycle of longing, aching, yearning, and hoping. (Dare I say again *thirsting*?) Each verse starts with the soulful plea 'O Come, O Come' and is followed by the joy of refrain 'Rejoice, Rejoice'. Not only were the Israelites waiting for the coming of the Messiah, but we know he will return.

In the fourth verse we sing of the Branch or Rod of Jesse. Jesse was the son of Obed and the Grandson of Ruth and Boaz. Jesse is important in Judaism because he was the father of David, the most famous King of Israel. He is important in Christianity, in part because he is in the Old Testament and also because he is cited in the genealogy of Matthew calling Jesus the son of David, indicating his royal origin, and also son of Abraham, indicating that he was an Israelite.

*Root of Jesse* is a metaphor found in [Isaiah 11:10](#). "In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his resting place will be glorious." The term *root of Jesse* figuratively stands for the Messiah.

Reflection: The next time you are out for a walk, pick up a stick and a leaf. Look up and take in the wonder of the tree these may have fallen from. Does the tree look healthy? Does it look stressed? This year because of the dry summer we had, most of our trees are showing distress. Their roots are struggling. The leaves actually withered and dropped earlier than usual. Now look again at the branch and leaf. These have fallen from the tree not because they were 'bad' but because they have another purpose. Now they are to replenish the nutrients in the soil and nourish the tree. It is a natural cycle. In the Old Testament, we listen over and over to the waiting of people for the Messiah. And the Messiah came and died and rose from the dead...and He will come again. Hold the leaf and branch and continue walking, but come back to where you first found it and leave it there, where it belongs. Let us rest in that thought together. Amen.

SUNDAY DECEMBER 13  
3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent

**WORSHIP WATCH PARTY AT 9:30 AM**

**PARKING LOT COMMUNION AFTER WORSHIP**

**Holden Theme: Magnificat**

### **Filling the Hungry with Wondrous Things**

I have a friend from Central America who is seeking asylum in the US. She first came to the US on a medical visa to have treatments at the Shriners Burn Hospital in Boston. While in her home country, she had acid thrown into her face, arm, and other places on her body. It had been an act of domestic violence, all too common in Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador. When she first came to live in our home, she spoke very little English, and her wounds were both embarrassing and painful. While waiting for her day in court, she wanted to learn English and study for a career.

Now, several years later, she has made many friends in Massachusetts, speaks English amazingly well, has graduated from college, has most of her scars healed, is working with a pharmaceutical company packing orders, and is helping people like me to learn Spanish. She is an amazing person and has had a wonderful turn-around in her life. She is one of the many inspiring people I think of when I sing this song of Mary, mother of our Lord. Mary had very humble beginnings, but now over 2000 years later, she is still remembered for her part in the amazing story of Jesus. Clearly, as she sang, God blesses the humble of heart. I want to be a part of God's favor for those in need.

**Prayer:** Lord, Jesus, you came into our world in very humble circumstances. You preached blessing to those who were poor, meek, and oppressed. Give me the humility to put aside any claims to privilege, and the generosity to share the resources you have given to me, so that I can be a part of your favor to those in need. In your name I pray, AMEN

**GROW: 2 Timothy 1:5-7**

*<sup>5</sup>I am reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also. <sup>6</sup>For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. <sup>7</sup>For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline.*

Through Paul, God had imparted to Timothy the spiritual gift he needed for his ministry. The laying on of hands was common practice in apostolic days (Acts 6:6, 13:3). Today when we lay hands on people for the ministry, it is a symbolic act but does not necessarily impart any special spiritual gifts. It is the Holy Spirit who enables us to serve God and through Him we can overcome fear and weakness.

It was October 18<sup>th</sup>, 2018 and I was going to be ordained. The Boscawen Congregational Church was packed with friends, family, mentors, ex-offenders from my prison ministry days, NH Hospital colleagues and 14 ordained clergy who supported my faith journey. Many prayers, hymns, and testimonies were part of the evening. Then it came time for all the clergy to place their hands on me while calling on the Holy Spirit to anoint me for my ministry as chaplain. I was simply emotionally overwhelmed and feeling a deep warmth from every hand that touched me. I will never forget it. To this day I can feel the "flame" and thank God for His Holy Spirit that lives within me.

