



Sunday Worship
December 6, 2020
Advent 2
Draw near to God
for God is waiting for you.

PRELUDE

LIGHTING OF THE ADVENT WREATH AND CALL TO WORSHIP

We want everything to look nice: the decorations of the season, our homes with their lights and tinsel, wreaths and ribbons.

We want to lighten the darkness around us, and bring beauty to the ugliness that wears us down. We decorate, because it is tradition. Because it lifts our hearts. Because it makes us feel like children again. We deck our halls because company is coming.

The prophet Isaiah smiled when he said, "God will give a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, a mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit." No matter how far we feel from the spirit of the season, God promises to decorate us with love and with joy.

Today's candle is a sign of our joy in the beautiful things of this season – not just the things that glitter and flash, but the deeper things, the beauty of the heart and the soul, the beauty of love shared in service and hospitality.

We light this candle of joy because company is coming. O Come, O Come Emmanuel. (Light two candles)

OPENING PRAYER

Lord of Love and Light, shine through our darkness, bringing us hope. Open our hearts for the journey, our eyes for the light, our spirits for the peace which you bring. Fill our mouths with laughter and speech with shouts of joy that we shall reveal the love with which you surround us. We offer this prayer in the name of the One who is coming into the world bringing your hope, love, peace, and joy, Jesus Christ. Amen.

HYMN #82 Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus

1. Come, thou long expected Jesus, born to set thy people free; from our fears and sins release us; let us find our rest in thee. Israel's strength and consolation, hope of all the earth thou art; dear desire of every nation, joy of every longing heart.

2. 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.

CALL TO CONFESSION

God's promise to us is eternal. God wishes to bless us with hope, with joy, with life. But our desires lead us to reject God and these blessings. Let us confess how too often we choose the path of tears, rather than the joy which can lead us to God's heart.

PRAYER OF BROKENNESS AND CONFESSION

God of Preparation, you have been preparing for us since before the world began. Your intentions for us are good and have always been. We confess that our shortsightedness means that we often miss you at work in our world and in our lives. We focus on things that are fleeting, that slip through our grasp, instead of grounding ourselves in your intentions for us: to love one another and care for the earth you

made. In this season of preparation, as we prepare for Christmas and the New Year, help us not to lose sight of what you have prepared for us: a new heaven and earth, a new life that begins now. In the name of the One who came, and is coming again into our world and lives in a new way, we pray. Amen.

WORDS OF BLESSING AND ASSURANCE

God is a God of Beginnings. There is always time for a fresh start, a turning back, a breaking open to something new. God is with you, now, guiding you into the newness of this life. Embrace God's ever-expanding love, and know that you are forgiven, and have new life in Christ because Jesus died for you. Jesus forgives you. Jesus loves you. Jesus is good to you. Amen.

FIRST SCRIPTURE LESSON Isaiah 40:1-11

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. ²Speak 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.

³A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. ⁴Every 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. ⁵Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken." ⁶A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. ⁷The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass. ⁸The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.

⁹Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!" ¹⁰See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. ¹¹He 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.

TIME WITH THE CHILDREN

HYMN #144 In the Bleak Midwinter

1. In the bleak midwinter, frosty wind made moan; earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone; snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow, in the bleak midwinter, long ago.
2. Our god, heaven cannot hold him, nor earth sustain; heaven and earth shall flee away when he comes to reign in the bleak midwinter a stable place sufficed the Lord God incarnate, Jesus Christ.
3. Angels and archangels may have gathered there; cherubim and seraphim thronged the air; but his mother only, in her maiden bliss, worshiped the beloved with a kiss.
4. What can I give him, poor as I am? If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb; if I were a wise man, I would do my part; yet what I can I give him: give my heart.

SECOND SCRIPTURE LESSON 2 Peter 8-15a


⁸But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day.

⁹The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. ¹⁰But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.

¹¹Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, ¹²waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire? ¹³But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home. ¹⁴Therefore, beloved, while you are

waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; ¹⁵and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.

SERMON

We live in a world of symbols. Advertisers spend billions to create just the right visual. They are shorthand for a story that is trying to be told. For example the Red Cross . This inverted Swiss flag is a symbol internationally known to mean “don’t shoot,” the person, vehicle, building or equipment is not a part of the fight but is providing impartial assistance.

