

## Sunday morning worship

November 29, 2020

First Sunday of Advent

### Centering words (from Psalm 80)

Come, people of God, prepare to worship the Holy One.

We have felt God's presence and know God's absence.

Although our bodies are satisfied, our souls ache for God's comfort.

Together with the psalmist, we cry,

"Hear us, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead your people like a flock.

Awaken your might! Come and save us! Restore us, O God!

Make your face shine upon us, that we may be saved!"

### Opening prayer

Tear open the heavens and come down, O God of all the ages! Rouse us from our sleep and form us into a watchful people; so that, at the advent of your Son, he may find us doing what is right, keeping all your commandments. We ask this in the name of him whose coming is certain, Jesus Christ our Lord, who reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever. Amen.

### Advent candle lighting

As we enter the season of Advent, we light the Advent wreath: a simple circle of candle light and branches; It is a symbol of our Advent waiting, of the Light that is coming into the world, and the circle of everlasting life without end. Christ came to bring us salvation and eternal life. Let us pray that our hearts may always be ready to welcome him.

Let us pray.

Eternal God, we wait in Advent hope for your salvation. We live in the promise of your love. As the days grow dark and the sun's light wanes, warm our hearts with the radiance of your love.

We your people eagerly await the coming of our Savior, the one who enlightens our hearts and dispels the darkness of sin. Pour forth your blessings upon us as we light the candles of this wreath. May their light reflect the splendor of Christ, who is Lord for ever and ever. Amen.

"Be patient beloved, until the coming of the Lord. Be patient and strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near!" We light the first Advent candle—the candle of Hope. One candle burns bright, driving away the darkness, and sparking faith within our hearts.

Come to us, Lord Jesus, come. We long for you to tear open the heavens and come down.

Bring your reign of compassion and justice, peace and healing to our world. Stir up your power and come save us, O God!

It is the power that calls "light" out of darkness.

It is the power that calls "freedom" out of slavery.

It is the power that calls "life" out of death.

Stir up our hearts within us, O God, stir up the fire of faith.

Let it burn within us, refining away the dross of sin.

Let it glow within us, as bright evidence of our joy in your salvation power.

Let it warm us as we wait, for the coming of your Son.

Come, Lord Jesus, quickly come!

## Scripture readings

Isaiah 64:1-9

*Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you! As when fire sets twigs ablaze and causes water to boil, come down to make your name known to your enemies and cause the nations to quake before you! For when you did awesome things that we did not expect, you came down, and the mountains trembled before you. Since ancient times no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who acts on behalf of those who wait for him. You come to the help of those who gladly do right, who remember your ways. But when we continued to sin against them, you were angry. How then can we be saved? All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags. We all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away. No one calls on your name or strives to lay hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us and have given us over to our sins. Yet you, LORD, are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand. Do not be angry beyond measure, LORD; do not remember our sins forever. Oh, look on us, we pray, for we are all your people.*

Mark 13:24-37

*But in those days, following that distress, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken. At that time people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens. Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that it is near, right at the door. Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away. But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come. It's like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with their assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch. Therefore, keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back—whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn. If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to everyone: Watch!*

## Meditation

“Come Down Here, O God!”

Rev. Alecia Schroedel-Deuble

Welcome to the first Sunday of Advent. Welcome to the Christmas season! Already my husband John and I sat down in front of the TV, with our pumpkin pie on Friday night to begin the season by watching some of the classic Christmas cartoons. You know, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, *Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer*, and a new one featuring The Minions. That's how we expect the season to start with happy shows full of Christmas cheer, bright shiny jingling holiday commercials, and Hallmark movies. But in stark contrast, each Advent begins with what's called “a little apocalypse.” It's full of frightening images of doom and gloom and destruction, and the second coming of Christ. Our gospel text from Mark (13:24-37) warns of the sun and moon going dark and the stars falling from the heavens. Then Jesus will come again, rolling in on the clouds with overwhelming power and glory!!! Not the kind of images I expect Christmas to start with.

But maybe those are just the right images for us in 2020—a year of disruptions of Biblical proportions! We have endured one crisis after another akin to the biblical 10 plagues of Egypt! Plague—yep, we have that one in spades this year with COVID and how it has disrupted life.

The moon turns to blood—we had that—when the fires in the west send thick smoke into the air the sun is blocked out and the moon looks blood red. The winds flattened, the land—yep, had that too. 2020 has seen more and stronger hurricanes than any previous year. Add on top of that general political chaos and you have a year we can't wait to leave behind! I think the only thing we didn't experience was a plague of frogs covering the land! So one of our biggest questions in 2020 is "Where is God in all this?" Where are you O God??? With Isaiah I think we raise our fists to the sky, turn our faces toward heaven demand, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!" (Isaiah 64:1) Get down here O God! Get down here and do those big mighty deeds of power like you used to do. Get down here and do some smiting!!! We hear this furious lament from an impatient prophet who is sick and tired of waiting on God to get down here and fix things now! And we can sure relate to this!