The Good News does not require laying of hands...but it does require to live through the gift of the Holy Spirit. How do you spread the Good News? How do you nourish the Flame within you? Sometimes doing a self-inventory of my faith, service, treatment of all God's children (regardless of ethnicity, political party, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, religion, or age). As many of you know I am a chaplain working part-time at a local hospital. I retreat to the hospital chapel for solace and inventory. I pray. I reflect. I call on my Lord for guidance and strength. It helps!!! By doing my inventory, I grow. No matter where you do your "inventory" take time and be thankful for the many blessings, including Spiritual gifts in your life. And it probably goes without saying...but each of us is no different in His eyes. Our eyes reflect Him (do they?).

**Prayer:** Eternal God, please lead me in my day-to-day. To make the right choices, to do Your Will. To be the kind of person you intended me to be. To always treat others with kindness, humility, compassion, and especially agape love. Help me to always acknowledge Your Holy Spirit living within me and helping me to grow. The love you gave us through Your Son Jesus. Help us to stay within His grip. AMEN.

## **GROW: Acts 17:10-11**

*As soon as it was night, the believers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea. On arriving there, they went to the Jewish synagogue. Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.*

We have just witnessed another democratic election here in the US. For months we watched the two candidates campaigning. Two candidates two very different approaches. Both looking to convince and looking to 'grow their base'. For days we watched as votes came in. The analysts predicted which counties and reporting districts leaned for one party or the other. Mailed in and in person balloting was another variable that seemed to lean one way or the other. I watched and watched and all the muscles in my body tightened up in fear.

In this passage we get a glimpse of how the early apostles campaigned to grow their base. Timothy was probably left at Philippi and Paul and Silas move ahead to Berea with a small delegation where they were to deliver contributions for the poor! We learn that one of the delegation was a local Berean (ah they used the locals to help them get their message across!) They went to a temple where they would be welcomed by enthusiastic Jews who received the message with eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. They knew people were curious, thirsty but also wanted to check for truth.

Ahhh there is the balance of power and responsibility! Not only did the messengers have a plan to grow, (who, when, where), but the Jews of Berea examined the scriptures every day (did their own fact checking). Let us stay close to the Scriptures. AND here is what I have recently put on the top of my Christmas list... a copy of the Constitution. I have asked my niece who is a lawyer to give me a copy, perhaps there is one that is annotated!

In Acts 17:10-11 we see some of what it takes to GROW.... Plan, gather people with a message, make sure the message is accurate for it will be fact checked, go to places where you know people are thirsty and wanting to learn, be prepared to be tested.

Oh God, in these TWO verses you show us so much. How come I never noticed this before? Now are we really prepared to execute to this plan?

There's more coming!

WEDNESDAY DECEMBER 16  
3<sup>rd</sup> Wednesday of Advent

## WORSHIP WATCH PARTY AT 7:00 PM

### Holden Theme: Jesus Christ You are the Light of the World

L: Jesus Christ, you are the light of the world;    **C: the light no darkness can overcome;**  
L: Stay with us now, for it is evening,            **C: and the day is almost over.**  
L: Let your light scatter the darkness.           **C: and shine within you people here.**

I think we all agree that Marty Haugen's music is simply beautiful. "Holden Evening Prayer" was written back in the 1985-86 timeframe. It is timeless. In 2020 it still resonates Jesus Christ into my heart and will continue to do so with each time I sing it. It is fitting that it starts with "Jesus Christ, you are the light of the world." (John 8:12 "When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk-in darkness, but will have the light of life.'"). We are called as Christians to reflect the light of Jesus to all we encounter. Are you shining?

A tradition that I usually use during a marriage or memorial service is to light a candle before the ceremony actually begins. My words vary but I pray that this light be a reminder that Christ is present, that we remember those that have died before us, or if a memorial, that the light remind us that the loved one that has died, is following the light of Christ to his or her eternal home. Usually, you could hear a pin drop as the candle is lit. Light is powerful. The light of Christ is the most powerful, most loving, most soul-fulfilling light that exists.

We follow Jesus Christ meaning we believe in Him and we trust Him. The outcome is life and light for the believer. We praise and acknowledge Him in that respect each time we sing the Holden Evening Prayer. The unsaved or non-believers are walking in darkness because they love darkness (John 3:17). The Gospel of John has a major message, that by inviting Christ into our hearts, people cannot comprehend the spiritual light that shines from us. They try to put it out (John1:4-5). The world has other priorities. As Christians who happen to be Lutheran (☺), we get it. We understand. We celebrate our understanding as we sing.