The Nike “swoosh” symbol comes from the Greek goddess, Nike, the Winged Goddess of Victory. The logo for the maker of athletic shoes and clothing then symbolizes the sound of speed, movement, power and motivation.

The Amazon logo was created to represent the message that it sells everything from A to Z (the arrow connects the two letters) and also represents the smile that customers would experience by shopping on the Amazon.com Web site (the arrow becomes a smile).

So what about symbols for Christmas? What story are they trying to tell? So many of our images of this holiday have secular origins but as Christians we give them a new sacred interpretation. We think of Christmas as the celebration of the birth of Jesus, God’s Son. But the early church didn’t celebrate Christmas. Only two of the four gospels even mention particulars about the Messiah’s birth. No other place within the New Testament canon is it even mentioned. Jesus’ birth held little importance. What was central was his teachings, death and resurrection.

It was in the fourth century that church officials decided to institute the birth of Jesus as a holiday and much of that was to offset pagan traditions already taking place. Unfortunately, the Bible does not mention date for his birth. Although some evidence suggests that his birth may have occurred in the spring (why would shepherds be herding in the middle of winter?), Pope Julius I chose December 25, the time of the Roman celebration of the winter solstice and the celebration of Saturn, the god of agriculture. It was a time of revelry and feasting. Business and schools were closed so that everyone could join in the fun. Celebrating the birth of Jesus at this time increased the chances that Christmas would be popularly embraced, but it also gave up the ability to dictate how it was celebrated.

By the Middle Ages, Christianity had, for the most part, replaced pagan religion. On Christmas, believers attended church, then celebrated raucously in a drunken, carnival-like atmosphere similar to today’s Mardi Gras. The celebration became so rowdy that in the early 17th century, a wave of religious reform changed the way Christmas was celebrated in Europe. When Oliver Cromwell and his Puritan forces took over England in 1645, they vowed to rid England of decadence and, as part of their effort, cancelled Christmas. By popular demand, Charles II was restored to the throne and, with him, came the return of the popular holiday.

So how did we get from that celebration to where we are today? It wasn’t until the 19th century that Americans began to embrace Christmas. This was a period of class conflict and turmoil. Unemployment was high and gang rioting by the disenfranchised classes often occurred during the Christmas season. In 1828, the New York city council instituted the city’s first police force in response to a Christmas riot. This got certain members of the upper classes to thinking and then begin to change the way Christmas was celebrated in America. It went from a wild carnival holiday to a family-centered day of peace and nostalgia.

The family was also becoming less disciplined and more sensitive to the emotional needs of children during the early 1800s. Christmas provided families with a day when they could lavish attention and gifts on their children without appearing to “spoil” them.

As Americans began to embrace Christmas as a perfect family holiday, old customs were unearthed. People looked toward recent immigrants as well as Catholic and Episcopal churches to see how the day should be celebrated. In the next 100 years, Americans built a Christmas tradition all their own that included pieces of many other customs, including decorating trees, sending holiday cards and gift-giving.

So let's look now at our Christmas traditions through our sweaters and see what we can learn from them regarding the meaning of this season. Let's start with the colors. Our Advent wreath has candles of blue and pink. Others use purple and pink. So where did green and red come into this picture? These weren't always the holiday's defining colors. Arielle Eckstut, co-author of *Secret Language of Color*, attributes the palette's rise to two things: holly and Coca-Cola.

The use of holly goes back to the winter solstice celebrations of the Romans and maybe beyond. As Christians, we look at those pointed leaves and associate them with the crown of thorns Jesus wore when he was crucified. Of course Holly also remains green as do other evergreens. For thousands of years evergreens were used to decorate and brighten up buildings during the long dark winter. They also reminded people that spring would come and that winter wouldn't last forever!

This then points to Jesus being the Alpha and Omega, the First and the Last, the Living One as we read in Revelation 1:17. There we also hear those four greatest of words – *Do not be afraid*. Do not be afraid. We need not have any fear as powers and principalities are but for a moment, but God is *green* - forever and through Christ, we have been given a dwelling place with God forever.

