

November 29, 2020
FIRST SUNDAY IN ADVENT



**ST. JOHN UNITED CHURCH OF
CHRIST**

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SECRETARY - Judy Hartmann

PASTOR - Rev. Rosemary Captain
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Service Prayers - Rev. Susan Blain
**Communion Liturgy - Rev. Thom M.
Shuman**

Advent Week One: *“The readings today are uncomfortable, giving expression to scenes of violence and desperation, natural disaster and community displacement. The feelings they evoke may be all too familiar to those who have lived through 2020, and faced into the crisis and losses of Covid-19, natural disasters of fire and hurricane, the exposure of societal injustices rooted in racism and sexism, and painful political reckonings.” Rev. Susan Blain*

LIGHT THE FIRST ADVENT CANDLE:

O Holy One, we light this first candle, a candle of grief, in the midst of the chaos of the last year; Let it burn through these weeks as a beacon to become the light of Hope. Let it guide us to your presence in our midst, leading us to your Justice and Joy in the service of Peace. **God be with us in this Light of Hope.**

CALL TO WORSHIP:

After such suffering, we go searching for a sign, any sign. The sun seems to dim, the moon fails, the stars fall. We need a sign, any sign.

Be aware, stay awake, change is coming.

We hope that the Human One is on the way, gathering the faithful from the four winds, into a place of peace – we need a sign, any sign.

Be aware, stay awake, change is coming.

Nature once offered signs to depend on: the fig tree put out tender leaves, and we knew summer was near— but climate today is hurting, and unpredictable.

We need a sign, any sign.

Be aware, stay awake, change is coming.

So together we search for a sign of the One who is coming— clarity in confusion. Green shoot in a barren landscape, song arising in a weary soul.

Be aware, stay awake, change is coming

Come, let us worship!



UNISON PRAYER OF INVOCATION:

Come into our midst, O Holy One, Rider of the Clouds of Heaven, surprising answer to heartfelt prayer.

In whatever way you choose— Come. Shake us up.

Help us find you at work in our lives showing the way to make all things new. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION: *Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19*

This has been a year to lament— Grief and loss, crisis when social structures have failed the common good complicity when age-old prejudices found new and cruel expression:

Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

This has been a year to wake up— to read the “signs of the times”, to wake up to painful truths, and give them voice, to ponder the changes needed for a just world for all:

Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

This has been a year to call God into our sorry midst— Show us your face! Encourage us in the face of brutal realities, empower us to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with you on the way in which you make all things new. **Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.**

Silence

ASSURANCE OF GRACE: *1 Corinthians 1: 3-9*

God is faithful, and gives us grace in Christ Jesus.

In this fellowship we can count on being enriched in speech, in knowledge, in every spiritual gift.

Let us give thanks, in Christ, we are forgiven and sent forth to work for God's reign among us. **Amen.**

SCRIPTURE: **Isaiah 64:1-9 CEB Translation**

Before you read the text, read this.

“When you read Isaiah 64: 1-9, give some time to reflect on the feelings that may come up: weariness, anger, fear, grief, wondering where God is and has been in this last year? Has God been hiding?”

“How can Isaiah ask for more upset, for God to “rend the heavens and come down!” What do we need from God in the midst of this chaos?”

In verses 8-9 God is named a parent and a potter; one who shapes a people; what form is God shaping us to be by our experience after such a year? What have we learned, what needs to change, what do we need from the Holy One who is coming?” – Rev. Susan Blain

64 If only you would tear open the heavens and come down!
Mountains would quake before you
² like fire igniting brushwood or making water boil.
³ If you would make your name known to your enemies,
the nations would tremble in your presence.
⁴ When you accomplished wonders beyond all our expectations;
when you came down, mountains quaked before you.
⁵ From ancient times, no one has heard, no ear has perceived,
no eye has seen any god but you who acts on behalf of those
who wait for him!
⁶ You look after those who gladly do right;
they will praise you for your ways.
But you were angry when we sinned;
you hid yourself when we did wrong.
⁷ We have all become like the unclean;
all our righteous deeds are like a menstrual rag.
All of us wither like a leaf;
our sins, like the wind, carry us away.
⁸ No one calls on your name;
no one bothers to hold on to you,
for you have hidden yourself from us,
and have handed us over^{to} to our sin.
⁹ But now, LORD, you are our father.
We are the clay, and you are our potter.
All of us are the work of your hand.
¹⁰ Don't rage so fiercely, LORD;
don't hold our sins against us forever,
but gaze now on your people, all of us:

