

**CHRIST CHURCH
COMMUNITY
2020
ADVENT
DEVOTIONAL**

Greetings to You in Christ's Name!

This year has been full of grief in the life of the Church and the world in general. The COVID-19 pandemic, like death, has one power. It has an insatiable appetite for taking things away. It has taken memories, opportunities, resources, traditions, and in the case of 250,000+ Americans, life itself. The pandemic has caused us to part with many beloved rituals and meaningful practices.

This year members of Christ Church and our friends have collaborated to create a new tradition that cannot be taken away from us. Our collective work has resulted in a community crowdsourced advent devotional. These writings are the sacred fruits of our labor. They include reflections on scriptures from people of diverse faith backgrounds and walks of life.

It is my prayer that you find hope, peace, joy, and love in these reflections. May the Spirit that surpasses all understanding be with you this advent season and prepare you for the birth of the Christ-Child.

With gratitude for you,

Rev. Dan Stark,
Pastor, Christ Church UCC, Milwaukee, WI.



WEEK TWO
PEACE

PEACE | Luke 1:77-79

*77 to give his people the knowledge of salvation
through the forgiveness of their sins,
78 because of the tender mercy of our God,
by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven
79 to shine on those living in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the path of peace."*

The above words were spoken by Zechariah, John the Baptist's father, prophesying about his infant son's relationship to the coming messiah. It speaks of salvation, forgiveness of sin, God's grace and the coming of Jesus. This passage points towards Christ as the one to "guide our feet onto the path of peace." Today we focus on PEACE one of the four words (HOPE, PEACE, LOVE JOY) often associated with our Advent journey.

Peace can be thought of as a destination. However, the pathway to peace often is riddled with conflict and tension. Justice and righteousness are not carved out, in our world, merely by visions of calm and tranquility. Jesus' teachings and example of service and sacrifice bares that out. If inner tranquility is the only path of peace that we take, then we may not have fully basked in the "shine" provided by the "rising Sun" (Son).

However, if we follow Christ's example, the peace we experience leads not only to a better world, but places us in a proper relationship with our God. The peace of salvation, forgiveness, and mercy will then be within our grasp.

During this Advent season where is the pathway to peace leading you? Just what is it about Christ's life that is directing your feet to the pathway of peace? Possibly it is in service to one another, care for the marginalized or downtrodden, or working towards a healthier world. Wherever that path is leading you the destination is shalom, but the journey is wrought with the hard work of becoming more Christ-like than we were the step before.

Gracious God, guide our feet into the path of justice and righteousness with peace during this Advent season. May your peace come to reign within us and over our entire world today and forever. Amen.

Jim Wick, Christ Church.

COMFORT | Isaiah 40:1-4

*Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.*

² *Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the LORD's hand
double for all her sins.*

³ *A voice cries out:*

*"In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.*

⁴ *Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.*

"Comfort, comfort my people" How many need to hear God's words spoken through the prophet Isaiah?

Christians know Advent as a time to remember and prepare for the birth of Jesus. By definition, Advent is the arrival of a notable person, thing or event; the first season of the Christian church year, leading up to Christmas and including the four preceding Sundays. At Christ UCC, we are blessed to walk through Advent with others, lighting the Advent candles representing Hope, Peace, Love and Joy. Advent is candles and connections, a sermon series, Advent songs, decorations, preparing for Christmas concerts, handbells, children's programs and so much more. Who remembers the children's treat bags with peanuts in the shell, an apple and a few sweets? A favorite Advent activity of mine took place at Christ UCC last year when we colored the Advent posters, bringing together people and conversations. I even stepped out of my comfort zone and learned how to play handbells.

Advent can become a busy time in our lives, especially if we lose focus the importance of the journey we are on to the birth of Jesus. We need to reach out to people who are feeling very removed from God's comfort. Look and you will find the homeless, parents with a terminally ill child, someone in an abusive relationship, those living with loss, illness, struggling to make ends meet, and those living with fear, sorrow and despair. I was a very young child when my brother was serving in Vietnam and I still remember feeling my mother's sadness at Christmas. I don't know what comfort she received from God and from others because it was a conversation that we never had.

