



*Walking By the Light
Advent 2019*

*FUMC Gordon
Cedar Springs UMC*



The Light

We long for a king
To free us as He brings,
The light of His love
And Hope from above.
And our Hope is for His Light.

We need His holy Peace
Where men's hatred will cease,
And men walk with the Son
In the Peace He has won.
And there's Peace in His light.

Joy is there as we wait
On the light of the Christ-child so great.
And his light can bless the soul
With Joy as we are made whole.
And we will Joyfully walk in the light.

Greater love has never been seen
By man, for our God would bring,
The light of the love of His Son
Will never end and never be done.
And His love brightens our Light.

Sunday, December 1 | The Light of Hope

*“Come, house of Jacob, let’s walk by the Lord’s light.”
- Isaiah 2:5*

The season of Advent begins in a kind of darkness. Yes, the sun rises on the first Sunday of Advent. Yes, the lights in the sanctuary and throughout the church will be turned on. The lights to the Christmas tree will be plugged in, and the candles that sit on the Communion table will be lit. But, in the midst of all of this stands a wreath with four blue candles on the edge and one white one in the middle. And, as our worship begins none of these candles are lit. None of their wax has dripped. None of the oil inside them has been burned. To an observer, it appears as if someone has forgotten to light them.

However, I can assure you that no one has neglected their duty. On the first Sunday of Advent in the first few moments of our worship, the candles are meant to be unlit. This wreath at the forefront of our worship area is meant to be in darkness. We are supposed to find ourselves asking, where is the light? Because, surely the light is coming. Or, at least we hope the light is coming. And then, finally the light does come.

One candle is lit and suddenly the entire space seems a little bit brighter, because it is. Suddenly it seems like the darkness is pushed aside ever so slightly, because it is. Suddenly it seems like we can have slightly more confidence in our tendency towards hope, because we can.

Friends, Advent is a season of anticipation, because it is first and foremost a season of hope. We have hope that the light is always going to shine. We have hope that God’s kingdom is coming. And, we have hope that at the end of this season, the Christ child will be born in a manger once again. And so, as Advent begins, let us walk by the light of hope.

Prayer: *God of hope, you illumine our darkness always. In our moments of doubt, when it seems like all is lost, when darkness extends as far as we can see, help us to hold onto the hope that your light is coming. Amen.*

Monday, December 2

But nobody knows when that day or hour will come, not the heavenly angels and not the Son. Only the Father knows. - Matthew 24:36

In the days leading up to the crucifixion, Jesus is out teaching and preaching, as crowds gather around him to listen. On first glance these opening remarks about the coming of the Human One are not incredibly helpful or hopeful.

“How are we supposed to plan accordingly, Jesus?” “My calendar is getting pretty full lately, are you sure you can’t provide a date and time?” “I’m a planner, and the coming of the Human One is a pretty big deal—it would be really nice to have time to plan ahead and schedule.”

These are reasonable responses to Jesus’ teaching for us to have or ask. But, as we begin to walk by the light of hope this week, it becomes apparent that we hold on to hope in something for which we can neither plan nor schedule, and perhaps this is the point of hope. Because, if we could plan or schedule it, then it might actually be certainty instead of hope. And, certainty is much less mysterious.

The mystery of the hope we find and enter into during Advent is hopeful precisely because it is not bound by time or dates on the calendar. Yes, we know that Christmas Eve is coming on December 24, just like it does every year. And, yes, we know that the Christmas story will be read, just like it is every year. However, each time this date rolls around, we are somehow different. Our situation, our experiences, our understanding, and also the world around us have changed or been added to each time we arrive at the month of December. This change and transition is somehow always filled with both the good and the bad—with relief and fear, with joy and sorrow, with comfort and with doubt.

And, somehow we always manage to cling onto the hope that our God in Christ Jesus is going to show up, causing our light to shine even brighter and our darkness to fade.