**Prayer:** Holy God You are my Lamp, my Light that takes away the darkness. As I continue to walk the path of Advent, let me reflect Your light to those around me, but to especially those in need. The homeless, the sick, those grieving loss, those that are jobless, and especially the children who are hungry. Push my mind, heart, body, and soul into action, that I do something as I reflect you. In Your Name, AMEN.

**GROW: Matthew 5:16**

**Others May See Your Good Works**

When I was about 7 years old, our pastor came to visit our home one evening. He told my Mom and Dad about a family that had had a fire in their home, and I was in the room listening. He was asking for some sort of financial help. At the end of his story, my Mom and Dad left for a private conversation in their bedroom while the pastor waited in the living room. I had a pretty good idea about what they were going to do, so I went to my room and took \$5.00 from my piggy bank. It wasn't much in the face of a fire, but it was a large chunk of the meager funds I had. My Dad gave something to the pastor, which I am sure was some form of money. Then I gave my \$5.00 and all the adults thanked me for my generosity. It was a very powerful good feeling!

My Mom and Dad never bragged about their generosity, they just did it. They also took the time to explain it to me. It was about the Biblical mandate to tithe, the power of generosity out of thanks for all that God had given to us, and the commitment to follow the teachings of Jesus. When it came to matters of money, my Mom and Dad were lights to my young eyes. The light of their good works showed me a very moving way to glorify our Father in heaven. The light of their love still burns bright in my memories.

**Prayer:** Heavenly Father, we give you thanks for those who have come before us to show us the light of your love. Help us to share the light that they have shown us so that we can pass this light on to those around us and to future generations. Give us the wisdom to not simply talk about our thankfulness, but to also show it with what we do. We pray in the name of Jesus, the light of the world. AMEN

## **ELW 257 O Come, O Come, Emmanuel v. 5**

There are troubling images in the Bible of people being locked out of the presence of the Lord. In the parable of the virgins and lamps five of the maidens are locked out in the outer darkness because they had not kept their lamps trimmed and burning. Others in the gospels are cast out where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. There are images of people who are in and people who are out. Judgments and misery abound.

There are sortings in scripture where sheep go one way and goats another. Wheat is brought into the granary and chaff is driven off in the wind or burned in the fire. Some are chosen and others are left behind (quite a cottage industry of books and movies has been birthed from this concept). Good fish are chosen and lesser fish are cast away.

If we are left to our own devices to earn our way into heaven (or even to try to jimmy the locks and get in on false pretenses) we will fail. The path of tempting God's righteous ire is treacherous and laden with misery. Even righteous folks like Job seem to falter in what is required to please God and to earn access to a heavenly rest. How much less likely are we than Job to "get it right".

The truth is that Jesus is the "Key of David" and can open those locks which we cannot. Dysmas, the traditionally named repentant thief, was granted access to paradise as he asked Jesus to remember him when Jesus comes and ushers in the heavenly reign of God. We would do well to learn from Dysmas, the patron saint of prisoners, locksmiths and prison guards, about how we might be assured a place in the heavenly home. It is not through earning and demanding but through petition and grace. We pray "thy kingdom come" and pray that it comes to us. Jesus proclaims that he is the gate and anyone who enters through Jesus will be saved.

**Prayer:** O come, o come Emmanuel. Set us free, Bring us home. Usher into the heavenly places you have been preparing. Help us live your will on earth as it will be done in heaven. Save us from misery and make us safe. AMEN.

## **ELW 257 O Come, O Come, Emmanuel v. 6**

Being in perpetual darkness can weigh down a soul. In the winter days when daylight is shorter and cloud cover is more frequent you can feel it in the core of your being. In the Pacific NW where cloud cover is quite common for long stretches of the year some people put banks of artificial sunlight to use to stave off depression and to help with vitamin D.

If you've ever been camping and wake up too early where it is cold and bleak you know the longing of waiting for the dawn. The warming rays of the sun bring hope and revive the chilled soul.

This verse of our hymn sneaks in the term "Sun of justice". There is more to darkness than merely physical dark and cold. There is injustice, racism, classism, sexism and all other forms of -isms that weigh down the souls of those on the receiving ends. There is a darkness that shadows our hearts and our country. When the Sun of justice appears then the soul of our nation will find warmth and renewed life. Depression and oppression will loosen their grips on our hearts.