Remember to give hope, peace, love and joy wherever you go. Extend comfort and you will receive comfort and so much more. Let God's words of comfort come to you and extend to others: "Here is your God!"

Barb Wells, Christ Church.

STAND | Isaiah 40:5-8

*Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."*

⁶ *A voice says, "Cry out!"*

And I said, "What shall I cry?"

*All people are grass,
their constancy is like the flower of the field.*

⁷ *The grass withers, the flower fades,
when the breath of the LORD blows upon it;
surely the people are grass.*

⁸ *The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will stand forever.*

When I was a kid, we had a white birch tree in our front yard. I wished that I could look out the picture window every day for the rest of my life and see it. And that if I didn't live there for that long that it would be there to enjoy for everyone who lived there after me. But not being the hardiest tree in our yard and between a lightning strike, the great ice storm of 1976, and my dad expediting it's demise with a chainsaw, it was gone forever. In Isaiah 40:8, the prophet Isaiah says that grass and flowers, like trees, are but a fleeting occurrence. Some other grass and flowers might grow later but they too will eventually die. A bouquet of flowers given to commemorate a holiday might live on in the recipient's memory, but the physical flower is here for but a few days, wilting away as quickly as it bloomed. Human life is like grass and flowers. It is an ephemeral occurrence. But fortunately for us, it is not eternal nothingness that awaits. What awaits is an everlasting and magnificent afterlife, courtesy of God. Isaiah's stark comparison between the fleeting and the forever gives us hope.

Heavenly father, thank you for allowing us this time on our beautiful planet called Earth. Thank you for family, friends and the joy of a nice tree or bouquet of flowers. Thank you for Your written Word. It is through it that we can learn to be better people and prepare ourselves for the ultimate glory in Heaven. I pray that I continue to understand your Word and abide by it more daily. In your son Jesus' name, Amen.

Chuck Terlinden, Christ Church.

LIGHT | John 1:5

"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

For most of my life the brightness of the sun and/or light fixtures have bothered me. They can trigger a migraine if I just catch a spot of light through a blind.

Over time I sometimes wondered when God was referred to as light and light physically had a harmful affect on me if I had done something wrong. If light was so good why did God let it affect me so badly? Did this mean I couldn't really get close to him? Was I not his child?

As I've grown in my relationship with God I've learned that I didn't do anything wrong. I am his child. "Light shining in the darkness" isn't necessarily literal. While I am more comfortable in low light or no light I am thankful that God comes as a light of hope and support in my times of darkness. Not literal darkness, but times of sadness, despair, frustration, and fear.

I can feel God's "light" not by his bright presence but by his calming and loving presence. He listens to my prayers and answers them, lifts me up and blesses me by putting so many wonderful people in my life.

Dear Lord, I thank you for being a light in my time of darkness in a way that works for me.

Debbie Behling, Christ Church.

WATER | Mark 1:4-8

And so, John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. ⁶ John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ And this was his message: "After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. ⁸ I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.

God speaks to us in Water Stories. Interestingly, the scriptures abound in stories involving water beginning with creation, Noah and the Ark, the Hebrew's exodus from Egypt and the crossing of the Red Sea, Jesus' first miracle of turning water into wine, Christ's walking on water, Jesus and the Samaritan women at the well and many others.

Today's scripture incorporates John the Baptist's use of water as a symbolic cleansing of his Judean followers for the forgiveness of their sins. It is a means of repenting, that is, turning away from sin, and asking for forgiveness. John uses this act as a means of acknowledging the coming messiah. He contrasts his act of baptism with water to their baptism with the Holy Spirit by the one for whom John is preparing the way. This passage foretells that the ultimate baptism/cleansing/immersion will be with the Holy Spirit and it will be performed by Jesus the Christ.