Prayer: *Holy One, No matter the situation in which I find myself, help me to have hope that you and your light will come into the midst of it this Christmas. Amen.*

Tuesday, December 3

As you do all this, you know what time it is. The hour has already come for you to wake up from your sleep. Now our salvation is nearer than when we first had faith. The night is almost over, and the day is near. So let's get rid of the actions that belong to the darkness and put on the weapons of light. - Romans 13:11-12

Just before these verses in the thirteenth chapter of Romans, the Apostle Paul lists out a number of duties and expectations of those who call themselves Christians. These duties and expectations include things like placing oneself under the authority of the government wherever one lives, doing the right thing, paying taxes, and following the Law, including the 10 Commandments. Paul ends this section by saying that all of these things can be summed up in one action: “You must love your neighbor as yourself.”

The “all this” that begins today's scripture reading is about love. We will talk more about love in the coming weeks, but today let us reflect on what love has to do with hope.

As people who follow Jesus, we are not in the business of loving our neighbors simply for the sake of loving our neighbors. The myriad ways in which we love in the world have a purpose: that purpose is salvation—which is the divinely inspired hope that each and every one of us and the world in which we live is being made perfect in love. Through our simple acts of love, each day we are taking another step in the direction of becoming more and more of the person whom God has created us to be.

In a world in which it is all too easy to think that our individual and small acts of love make no difference or that the problems of this world are too large to overcome, it requires hope in order to trust that each time we love our neighbor—each time we feed or clothe someone, each time we include someone who has been left out, or even each time we simply offer a stranger a smile—we are experiencing another act of salvation, and one by one we are all being made perfect in love.

Prayer: *God of our salvation, with each act of loving my neighbor help me to hold onto the hope that myself and the world around me are being saved. Amen.*

Wednesday, December 4 | Mid-Week Prayer and Praise

I rejoiced with those who said to me, "Let's go to the Lord's house!" Now our feet are standing in your gates, Jerusalem! Jerusalem is built like a city joined together in unity. That is where the tribes go up—the Lord's tribes! It is the law for Israel to give thanks there to the Lord's name, because the thrones of justice are there—the thrones of the house of David! Pray that Jerusalem has peace: "Let those who love you have rest. Let there be peace on your walls; let there be rest on your fortifications." For the sake of my family and friends, I say, "Peace be with you, Jerusalem." For the sake of the Lord our God's house I will pray for your good. - Psalm 122

The Psalms are our words to and about God. When we find it difficult to come up with the right words, the Psalms give us the words for prayer and for praise. Instead of reading a devotional today, take time to read this Psalm. Which words or phrases stick out to you? Where do you see hope in this reading? Use the space below to journal or draw your reflections.

Thursday, December 5

Therefore, stay alert! You don't know what day the Lord is coming. But you understand that if the head of the house knew at what time the thief would come, he would keep alert and wouldn't allow the thief to break into his house. Therefore, you also should be prepared, because the Human One will come at a time you don't know. - Matthew 24:43-44

It has been a sure thing for me over the last several years on Christmas Eve, and each time it has caught me off guard. At the previous church I served every year on Christmas Eve the opening hymn to our worship services would be, “O Come, All Ye Faithful.” This is a fine Christmas Eve hymn. It usually isn't at the top of my playlist during the Advent and Christmas seasons (I am more of an “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” fan), but I enjoy singing it on Christmas Eve.

Without fail on Christmas Eve, as the first stanza of “O Come, All Ye Faithful” was being sung, and the light to light the Christ candle was being processed down the aisle of the Sanctuary, I usually found myself with a little tear in my eye. I never knew why. I had helped plan the worship service. I knew what to expect. I knew what was coming.

Perhaps it was due to the exhaustion of the season with all of its events and details to attend. Or similarly, perhaps it was because I knew that there was nothing left to do; the rest of the service would fall into place or it wouldn't, and either way I would get to go home and rest once it was over. But, perhaps even still, it was because after all of that staying alert to the details and needs of the season, the Human One came, as promised, like a thief in the night comes to pastors and church workers in the same way that the Human One comes to each and every one of us in this season.