We know what's gone on in our world this year; and here's what was going on in Isaiah's world at the time: Jerusalem; the holy city, had been invaded by the Babylonians. The city was sacked, buildings were burned to the ground; and the holy Temple, the dwelling of God, had been completely destroyed, not a stone left upon a stone. Men, women and children were slaughtered and those who remained alive – the remnant – were marched into exile to Babylon. The nation of Israel was all but destroyed. It's a scene of shocking violence! It's hard to imagine a people more devastated. These were Israel's darkest days. In our reading from Isaiah today (Isaiah 64:1-9), he calls out to God from a foreign land: "God don't you see what's happened to us? Tear open the heavens and come down! Make the mountains quake in your presence like you did before! Show our enemies who they're dealing with. Show them your awesome deeds of power." The people of Israel also beseech God in Psalm 80: "Hear us O God! Stir up your might! Wake up your power! Restore us! Save us! Where is the God of mighty deeds? Where is the God of the burning bush? ...Where is the God who parted the Red Sea? God don't you see what's happened to us? Don't you care about us? "Where are you God?!! Come save us!"

Psychologists tell us that underneath our feelings of anger lie other deeper emotions. Underneath Isaiah's heated words are feelings of grief and disorientation. Israel was at a turning point in its history. It was grieving for the good old days and longing to go back to a time when life made sense and faith was clear. At the same time, it was waiting for God to come and make something new out of their confusion. They were waiting for God to come and put an end to their oppression and take them back home to the land of Zion – back to where things were normal and secure. What a frustrating spot to be in! We can relate. When you think about it, we are grieving too. We are grieving the way life used to be. We are grieving the ability to move around freely and to gather together. Some of us might be grieving the loss of a loved one and that awkward space of not knowing what to do next. Some are grieving the loss of a job and wonder "What now?" Some might be grieving the aftermath of an illness that has changed life. We are grieving not being able to worship together in the way we are accustomed. Wouldn't we just love for God to tear open the heavens and come down and heal our confusing and chaotic world? Our anger softens to tears. In our grief we plead and beseech, Lord, come down here and bring us your comfort. Take us back to a more comfortable time and place! Or at least come down and solve our problems so we can move on into a new comfortable time and place. Either way, just come, comfort us, and get us out of this painful spot! But we can't go back (although we wish we could); and we can't quite move forward yet (although we wish we would). We're stuck in this very uncomfortable spot. And that sums up this time we call Advent, this frustrating

time of waiting. Just ask any child who is waiting impatiently for Christmas Day to come. For us adults, we feel frantic, like there is not enough time to get everything done we'd like to do before Christmas – it's moving too fast. But to any child, this month feels like an eternity!

This nerve-wracking time in the middle of things is the place where hope lives. Today we lit the candle of Hope. Hope is a word with motion underneath it. It has a sense of looking forward to something. Hope has a sense of a vision of something better, something different, something more. Hope lives in the turning point. And turning points are not comfortable places to be. We know this in our churches. Everything is so different this year. We can't gather together, we can't sing together, we worship via technology. We wish we could just go back to the way things were when the church was filled. But we know that's not possible and the way forward is not clear yet either. This in-between time of Advent is calling us to have patience—patience with ourselves, patience in the midst of things we can't control, and even patience with God.

Our impatient prophet Isaiah realizes that he too has to take a deep breath and be patient. "YET", says Isaiah in the midst of his lament; "YET, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, you are our potter." Even though life is uncomfortable and frustrating, Isaiah does not turn back. He acknowledges that God is in charge and he puts his trust in God's hands and waits on God's timing. That sums up what Advent is all about: an uncomfortable spot between the past and the promised future. Yet It is a season of hope – and hope is in motion. Hope is coming towards us. When we say "Christmas is coming" that phrase has a sense of motion in it. Christmas is coming toward us and will be upon us if we are ready or not! In the same way, the essence of Christmas is hope – hope that God will come down and meet us, hope that God will restore our well-being and restore our relationship with Him and with our brothers and sisters; and hope that God will restore our church. We wait with longing for the future God is shaping. Isaiah encourages us not to turn back, but put our hope in God as we await the birth of the Promised Son – and as we await the birth of our future. By the way, God did tear open the heavens and come down, but not in the powerful way Isaiah envisioned. God opened a hole in the heavens and gently, quietly, on a silent night, he sent us His Son, the promised One, the Savior we had been hoping for – and the world hasn't been the same since.