MESSAGE: **"It's Not Easy to Wait"** with thoughts from Dr. John
H. Hayes

I think we could all agree that 2020 has not been the
"usual" year that we usually experience. That's why I chose
the reading from the First (Old) Testament to share with you
on this First Sunday of Advent. (*If you would like to read the
usual Gospel text recommended for today, it is Mark 13:24-
37.*) As we examine the passages from Isaiah, I want you to
think about your condition right now. Are there any
similarities between what those in exile were feeling to
what you are feeling?

Advent is a time of waiting and anticipation. Just ask any
child. They are anticipating Christmas, the sooner the
better. I think the rest of us are anticipating some kind of
relief, as were the Jews who were in exile in Babylon around
500 BC when this passage was written. As part of a
communal lament, Isaiah 64:1-9 constitutes a powerful plea
for God to intervene in history in a decisive fashion to bring
redemption to the people.

As a special petition for divine deliverance, this passage
embodies the central themes of the Advent Season – the
sense of a need for vindication and the feeling of
unworthiness before God; a longing for God to act, and the
assurance that, as our Creator, God is also our Redeemer.
The Jewish exiles were praying for deliverance, as they were
alienated from their homeland, living among foreigners,
suffering for their sins, and estranged from God. They
believed their wrongdoings as the source of their condition.

*(This is where our similarities are not true. I don't believe
the Covid crisis was caused by our sinful ways. Old
Testament faith was quite willing to claim that makes
moderns cringe; namely, that the Divine could bring evil*

upon God's own people and harden their hearts so that punishment was inevitable.)

The exiles are mourning because their temple, which represented God's presence, had been destroyed, and adversaries occupied God's holy place. Foreigners are in the place where God's people made contact with the Divine. They felt as if they had never belonged to God. We can understand why the exiles felt lost. Because they could not follow the Jewish rituals, they felt unclean and thus ostracized from normal life as can be read in Leviticus 13:46.

The petition for redemption (64:1-4) pleads for God to act not in some normal way, but with decisive force as before when God caused mountains to quake and fire to blaze forth. Verse 4 concludes the plea for divine intervention with a statement of confidence - God can so act for those who wait because neither ear nor eye knows of any God so great! (verse 4)

The opening and concluding statements of confidence affirm the people's trust in God whom they call Father. To be able to address God as Father is a claim to be children of the Divine in spite of all the evidence. It is their faith that is the ultimate basis of their hope.

Advent, like Isaiah 64:1-9, is concerned with human alienation from God and with the drastic consequences of human sinfulness; but like this text, it looks beyond these to God's intervention from heaven (verse 1) through the incarnation, which Christians affirm that the alienation is no longer and human sinfulness is overcome.

So, what do you think? Are there any similarities between those who heard this passage 500 years ago and us today? Do we



have faith and trust that God will rescue us from this pandemic? Will Advent be the time? What do we have to do to receive this redemption? Ponder that. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER: Our heavenly God of many gifts, we thank you for the many blessings you give us each and every day. We don't always remember to thank you every day, yet we are truly thankful.

We thank you for sending your Son to us, as a helpless infant, as a young man as teacher, as a physician to all, as a crucified martyr, yet as a resurrected Savior. As we await his birth, we recall all that he will be for us and we are thankful.

We are thankful for all the first-responders, medical professionals, and all those working to exhaustion to serve "such as these". We pray for those who have died, those who are sick, and those who have lost their jobs due to Covid. May all of us help our neighbors in any way we can.

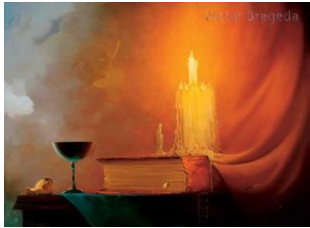
We pray all these things in the name of your Son who taught us to pray . . .

THE LORD'S PRAYER: **Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.**

THANK YOU FOR SHARING: In struggle and in joy, God is faithful to us. We bring forth our offerings – our tithes, our

treasures, our least coins – to demonstrate our faithfulness to God.