This is a new year and a new church, and I am unsure about what to expect when we gather for worship on Christmas Eve; nonetheless, perhaps the Human One will appear all the same—or, at least, I hope.

Prayer: *God of unexpected moments, we hope that you will catch us off guard this season, just like you always do. Amen.*

Friday, December 6

God will judge between the nations, and settle disputes of mighty nations. Then they will beat their swords into iron plows and their spears into pruning tools. Nation will not take up sword against nation; they will no longer learn how to make war. - Isaiah 2:4

Our hearts are collectively broken with each act of horrendous and senseless violence that makes its way across our news screens. With each mass shooting, each suicide, each skirmish, each act of terror at home or somewhere across the world, we find ourselves asking, why? When will this end? How much longer do we have to wait to stop these kinds of things from happening?

As often as violence of this nature occurs, it can be tempting to turn off the news, to switch to another channel, or find something else to read instead. It can be tempting to give ourselves permission not to worry about or focus on these kinds of things because they didn't affect us. And, it can be tempting to devote our time to the comments section of our preferred media trying to persuade one another about how best to respond, going back and forth with the same talking points each time.

However, friends, as people who follow Jesus, we are called to respond to violence. We are called to pay attention to the news. We are called to care about others, especially when the news of the day doesn't affect us. And, we are called to rise above the kind of discourse that pits us against each other, and instead, take hold of our neighbor's hand, regardless of who they are or what their beliefs may be, spend time praying together, and then with our hands still united put our prayers into action.

We do this because, at the end of the day, we are a people of hope, and we have hope that one day we will beat our swords into iron plows and our spears into pruning tools. Nation will not take up sword against nation; we will no longer learn how to make war.

Prayer: *God of all peoples, we pray for the day on which our hope becomes reality, while also praying that each day we put our prayers into action. Amen.*

Saturday, December 7

Instead of reading a devotional today, take time to reflect on this past week. Which scriptures and devotionals stood out to you? Which ones challenged or comforted you? As we continue to walk by the light together, for what do you hope? Use the space below to journal or draw your reflections.

Sunday, December 8 | The Light of Love

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the desert of Judea announcing, “Change your hearts and lives! Here comes the kingdom of heaven!” - Matthew 3:1-2

The final anthem in this year’s Gordon Chancel Choir Cantata ends with a medley of spirituals typically sung at Christmas time. The most familiar hymn in the medley is, “Go, Tell It on the Mountain,” though the others are just as fun. I will confess that as I was first beginning to practice this piece with the choir, I was a bit surprised to find the hymn, “This Little Light of Mine,” included in the mix. This is not typically a Christmas song. It is found in a different section of our United Methodist Hymnal. It makes no reference to the Christmas story or to any elements of the Advent or Christmas seasons. And yet, it is a perfect song to sing this time of year, especially on this second Sunday of Advent. The first stanza is as follows:

*This little light of mine,
I'm gonna let it shine.
This little light of mine,
I'm gonna let it shine.
This little light of mine,
I'm gonna let it shine,
let it shine, let it shine, oh let it shine.*

On this second Sunday of Advent, just as we always do, we meet the character of John the Baptist. John was a cousin of Jesus, born just a few months before. His birth is only fully told in the Gospel of Luke; however he comes early on preparing the way in all four Gospel narratives. John isn’t the kind of person you want to invite to your dinner table. He’s almost certainly not the first person you would pick to be your friend. And yet, he never fails to come into Christ’s story and our story shining his own light and calling us to change our hearts and our lives so that we might shine ours.

Prayer: *God of love and light, help us to change our hearts and our lives once again so that the little light we carry might shine even brighter. Amen.*

Monday, December 9

*A shoot will grow up from the stump of Jesse; a branch will sprout from his roots.
- Isaiah 11:1*

It's called "Remnant Theology." It appears all throughout the book of Isaiah, its first, second, and third parts, from Israel living and thriving in its own land, to exile, and back again, in the years and seasons after the great kings: David and Solomon, when God kept sending prophets, and still God's people keep walking around unsure if things between them and their God are over or still continuing.