This Advent, our Advent candles will call us to wait with patience and perseverance as we prepare to greet the One the prophets proclaim as God's Promised Son. Have patience, people of faith. Keep awake and wait on the Lord. God is not finished with us yet. With Isaiah, we cry out, "Open the heavens and come down, O God!" Let these words be our Christmas prayer this year. We have railed against heaven and demanded that God come down! We have beseeched God and acknowledged our grief over what we have lost this past year. As we wait in hope now, ready for what will happen next, let us use these words not in anger or in grief, but as an invitation to the Holy One to come and enter our lives and our world with healing, justice and peace. Come, O come, Emmanuel! Let us invite him in as we wait in hope. We are open, O God, and we invite you to open the heavens and come down. And while we wait, may the peace of the Christ child be with you all.

### Pastoral prayer

Gracious God, when the world was dark and the city was quiet, you came among us. You crept in beside us, and almost no one knew. Only the few who dared to believe that God might do something different – they were the only ones who knew that you were here.

Will you do the same this Christmas, Lord?

Will you come into the darkness of our world; not the friendly darkness that invites us to sleep soundly when we are tired, but the fearful darkness in which people have stopped believing that war will end, or that their bellies will ever be full, or that someone cares. Will you come into that darkness and do something different to save your people from despair?

Come among us again.

Will you come into the silence of our lives, Lord; not the friendly silence when close friends sit together and no words are necessary; but the fearful silence when the phone has not yet rung, or the phone has rung with unwelcome news, or the doctor's face makes words unnecessary. Will you come into that silence and do something different to relieve our suffering?

Come among us again.

Will you come into the dark corners of our lives, Lord? We are not guilt-ridden with things that we have done or have not done; but we know that the fullness of the life that we long for depends on us being as vulnerable to you as you were to us when you came wearing no more than swaddling clothes and trusting human hands to protect and care for their Maker. Will you come into the dark corners of our lives and do something different so that we might live abundantly?

Come among us again.

When the world was dark and the city was quiet, you came among us long ago. You crept in beside us, and you loved us. Come among us again, gracious God. Come among us again. We pray in the name of the Christ child, even Jesus Christ our Lord; and we join to pray the prayer that he taught us, saying, *“Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever!” Amen.*

Offering      ***Reminder: send your offerings to church!***

### Doxology

Praise God from whom all blessings flow!

Praise God, all creatures here below.

Praise God above, ye heavenly host.

Creator, Christ, and Holy Ghost! Amen.

### Benediction

During this time of waiting and hope, keep awake! God may tear open the heavens again and come into our lives not as a mighty savior on the clouds, but as a bell-ringer next to a red kettle, as a harried shopper juggling packages and babies, or as a man on the street corner holding a sign that says “Need food.” Keep awake! God may arrive at any moment!

And as you wait, may you remain in the peace of Christ, today and forever. Amen.

## Daily thoughts November 23-27

### Monday, November 23

Good morning! This is Pastor Lynn with today's thought.

My thoughts this week will focus on the thanks that we give for the gifts that we receive; and our hymn of the week follows that theme. We sang it to begin worship yesterday: "Now Thank We All Our God." It is a hymn that is traditionally used on Thanksgiving Sunday to remind us of how many gifts God has given to us, and how thankful we should be for those gifts. But as I recorded this hymn, I wondered what atheists do on Thanksgiving. To whom do they give thanks for all the good things they enjoy? Certainly not to God; they don't believe in God! Maybe they give thanks to other people who work hard on their behalf. They are farmers who grow our food, migrant workers who pick produce in the fields, factory workers who process that produce, truckers who ship it to market, and employees in food stores who stock the shelves. They are postal and delivery service employees who make sure that our mail is delivered, workmen who repair power lines, and plumbers who fix our clogged pipes. They are construction workers who build our homes, highway workers who keep our roads in good condition, and trash collectors who haul away our garbage. They are medical workers – doctors, nurses, respiratory therapists, X-ray technicians, and anesthesiologists, just to name a few – who do their best to keep us healthy. Maybe these are the people who receive the thanks of those who don't believe in God. And maybe those of us who do believe in God should be thanking all of them, too, especially at Thanksgiving time.

### Tuesday, November 24

Good morning! This is Pastor Lynn with today's thought.