Evergreen, forever life because God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him will have eternal life. That takes us to the red. The *female* holly plant, has red berries. The red remind us of Jesus giving his life's blood on the cross for our lives. The female red berry also points to Mary. Not divine, but an agent of God who, through the power of the Holy Spirit, is the female handmaid of God, lowly peasant *girl*, who brings the baby Jesus into the world. By the way, all the reindeer we see pulling Santa's sleigh with their big rack of antlers – they must have been GIRL reindeer because male reindeer lose their antlers in about November for the winter. Female reindeer lose them in spring when their calves are born. Let's not forget that it was women who first proclaimed the resurrection of Jesus as they were first to his tomb and the angel explained that he had risen. They then went and told the disciples, who, of course, didn't believe them. But this reminds us that God uses the unexpected, even those considered the least in society, to do God's will.

Red is also the color of Bishop's robes and that brings us to Santa Claus. When most Americans think of Christmas, Santa Claus comes to mind. The legend of Santa Claus can be traced back hundreds of years to a monk named St. Nicholas. It is believed that Nicholas was born sometime around 280 A.D. in near what is now modern-day Turkey. Much admired for his piety and kindness, St. Nicholas became the subject of many legends. It is said that his faith led him to heed the teachings of Jesus who instructed the rich young ruler to sell all that he had and give to the poor. Nicholas did just that with all of his considerable inherited wealth and then traveled the countryside helping the poor and sick. Eventually he was made Bishop of Myra. Many legends arose about this generous man in Bishop robes. One of the most famous is when he was said to have rescued three impoverished girls who were being forced into prostitution. Nicholas is said to have dropped a sack of gold coins through the window of their house each night for three nights so their father could pay a dowry for each of them. From that arose the idea of St. Nicholas secretly leaving gifts in houses.

So how did we get from this generous Bishop to the round bellied chubby and plump right jolly old elf who shook when he laughed like a bowl full of jelly? We can thank Episcopal priest Clement Moore and Coca Cola. Clement Moore wrote his famous poem in 1823. His inspiration for the character of Saint Nicholas was a local Dutch handyman – his appearance was, well, rather round and he was a very pleasant man who found humor in life. Of course, Moore was also familiar with the legendary Saint Nicholas. But it was later, in 1931 that Coca-Cola hired artist Haddon Sundblom who helped popularize the Santa that we know today: fat, jolly and wearing a bright red robe. Why red? Santa Claus had been portrayed in many different colors prior to the Coca-Cola ad. Sundblom wanted to associate the character with the product and so Santa's suit was made in the advertising colors associated at that time with Coke – Red and White.

No matter its origin, Moore's poem and the change of attitude and celebration of Christmas came together to create a figure who is generous in giving gifts to those who are good. Isn't that what we expect of God? So many of us, me included, look to God to provide not just our needs, but also our wants. Jesus said, "Ask and it shall be given." So like children at Christmas, we make our lists. What do we want for Christmas? A new car?

The latest gadget? A pair of gloves? A new coffee maker? Well behaved children? The winning lottery ticket? Snow? No snow? A clean bill of health? And when we don't get what we want, we get mad or figure that we have been bad and God is punishing us.

Still, in many ways God is like Santa (or is it the other way around?). God shows up often when we aren't even aware, when we are sleeping or our attention is directed elsewhere. No wonder the Advent scriptures each year have Jesus instructing us to keep awake and keep watch. Some of the time, maybe most of the time, our gaze is elsewhere while God is at work right in the places where we live – our homes, our workplace, our communities. The Psalmist said, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want...my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life." The Hebrew word we translate as "want" actually comes from the word "eschar," "to lack." The writer of the Psalm is saying that he lacks for nothing; there are no deficiencies. God the Good Shepherd provides for what we need but isn't Santa Claus who will fulfill our wish list of wants. That Psalm also speaks of walking through the valley of the shadow of death – "through," meaning that he will get past it and get to the other side but all the while, in and out of the valley, God is there to provide and in my experience that is often what is unexpected.