And so, through the Prophet Isaiah God continues to say to God's people that the promise is still in tact. God will continue to lead and be with God's people. They may suffer hardship, their numbers may dwindle, but still in a moment yet to come, God will anoint another. They will be of the same blood and lineage of King David. The promise was never broken. God's love remained steadfast.

Friends, even to this day, God's promise is never broken—God's love remains steadfast in our lives and in the world around. In this season of Advent we wait anew in the same way that God's people continued to wait for the coming of the Christ child and the coming of God's kingdom at Christmas. Our ability and desire to wait is a sign that we know and have been convinced of the love that God has for us.

And so, as a new week of Advent begins may we continue to wait for the one who is love, the one who loves us and calls us to love, the one who no matter how long it takes or what happens will shoot forth from the remnant that remains steadfast.

Prayer: *God of steadfast love, may my waiting today and this week serve as a reminder of who you are and of your great love, because why would I remain and why would I keep waiting unless I was assured that indeed you remain and you keep waiting for me? Amen.*

Tuesday, December 10

The ax is already at the root of the trees. Therefore, every tree that doesn't produce good fruit will be chopped down and tossed into the fire. I baptize with water those of you who have changed your hearts and lives. The one who is coming after me is stronger than I am. I'm not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. The shovel he uses to sift the wheat from the husks is in his hands. He will clean out his threshing area and bring the wheat into his barn. But he will burn the husks with a fire that can't be put out." - Matthew 3:10-12

We were introduced to John the Baptist on Sunday, and today we get a little bit more of the story. These verses confirm what was mentioned earlier about John—that he probably isn't a person with whom we would like to spend a great deal of time. His mention of axes, chopping, tossing, and fire is not exactly the most cheerful talk in the Bible. But, John does exactly what he is supposed to do at Advent. As the first person that we know of to ever invoke the practice or the word, John reminds us of our Baptism.

In The United Methodist Church, each time someone is Baptized or Confirmed into the faith, these questions are always asked in the liturgy: Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of your sin? Will you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in all the forms they present themselves? And, do you confess Jesus Christ as your savior, put your whole trust in Christ's grace, and promise to serve Christ as your Lord in union with the church, which Christ has opened to people of all ages, nations, and races?

If you don't remember, you said yes to these questions. And, in doing so, you followed in the long line of individuals going back all the way to John the Baptist who allowed water to touch their foreheads as a sign that they are loved by God, and are therefore engaged in the great work that God has for us to do. Just like the words of John the Baptist, the work of our Baptism can sometimes be uncomfortable. Nevertheless, it is our work to do.

Prayer: *God of life and water, on this day we remember our Baptism and give thanks, and in so doing are reminded that our waiting this Advent cannot be idle, because you have work for us to do. Amen.*

Wednesday, December 11 | Mid-Week Prayer and Praise

*God, give your judgments to the king. Give your righteousness to the king's son. Let him judge your people with righteousness and your poor ones with justice. Let the mountains bring peace to the people; let the hills bring righteousness. Let the king bring justice to people who are poor; let him save the children of those who are needy, but let him crush oppressors! Let the king live as long as the sun, as long as the moon, generation to generation. Let him fall like rain upon fresh-cut grass, like showers that water the earth. Let the righteous flourish throughout their lives, and let peace prosper until the moon is no more. Bless the Lord God, the God of Israel—the only one who does wondrous things! Bless God's glorious name forever; let his glory fill all the earth
Amen and Amen! - Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19*

The Psalms are our words to and about God. When we find it difficult to come up with the right words, the Psalms give us the words for prayer and for praise. Instead of reading a devotional today, take time to read this Psalm. Which words or phrases stick out to you? How is this Psalm calling you to love? Use the space below to journal or draw your reflections.