UNISON PRAYER OF DEDICATION: O Faithful One, accept these gifts of our hearts and hands. May they be multiplied and magnified as the living presence of Christ in the world. Amen.



HOLY COMMUNION:

In this Advent of disquiet, remember God comes to us.

God approaches to be with you, as well.

Let us offer our empty hearts to our God as we begin this journey to Bethlehem.

God approaches to fill them with grace and hope.

With weary souls, and trembling voices, let us sing praises to our God.

God approaches to teach us new songs of love.

In our weariness, God-of-that-first-moment, tell us the story of how you could no longer wait, but ripped apart the fabric of chaos, to make the grass to blanket the meadows, the backdrop for all the stars flung against it, the swaddling clothes for puppies and kittens. Each, and everyone, of your wonders were crafted for those formed in your image so we could be with you forever, but

overwhelmed by the virus of sin, we chose to quarantine ourselves from you.

You sent men and women to us, so we might continue to hear your heart and discover what you do all around us, but we chose to ignore them. That is when you chose to come to us in that Child of peace who could save us.

With those who try to be cautious in these days, and those who don't seem to care, we sing your praises this day:

Holy, holy, holy are you, God who comes to us.

Creation always pours out its praise to you.

Glory to you in the highest!

Blessed is the One who is coming to us even now.

Glory to you in the highest!

In your weariness of all our foolishness, God-who-never-forgets-promises, you could have clung to your holiness and left us on our own, to find our way, but you chose to love us, coming to be one of us in Jesus. He came to a people whose anxiety about the future was high, to remind them, and the generations to come, that you are in control, even when it seems doubtful.

He came to those who struggled in the deep poverty of despair, to empty his pockets of all the hope and grace they needed, just as you do for us in these days.

He came to his kinfolk who were weakened by fear, to strengthen them with the assurance that the road they walked was well known to him. And when death thought that it could defeat him with its power, he simply waited for you to bring him out of its clutches with your resurrection power.

With those who try to stay alert,

and with those who toss and turn trying to sleep, we proclaim that mystery which is our faith: **Christ died, giving his life for all; Christ was raised, the light of resurrection showing the way; Christ will come, gathering us in love and hope.**

(Put your hands over your meal.) You know how apprehensive we are in these days which go on and on, so we pray that you would pour out your Spirit on your fretful people and the gifts which remind us of your love. In Jesus, you came to know our struggles, our fears, our worries, and in the bread which is broken for us, we are given the life which will enable us to be your hope for the forgotten, to be your justice for the overlooked, to be your light in the dim moments of this year. *(Break your "bread")*

You poured your life into Jesus, who emptied himself for us, and as the Cup of grace is poured out for us, may we empty ourselves so we might be the companion to the weary, the community for the lonely, the peace for all divided neighborhoods, the love to those who are dismissed.

(Lift or pour your drink)

And when human time has come to an end, and you gather us around your table with our sisters and brothers, we will sing our joyful praises to you.

TAKE AND EAT. TAKE AND DRINK.

Jesus has set this table for you to join him
and be one with him.

PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING:

We give thanks, loving God, that you have refreshed us at your table. Strengthen our faith; increase our love for one another. As we have been fed by the seed that became

grain, and then became bread, may we go out into the world to plant seeds of justice, transformation, and hope. Amen.

SENDING AND BLESSING: On this pilgrimage of uncertainty, may we remember God has walked this road many times before. As we live through these endless moments, may we remember Jesus shares hope with us every day, every day. In this season filled with isolation from others, may we remember that the Spirit knows our loneliness and cradles us in love. Amen.



PRAYER LIST: Rich Schmitt, Nelson Libell, Dave Seneczyn, Eric White, Lori Riess, Donna Isselhard, Mitch Nallie, Candy Pearce, Greg Talley, Carol Meyer, Leah Williams, Pat Holtgrave, Jane Riess, Shari Hamilton, Becky Ballard, Amy Annis.

(If you know of any of these people who could be removed from the list, please let the Secretary know.)



Due to the increase in Covid positive cases,
we are suspending in-person worship in our sanctuary
until it is safe for all of you.