Back when I was in grade school, every year when Thanksgiving week rolled around, we were given the same art project: draw a picture of something for which you are thankful. And every year, I drew a picture of the same thing: someone kneeling in prayer. I don't know why I never drew a plate of food or a picture of my family. Maybe I thought that the teacher wanted a picture of something other than a big helping of turkey and dressing. After all, we had just been taught that the Pilgrims traveled to our shores because the king wanted them to attend his church; and they wanted to go to their own church. I imagined a big, grey stone building labeled "King's church" and the Pilgrims dragged there by grim-faced soldiers; and I thought that was terribly unfair! Whatever the reason, my kneeling-in-prayer person showed up year after year. Today, I am still thankful for being able to kneel in prayer; but my reason for being thankful is a little bit different than it was sixty-odd years ago. Oh, I am still thankful that I am permitted to attend whatever church I choose, even if that church is a synagogue or a mosque! But my Protestant upbringing offers another reason. I don't have to pray to God through anyone else. I don't need a priest, or one of the saints, or even Jesus to pray to God for me; I can do it myself. One of my friends likes to say, "I can go right to the big guy!" Jesus told us that God is not far away from us, available only through repeated sacrifices and following a set of unbreakable rules. No, God is as near as our own breath, waiting to hear about everything that goes on in our lives. Take a moment today to be thankful for prayer. In fact, you might even pray about it! Blessings on you and yours.

### Wednesday, November 25

Good morning! This is Pastor Lynn with today's thought.

We all know the story of the first Thanksgiving: how the Native Americans joined the Pilgrims in a feast as the Pilgrims gave thanks for God's presence during their first year in their new home. We don't know exactly what happened that day. What we do know is that Native Americans assisted the Pilgrims in planting and growing crops so that when harvest time rolled around, they had plenty of food to sustain them through their second winter here. It's past time to acknowledge the many gifts that Native Americans have given to all of us, not just to long-ago English settlers in the far northeast; and what better time to do it than Thanksgiving! Native Americans have given us many things that we take for granted today. Corn had been cultivated for centuries by native peoples before they taught European settlers how to grow it. Kayaks and canoes were originally forms of transportation used by native peoples. Snow goggles invented by the Inuit are the forerunners of today's sunglasses. Hammocks were invented by natives in the Caribbean. But one of the most important inventions of Native Americans is much more recent than corn, canoes, or hammocks. During both the First and Second World Wars, Native Americans known as code-talkers developed a code used in critical radio transmissions that our enemies were not able to break. Although the Navajo code-talkers are the most famous, Native Americans from a variety of tribes contributed to the code that was based on tribal languages. That code was vital to our winning both world wars. I invite you to give thanks for our Native American sisters and brothers, and for all their gifts to us. Thanks be to God for all of them!

### Thursday, November 26

Good morning! This is Pastor Lynn with today's thought.

On this Thanksgiving Day, I invite you to join me in a prayer that was written recently by Sharon Seyfarth Garner. It expresses thoughts that many of us are feeling today. As we pray, know that I join you in both your gratitude and your grief; and wish you all God's blessings.

Gracious God, this Thanksgiving we gather full of both gratitude and grief.

We are grateful for the food on our table, and grieve the empty chairs around it.

We are grateful for technology that connects us, and grieve the loss of a simple human touch.

We are grateful for seasons of abundant harvest,  
and understand that fields must sometimes lie fallow.

We humbly ask that you feed our hungering hearts, weary spirits, and beleaguered bodies  
with generous helpings of your sacred strength, extravagant love, and radical resilience.

Thank you, O God, for this gift of life and the privilege of living it. Amen.

### Friday, November 27

Good morning! This is Pastor Lynn with today's thought.

It's Black Friday, as if you didn't already know! Everything around us is screaming that it is time to get ready for Christmas! Put up your outdoor lights! Put up your Christmas tree! Buy your gifts before they're sold out! Get moving!! That's our culture, though; and there's nothing wrong with it. Our society celebrates Christmas for an entire month, and all of us look forward to that celebration. But we Christians do something a little bit different during the month of December. For us, it's not Christmas yet; it's Advent. The word Advent means "arrival." During the season of Advent, we anticipate the arrival of the Messiah, the One from God who promises to rescue us from the sorry situations in which we find ourselves. During Advent, we look around us and realize how much we need a savior. During Advent, in the midst of our troubles and griefs, we

anticipate the great joy that God has promised to us. During Advent, we wait for a celebration that begins on Christmas Eve. Each Sunday, we light one candle in the Advent wreath, until on Christmas Eve, the entire wreath is aglow with the light of the promised savior. So, put up your outdoor lights, decorate your tree, and buy those gifts! But find a corner of the house and set up an Advent wreath to light on the next four Sundays. This Sunday, during worship, we will light the first candle of that Advent wreath. On Sunday evening, I will also offer an Advent-themed Worship at the Well over Zoom. That link will be posted on the church Facebook page on Sunday afternoon. May you be blessed as you wait for the Messiah to arrive once again.