Thursday, December 12

So welcome each other, in the same way that Christ also welcomed you, for God's glory. I'm saying that Christ became a servant of those who are circumcised for the sake of God's truth, in order to confirm the promises given to the ancestors, and so that the Gentiles could glorify God for his mercy. - Romans 15:7-9a

When it comes to Christmas shopping, the annual act of buying gifts for friends and loved ones, some people begin several months before Christmas, others are excited by launching their shopping early in the morning the day after Thanksgiving, others begin sometime in early to mid-December, and still, others like me typically begin one or two days before Christmas. As with many things that I do, I do my Christmas shopping closer to the last-minute than the first-minute. This isn't because I haven't planned or made good use of my time. It is simply because I almost always do my best work under pressure (or, this is at least what I have convinced myself to be true).

In today's reading from Paul's letter to the Romans, Paul is making reference to something that we most vividly remember Jesus doing at the last-minute: serving. This isn't to say that Jesus wasn't a servant throughout his entire life and ministry. There are a multitude of stories about which Paul may be thinking. But, we know that on his last night before the crucifixion, Jesus served his disciples a meal—his last meal. He took bread and said this is my body and every time you break it do so in remembrance of me. And, he took wine and said every time you drink it remember me.

It's true that the time to expound even more so on that story isn't for another four months when we get to Holy Week at the end of Lent. But, in just twelve more days, hours after I have completed my Christmas shopping, in the last minutes of Advent, we will gather around a table and somehow find ourselves able to remember both the first night and the last night of the newborn baby in a manger, knowing that in order to become like this one called Jesus, we must serve.

Prayer: *God of body and blood, with all that I am and all that I have help me to serve from my first minute to my last. Amen.*

Friday, December 13

The wolf will live with the lamb, and the leopard will lie down with the young goat; the calf and the young lion will feed together, and a little child will lead them. - Isaiah 11:6

One of my favorite hymns of this season is the great Charles Wesley hymn, “Come, Thou-Long Expected Jesus.” Historians date this hymn to the year 1744. This was an exciting time in the life of the Methodist movement. The first societies—worshipping communities—of Methodists across England were being formed. Charles’ brother, John was deploying preachers to serve these societies. Methodist leaders were entertaining questions such as, “What do we teach and how do we teach it?” And, perhaps most importantly of all, in this same year, John Wesley developed the General Rules for Methodists of: Doing No Harm; Doing Good; and Attending to the Ordinances of God (translated, Staying in Love with God).

I can’t help but think that all of this was at the forefront of Charles’ mind when he penned these words in the second stanza:

*Born thy people to deliver,
born a child and yet a King,
born to reign in us forever,
now thy gracious kingdom bring.
By thine own eternal spirit
rule in all our hearts alone;
by thine all sufficient merit,
raise us to thy glorious throne.*

Surely in Charles’ mind, God’s people, particularly the ones called Methodist were closer than they had ever been to being raised to God’s “glorious throne.” Perhaps this was so, but perhaps they still had a long way to go, as exactly one century later in 1844, the Methodist Church in America split into two over slavery.

Prayer: *God of love and justice, continue to deliver us and led by the Christ child raise us to that glorious throne where we all live as one. Amen.*

Saturday, December 14

Instead of reading a devotional today, take time to reflect on this past week. Which scriptures and devotionals stood out to you? Which ones challenged or comforted you? As we continue to walk by the light together, who is God calling you to love? Use the space below to journal or draw your reflections.

Sunday, December 15 | The Light of Joy

The desert and the dry land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom like the crocus. They will burst into bloom, and rejoice with joy and singing. They will receive the glory of Lebanon, the splendor of Carmel and Sharon. They will see the Lord's glory, the splendor of our God. - Isaiah 35:1-2

During the Sunday school hour today all of our Sunday school classes, and I hope even those without a Sunday school class, will meet together in the Harlin Building for a morning of fun during our “Birthday Party for Jesus.” On first glance, I know this seems premature. We still have some waiting to do until we get to Jesus’ actual birthday. However, this particular week of Advent is a week of joy, and we intend to experience joy as the church together this day.

Throughout the month of December it is easy to find ourselves overwhelmed and less than joyful as we move from one thing to the next. Between Christmas parties, Christmas shopping, baking, gift wrapping, card writing, and a multitude of other activities we might find ourselves looking ahead to the end of the season instead of finding joy in the midst of it.