Hopefully, during this Advent season, we, like the Judeans, recognize our need to turn away from our old ways and prepare to be immersed in the Holy Spirit by Jesus, our Lord, and Savior.

Gracious and glorious God, in this Advent season we too look forward to celebrating the birth of the "one more powerful than I. Amen.

Jim Wick, Christ Church.

MESSENGER | Mark 1:1-3

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.² As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight...'"

Why is the opening of Mark's Gospel an advent reading when he doesn't even mention the birth of Jesus? I mean, Jesus didn't just miraculously show up as a thirty-something, but Mark gets down to business with such haste he doesn't even mention the nativity. Mark begins with a quote from Isaiah and then shifts to John the Baptist crying out in the wilderness with his camel-hair undergarments and steady diet of bugs and wild-honey. There is no world-building like we have in Luke about the Emperor or Governor. There is no talk about a census or a reason for Mary and Joseph returning to Bethlehem. There isn't a lengthy genealogy about Jesus' ancestors and royal lineage like we have in Matthew's Gospel. We don't hear about angels, shepherds, animals, Mary, Joseph, or anybody who would have been at Jesus' birth. Why was Mark in such a danged hurry that he had to skip over the birth of Jesus Christ? He uses the word "immediately" over 40 times, for crying out loud!

The evangelist Mark is like that friend who tells you like it is. Mark has the most simplistic and rudimentary language of all the evangelists. He is in a hurry to tell us the good news about Jesus because he believed the end of the world was dawning and needed to hear about Jesus as soon as possible. Mark gives us the bare necessities about Jesus Christ. In a sense, the way Mark's Gospel delivers the good news is kind of like what Christmas will be for each of us this year due to the pandemic. Because our world is on edge, Christmas will be different this year. We will need to keep things simple. We need to stick to the fundamentals and do it like Mark.

How will you make Christmas still feel like Christmas this year? Will you listen to Silent Night on YouTube and light a candle at home? Will you watch a *The Grinch*, *A Christmas Story*, or a Lifetime Christmas movie marathon? Will you decorate a tree or hang up stockings? Will Santa Zoom with the kids or grandkids? Are you going to make cookies? Or will you put up a nativity scene in your yard or windowsill? We may not be able to do everything we want during the pandemic, but like Mark and the good news of Jesus, we can still provide the foundation to keep the good news good and Christmas still Christmas.

*God of the bare bones,
Help us be OK with keeping its simple this year,
Be with us in our celebrations, big and small,
And remind us that Christ comes anyways.
Amen.*

-Rev. Dan Stark, Christ Church.

GLORY | Luke 2:13-14

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ¹⁴ Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

Growing up, every Advent season I can picture my family - mom, dad, and two older brothers and I - opening the little perforated windows on the paper Advent calendars we had in our dining room after dinner. We had 5 or 6 calendars, all of which we opened and read. There was one in particular that I loved the most (so much so that it exists barely intact today, faded light blue with plenty of scotch tape holding it together and is more an heirloom (not monetarily, but sentimentally) on display now than an in-use calendar.

For some reason when we got to the day on the calendar with this verse, I was annually enraptured because of the sheer joy that exuded from the text. I had a fondness for angels, heavily influenced by my mom and her fascination with them, the guardian variety to be most specific.

This text from Luke sums up perhaps what I love most about the Advent season - the feeling of anticipation. "And suddenly, He's here!" Here is the proclamation of everything we are celebrating, building towards, and when I hear these words I feel a mix of both fantastical and real-life rejoicing. I try to emotionally straddle between the fantasy and real-life part of Christmas for as long as I am able - there is hardly a greater feeling than the birth of a baby and seeing the joy from the arrival of one life being spread to so many people.

Gracious and good God, let us feel the excitement of You throughout and beyond the season of Advent. Let Your goodness shine through us so we may allow others to experience the feeling of anticipation for You. Amen.

Molly Pufall Brown, Christ Church.