And that takes me to Sarah's sweater that reads, "A Very Murray Christmas" with a big picture of the actor Bill Murray wearing a Santa Hat. This from the film of that title released in 2015. The story is about a TV personality, played by actor Bill Murray, who is to host a live Christmas special. Due to a snow storm, all the guests have cancelled and Murray then goes out in search of talent to appear in their place. Nothing is going as expected for any of those he encounters – a wedding goes sour as the bride and groom have a big fight. A restaurant with lots of food is facing having it all go to waste due to a power outage and no refrigeration. But what ends up happening is these down-on-their-luck folks come together and end up sharing what they have – wisdom to get them through or tangibles that help the situation and it is a better Christmas than they ever imagine.

God works like that. The saying goes, "when a door closes, God opens a window." We are never left even in the middle of crisis. God's strength, God's imaginative Spirit will see us through. Things certainly did not go as planned for Mary and Joseph – pregnant before marriage, census forcing them far from home, no empty beds at the local inn or presumably in any relative's home. But the Savior of the world came.

I wonder what Mary and Joseph expected, certainly not who in reality Jesus turned out to be – a crucified traitor of the state and blasphemer to their religion. But look what God did with the unexpected and the worst of all tragedies in human history. Just look at what God did with all that confusion, hatred, betrayal and death. Death's darkness was turned to the brilliant light of life.

And that takes us to lights. Christmas is full of lights. Ever since the brightness of heaven flooded the hills of Bethlehem; and the far off twinkling star guided Eastern wise-men to the newborn King, Jesus has been the Light of the world, and we have celebrated Christmas with lights. Lights on our Advent wreaths, candlelight during silent night, lights on Christmas trees and lights on buildings, bushes, in lawns and lining city streets. In 2016 the record for lights at a home, lawn included, was 601,736 bulbs. Can you imagine that electric bill? But what could be more appropriate to mark the birth of Jesus than shining a light? In John 8, Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

Jesus the light reminds me of the Paul Simon song, "Bridge Over Troubled Waters." I've heard it paraphrased this way:

When you are down and out
When you are on the street
When evenings fall so hard
Christ will comfort you.
He'll take your part, when darkness comes
And pain is all around
Like a bridge over troubled waters, Jesus lays himself down.
Like a bridge over troubled waters, Jesus lays himself down.

That's what salvation is all about. The broken bridge to the city of God is restored through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son. Begun as a baby in a manger, ended at an empty tomb, he laid himself down for our sake. That's what Christmas and all its decorations and symbols are all about – The Messiah, Light of the World, our Savior.

AFFIRMATION OF FAITH The Apostle's Creed

**I believe in God, the Father Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
and in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord;
who was conceived of the Holy Ghost,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, dead, and was buried;
he descended into hell;
the third day he arose again from the dead;
he ascended into heaven
and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty;
from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.**

**I believe in the Holy Ghost;
the holy catholic church;
the communion of saints;
the forgiveness of sins;
the resurrection of the body;
and life everlasting. Amen.**

RECOGNITION OF THE OFFERING

PRAYER OF DEDICATION

Lord, we recognize the gifts we have given to you by various means and are thankful that we are able to not only express our gratitude for your providence, but also that we are able to serve as stewards of your creation. May we be thankful for all the ways you have healed and enriched our lives. May our gifts be used in service to others in Jesus' name. Amen.

JOYS AND CONCERNS

CELEBRATION OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

INVITATION TO THE TABLE

GREAT PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING

PRAYER AFTER COMMUNION

HYMN #106 Prepare the Way, O Zion

1. Prepare the way, O Zion, your Christ is drawing near! Let every hill and valley a level way appear.
Greet One who comes in glory, foretold in sacred story. O blest is Christ who came in God's most holy name.
2. He brings God's rule, O Zion; he comes from heaven above.
His rule is peace and freedom, and justice, truth, and love.
Lift high your praise resounding, for grace and joy abounding.
O blest is Christ who came in God's most holy name.
3. Fling wide your gates, O Zion; your Savior's rule embrace, and tidings of salvation proclaim in every place.
All lands will bow rejoicing, their adoration voicing. O blest is Christ who came in God's most holy name.

BENEDICTION

May the light of this Advent season shine in your heart, on your path, and beckon you to God's love and service to the world. Go in peace. May the God of peace go with you. Amen.