Today’s reading from the Prophet Isaiah invites us to find joy in all things. The prophet describes deserts, dry lands, and even wilderness bursting into joy. And, if even the driest and most lifeless of places can enter into joy then so can we.

In addition to joining us for our “Birthday Party for Jesus,” take time this week to enter into joy. As you go about your schedule and to-do lists take time to pause, remember why you are doing what you are doing, celebrate and give thanks for the people with whom you get to spend this time, and find joy in the midst of all that God has for us this season.

Prayer: *God of joy and life, in the midst of all that is ahead of me this week, help me to burst into joy. Amen.*

Monday, December 16

A highway will be there. It will be called The Holy Way. The unclean won't travel on it, but it will be for those walking on that way. Even fools won't get lost on it; no lion will be there, and no predator will go up on it. None of these will be there; only the redeemed will walk on it.

- Isaiah 35:8-9

The thirty-fifth chapter of Isaiah continues to aid us on our week of joy by inviting us to walk along the Holy Way. We have been walking this way already and we will continue to walk on it all the days of our lives.

In the year 203, a woman by the name of Perpetua, was put to death by the Roman Empire because of her commitment to walk along the Holy Way instead of the way of Caesar. She was given opportunities to renounce her Christian faith, but knowing that her execution was surely coming, with joy in her heart, she proudly professed that Jesus was her Lord. Awaiting her execution she wrote a portion of a document that recounts her martyrdom. It is known to be one of the earliest Christian writings by a woman. A portion of that account, written after her death, reads this way.

“And when the people besought that they should be brought forward, that when the sword pierced through their bodies their eyes might be joined thereto as witnesses to the slaughter, they rose of themselves and moved, whither the people willed them, first kissing one another, that they might accomplish their martyrdom with the rites of peace. The rest not moving and in silence received the sword; Saturus much earlier gave up the ghost; for he had gone up earlier also, and now he waited for Perpetua likewise. But Perpetua, that she might have some taste of pain, was pierced between the bones and shrieked out; and when the swordsman's hand wandered still (for he was a novice), herself set it upon her own neck. Perchance so great a woman could not else have been slain (being feared of the unclean spirit) had she not herself so willed it.” *Acts of Perpetua and Felicitas*, Section 21.

Prayer: *God who walks with us along the Holy Way, help me to cling onto unwavering joy no matter where the Way takes me. Amen.*

Tuesday, December 17

Therefore, brothers and sisters, you must be patient as you wait for the coming of the Lord. Consider the farmer who waits patiently for the coming of rain in the fall and spring, looking forward to the precious fruit of the earth. You also must wait patiently, strengthening your resolve, because the coming of the Lord is near. Don't complain about each other, brothers and sisters, so that you won't be judged. Look! The judge is standing at the door! Brothers and sisters, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord as an example of patient resolve and steadfastness.
- James 5:7-10

Patience. Christmas Eve and the celebration that we have been waiting for is only one week away. It is so close and yet it feels distant. The season of Advent is not for the faint of heart. The act of waiting takes work.

Patience is sometimes something that runs in short supply in my life. I like to get things done and move onto what comes next. I was especially lacking in patience when I was in school. I completed both my undergraduate and graduate degrees in three years each. These are normally four-year degree programs. And, in all of that rushing, I was so focused on the next thing.

I think if we are honest with ourselves, we all have moments in our lives in which we conceded to the temptation to rush and trim down the amount of time we should have spent waiting. The instructions from James in today's reading warn against rushing.

The letter of James is known for its practicality and throughout the church's history, it was not highly favored by the less-than-practical theologians among us. However, as good Wesleyans and Methodists, practical theology is our business. These words from James, along with its other selections should warm our hearts.

There is something about patience and waiting that makes a difference in the lives of people who follow Jesus—something that most certainly makes space for joy. In these final days of Advent let us practice patience as together we wait and see.