Perhaps the most looming and ominous darkness of them all is the shadow of the grave. All of us must face our deaths. There is a marvelous, hauntingly beautiful, song by Beth Nielsen Chapman called "Sand and Water". I commend it to your listening library. One portion of the song declares: *All alone I came into this world, all alone I will someday die*. While perhaps the multiple births we know and love might take issue with the coming in alone the point is that all of us are mortal. All of us must endure our own deaths. All of us will someday die. And the darkness of the yawning grave can terrify us.

But God's Dayspring is coming. Jesus is coming in the manger again in our liturgical rhythm. Jesus is coming at the end of all time to usher in with finality the reign of God. And Jesus comes to us again and again in Word and Sacrament. In big ways and small ways. Through corporate spiritual life and in intimate revelations and epiphanies.

**Prayer:** Come Jesus drive away our fears and our forebodings. Bring life! AMEN.



SUNDAY DECEMBER 20  
4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent

**WORSHIP WATCH PARTY AT 9:30 AM**

**ELW 258 Unexpected and Mysterious**

The three verses of this hymn speak of Jesus who comes to us in ways we don't fully expect and in way we can't fully understand. God invites us into community with this surprising and self-revealing deity.

God comes to be with us and to make peace with us. Our hope and our salvation is not in our walk of perfection—we will certainly falter. We will have moments of cowardice and moments of doubt. In spite of those failings—perhaps even because of them—God comes to faithfully console us as only a loving parent can.

Michael Card in his song The Final Word talks about the incarnation of Jesus as eternity stepping into time. The second verse of the hymn that is the focus of this devotion echoes this theme as well. Mary bears the mortal, the baby Jesus, and the eternal, the second person of the Trinity. Mary's response to this powerful promise from the messenger angel is to seek out community. As God seeks to make community with us through the promised birth Mary seeks to renew community with her cousin Elizabeth who is also expecting a promised birth. And in her visit Jesus and John come into contact for the first time. John and Jesus' lives become intertwined just as our lives become inextricably connected with the divine.

As ones made in God's image we can catch glimpses of the mystery of God but cannot fully comprehend it. We will most fully realize the mystery when God restores all things at the end of time. For now our best glimpse is considering the one who comes in the manger and following him as the Holy Spirit leads and inspires.

**Prayer** Mysterious and unexpected God, draw us into you. AMEN.

**SHARE: John 14: 25-27**

*25 "All this I have spoken while still with you. 26 But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. 27 Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."*

When I was active in prison ministry, I had the opportunity to survey a large group of Christian inmates during a session on prayer. The survey was essentially asking how many specifically prayed to the Holy Spirit. As you might suspect, there was acknowledgment that prayers were primarily going to God the Father, and/or Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit did not get many comments. I do not remember the actual statistics, but it was indicative that we may not fully understand the Holy Spirit! The Blessed Trinity reminds us that all three persons are equal as one God. Jesus was clear that the Holy Spirit will take the reins to lead us to transformation and action, in essence to follow Christ.

In four days, we will be celebrating the birth of Christ. Advent has led us here. Starting December 26<sup>th</sup>, we must continue to walk as Christians and be His people in all we do. Jesus promised His followers that the "Strengtheners" would be with them forever. That includes us. Someone once said that this promise is not a lullaby for the faint-hearted. It is a blood transfusion for courageous living.

**Prayer:** Oh Holy Spirit, fan Your flame in my heart to be courageous in this world, to accept Your guidance to do what I am called to do. To love, to act, to speak, to profess You to all I meet. Help me to not get sucked in to the ways of this world but to stand tall in my faith in You. In the precious Name of Christ, AMEN.

**SHARE: Acts 2: 43-47**

Ahhh I told you there was more (see December 15). To grow we need to have a plan and to execute to the plan for growth. I spoke of our recent campaigns and election. But in Acts 17:10-11 we see some of what it takes to GROW.... Plan, gather people with a message, make sure the message is accurate for it will be fact checked, go to places where you know people are thirsty and wanting to learn, be prepared to be tested. And I said there is more!

In Acts 2: 43-47 we see how it can happen and learn more about what we must do.

*Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. <sup>44</sup> All the believers were together and had everything in common. <sup>45</sup> They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. <sup>46</sup> Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, <sup>47</sup> praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.*

Right away the word AWE strikes me. When we are in AWE it is usually because we are experiencing something that exceeds our usual experience. Something out of the ordinary causes us to pause and wonder. For me it is something that humbles me and again and again helps me understand that there is a God of love. There is Love. I think we all have had those moments when something beautiful happened or we accomplished something and exceeded our own expectations. Pause and think of some of those moments...