Prayer: *God of patient resolve and steadfastness, help us to keep waiting this Advent season, because in our waiting you come all the more near. Amen.*

Wednesday, December 18 | Mid-Week Prayer and Praise

In the depths of who I am I rejoice in God my savior. He has looked with favor on the low status of his servant. Look! From now on, everyone will consider me highly favored because the mighty one has done great things for me. Holy is his name. He shows mercy to everyone, from one generation to the next, who honors him as God. He has shown strength with his arm. He has scattered those with arrogant thoughts and proud inclinations. He has pulled the powerful down from their thrones and lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty-handed. He has come to the aid of his servant Israel, remembering his mercy, just as he promised to our ancestors, to Abraham and to Abraham's descendants forever."

- Luke 1:47-55

The Psalms are our words to and about God. When we find it difficult to come up with the right words, the Psalms give us the words for prayer and for praise. This week's Psalm is not found in the Old Testament, but rather, is the Psalm or Song of Mary from the beginning of Luke's Gospel. Instead of reading a devotional today, take time to read this Psalm. Which words or phrases stick out to you? Where do you find joy in this reading? Use the space below to journal or draw your reflections.

Thursday, December 19

Now when John heard in prison about the things the Christ was doing, he sent word by his disciples to Jesus, asking, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?" Jesus responded, "Go, report to John what you hear and see. Those who were blind are able to see. Those who were crippled are walking. People with skin diseases are cleansed. Those who were deaf now hear. Those who were dead are raised up. The poor have good news proclaimed to them. Happy are those who don't stumble and fall because of me." - Matthew 11:2-6

I have come to thoroughly enjoy each third Thursday of the month in Gordon. A great number of persons from our church and an even greater number from our community gather together at the Harlin Building for the monthly Gordon Community Food Pantry.

There are friends, neighbors, and strangers who are becoming friends all mixed together as groceries are spread out throughout the building, ready for pickup by those who are hungry in our community. There is laughter, sharing, and visiting amongst the clients and volunteers. And, most of all there is an overwhelming sense of joy in the midst of what can only be described as organized chaos.

Today, the food pantry will do its thing one final time for the year 2019. I am looking forward to this morning of chaotic joy that will make this season all the more special.

And, I am also looking forward to Jesus showing up this morning while we gather.

I think in-between visiting, checking people in, re-stocking shelves, and carrying bags of groceries to cars, I'm going to ask, just like the disciples of John, "Are you the one who is to come?" And, I have no doubt that the answer will be, "Go report what you hear and see. Those who are blind are able to see. Those who were crippled are walking. People with skin diseases are cleansed. Those who were deaf now hear. Those who were dead are raised up. The poor have good news proclaimed to them."

Prayer: *God of chaotic joy, as the hungry are fed and the poor have good news proclaimed to them this day, help me to go, and report what I see. Amen.*

Friday, December 20

He is the one of whom it is written: Look, I'm sending my messenger before you, who will prepare your way before you. "I assure you that no one who has ever been born is greater than John the Baptist. Yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.
- Matthew 11:10-11

The kingdom of God is constantly in the habit of disrupting our expectations. Just like those in the first century, when we think of great leaders and great people, our minds immediately jump to the elite and powerful of the day: successful business people, government officials, famous actors or musicians. These are often thought to be the great ones among us.

But, greatness in God's kingdom is defined quite differently. According to Jesus, greatness is found much closer to the bottom than near the top. The crowds gathered around him as he was speaking, when asked to consider greatness, immediately thought about Caesar and his men—those who lived in palaces. But, Jesus flipped these assumptions. When speaking about greatness, Jesus pointed to John the Baptist as our reference for greatness.

This one who ate locusts and wild honey and who wore clothes made from camel's hair with his sandals, is the one whom Jesus says is great. Though, not the greatest. Because, the position of greatest in the kingdom of heaven is reserved for whoever is least—the one with absolutely nothing to their name—the one whose existence has been relegated the farthest to the margins by the world around them—that person is the greatest.

It is sometimes easy around this season to define ourselves by how great we have been, how well we have observed the customs of the season, or how much we have. But, let us not fall into the trap of comparison. Let us remember that in the kingdom of God, our expectations are disrupted, and when thinking about what and who is great, we should look to those with the least.