Now imagine how the apostles were feeling as they together saw many things happening around them that brought on AWE. They knew something far greater than themselves was at play. There were miracles and signs just as Jesus performed that were confirmation that what they were saying and doing was true.

This was the beginning of a new community of faith that we now know as Christianity! What brought them together was the teachings of a man named Jesus. What held them together was their AWE, faith and fellowship. They gathered publicly in the temple and privately in their homes and dare I say in their own practice of personal prayer. These three dimensions are necessary to any community. Open the doors and welcome all; keep a few friends and kindred spirits close with whom we can share, and find time alone. God will be present and will do wonders!

It is worth noting that the disciples were willing to give everything. They saw needs, physical and spiritual, and they gave of what they had and gave of their time and presence. Their pure intent must have been obvious to others, for their numbers multiplied. And this is our call to action: to SHARE God's love...

WEDNESDAY DECEMBER 23  
4<sup>th</sup> Wednesday of Advent

**NO WORSHIP TONIGHT, PLEASE JOIN US ON CHRISTMAS EVE AT 7:00 PM**

**ELW 257 O Come, O Come, Emmanuel v. 7**

**Jesus, the True Cornerstone**

The cornerstone is traditionally the first stone that is laid in the construction of a new building. Its location, position, elevation, and orientation are all important for the rest of the building to be lined up properly according to the plan. Architecturally, the cornerstone unites the plan of the rest of the building. This one stone is so Important!

In late October, Doreen and I took a hike on the Keystone Arch Bridge Trail in Western Massachusetts. Along its path are several stone bridges that were built about 150 years ago for what was then the longest railroad in the world, from Boston to Albany. It crossed through the Berkshires and proved that it was possible to route a train through the mountains. The bridges and the railway were designed by engineer Major George Washington Whistler. (He was married to the famous Whistler's Mother.) The strength of the bridges, built with no concrete nor iron supports, is in their keystone construction. They are so strong that trains still use them to this day. We saw several trains pass over them during our five mile walk.

Who is your cornerstone, or your keystone? Our hymn proclaims Jesus as our Emmanuel, "God with us." It is He who is the chief cornerstone, the King of nations. Oh, that nations could premise their very existence on the care of their citizens and on good relations with all their neighbors around the world! The longing of our hearts for justice and peace are met in the power and strength of Jesus' example and teachings.

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, we welcome you into our hearts as we celebrate your coming into our world. Be our cornerstone and our keystone so that our lives will be strong in their orientation toward your love. With that strength, help us to persevere in our love for those around us so that all nations might be united in a common respect and peace. We pray in your name, as our chief cornerstone. AMEN

THURSDAY DECEMBER 24  
Christmas Eve

**ZOOM WORSHIP TONIGHT 7:00 PM**

**ELW 257 O Come, O Come, Emmanuel v. 8**

Same song, last verse. A little more weighty, but same as the first.

As we draw the close of this Advent devotional we return to the same words that we first heard on December 4<sup>th</sup>. Perhaps they take on a little more gravitas having lingered with the thoughts and prayers of the intervening pages.

During our Wednesday Taizé services we would spend time reflecting and reacting to a traditional Christian symbol (a cross, a dove, a butterfly, a Jesus fish(ἰχθυσ), etc., etc.). It would then be followed by a brief reflection about the symbol. That portion of the service would conclude with another time of silence to reflect and react to the symbol under consideration. The hope was that the later reflection would be deepened and enhanced through the lingering and pondering done together.

The intention of this devotional is much the same. We started knowing we were entering Advent in preparation for Christmas. We perhaps have already heard strains of O Come, O Come, Emmanuel during our days and our devotions. But then we took some time to go deeper. Thank you for lingering with us through these devotions. Our hope and prayer is that your reflection on O Come, O Come, Emmanuel and the other themes of this devotional have drawn you to deeper and more enhanced readiness for celebrating Christmas.

*Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel (God with us) has come to us, O Israel.*

Perhaps we have been mourning in lonely exile (because of the COVID, because of separation within our families, because of separation from our families and friends, because of sin, death and the devil). We have been waiting for the Son of God to appear. Jesus has. REJOICE!

**Blessed Christmas!!!**



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