Prayer: *God of greatest joy, help us to look in the direction of those whom you call great in order that we might step further into your kingdom. Amen.*

Saturday, December 21

Instead of reading a devotional today, take time to reflect on this past week. Which scriptures and devotionals stood out to you? Which ones challenged or comforted you? As we continue to walk by the light together, how are you finding joy this Advent season? Use the space below to journal or draw your reflections.

Sunday, December 22 | The Light of Peace

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. - Isaiah 7:14

This is the verse—the verse that is plucked by the author of Matthew, writing to his Jewish audience, as he begins inserting citations from the Hebrew Bible into his story about the birth of Jesus. We will read it in Matthew’s Gospel tomorrow, but for a moment, let us take a look at the story it comes from in Isaiah.

King Ahaz, the king of Jerusalem and the kingdom of Judah is facing an attack from the northern kingdom of Israel and Aram. The Prophet Isaiah is in the throne room with him and together they are discussing what to do. King Ahaz wishes and hopes for some sign that God will be with him and his people and that Jerusalem will not fall. The Lord hears the king’s request and speaking through Isaiah says, “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.”

In this situation, there is actually a young woman standing right in front of King Ahaz and Isaiah, and she does in fact give birth to a son a few chapters later.

There is something deeply comforting about the name, Immanuel. In one word, ascribed to define one individual, we are reminded and assured of the perpetual presence of our God. And, when this name is spelled with an “E,” and translated to the Greek, we are remind and assured of the perpetual presence of our God in Christ Jesus.

The gift of God’s presence in flesh and blood as a human being that shows up right in front of us at Christmas is a gift that can bring us nothing less than peace. May we receive peace this season.

Prayer: *O come, O Come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel, who mourns in lonely exile here, until the son of God appear. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel. Amen.*

Monday, December 23

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. Joseph her husband was a righteous man. Because he didn't want to humiliate her, he decided to call off their engagement quietly. As he was thinking about this, an angel from the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because the child she carries was conceived by the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you will call him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." Now all of this took place so that what the Lord had spoken through the prophet would be fulfilled: Look! A virgin will become pregnant and give birth to a son, And they will call him, Emmanuel. (Emmanuel means "God with us.") When Joseph woke up, he did just as an angel from God commanded and took Mary as his wife. But he didn't have sexual relations with her until she gave birth to a son. Joseph called him Jesus.

- Matthew 1:18-25

The darkness seems further away than it did on December 1. Yesterday in worship we lit the fourth Advent candle. All four blue candles on our wreath are shining brightly, as we walk these final moments of the season by their light.

It is appropriate that the final candle in the sequence is a candle of peace. When the season does what it is supposed to do our discomfort should remain in tact for a while; not because God desires or causes our discomfort, but because our discomfort allows us to see the world in a different way.

It is out of our discomfort and the discomfort of others that we are provoked to notice what is wrong in the world. Our discomfort in the face of poverty and oppression causes us to notice the poor and the oppressed. Our discomfort in the face of injustice causes us to notice where justice needs doing. And, our discomfort in the face of division, war, and disagreement, causes us to dream of the day in which we live in peace.

And so, friends, the one who is and brings our peace is closer than ever, and we have been invited to walk by this one's light. In these final moments of Advent, may we keep walking.

Prayer: *God whose promise is peace, help us to keep walking by your light that never goes out so that we might join you in driving out the darkness of our world. Amen.*

Tuesday, December 24 | The Light of Christ

There is no devotional or printed scripture verse for this Christmas Eve. Instead pick up a Bible, whether in print, on your phone or tablet, or on your computer. Turn to the second chapter of Luke and read about the story we celebrate this day (Luke 2:1-20). And, then join us tonight at 5:30 in the Sanctuary as we celebrate and tell this story together.

Merry Christmas! Let us rejoice as we walk by the light of Christ!

Acknowledgements and Notes

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- Hymn stanzas are taken from *The United Methodist Hymnal*

