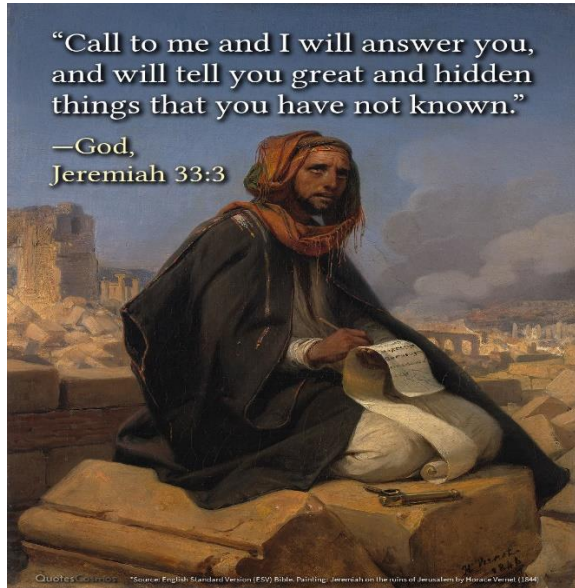


January 3, 2021

Second Sunday after Christmas



St. John

United Church of Christ

10207 Lincoln Trail

Fairview Heights, IL

Telephone 397-6323

SECRETARY – JUDY HARTMANN

Rev. Rosemary Captain

Prayers and Liturgy by Rev. Thomas Shuman

Being the first Sunday of the month, we will have Holy Communion. Have your piece of bread and cup of beverage handy.

Texts: Jeremiah 31:7-14; Psalm 147:12-20; Ephesians 1:3-14; John 1: (1-9), 10-18

CALL TO WORSHIP:

On this day, we remember the gift of God's Word,
**who gathers us together from the farthest parts of
the world to worship in joy and hope.**

On this day, we remember the simple graces of the
bread and the cup,
**those plain gifts shaped by God's love into
nourishing hope.**

On this day, we remember the gifts of water and oil,
**cleansing us in the baptismal pools, anointing us as
God's children.**

PRAYER OF INVOCATION:

You could let us continue to shuffle through the
world's deserts, God of Christmas,

but you choose to walk with us
beside the rivers of life.

You could forget who we are,

but you adopt us into your family,
your children of hope and joy.

You could decide we are not worth all the love
or all the agony of caring,

but you redeem us and make us whole.

Blessed are you!

It was only the other day
the angels were singing of your birth,
Tiny One of Bethlehem,
and now, here you are, running swiftly toward us:
to melt our frozen faith,
to comfort us in our loneliness,
to lead us into life in your kingdom.

Blessed are you!

At the edge of a new year,
we wonder what life will be like,
and what do you do,

Gathering Spirit?

You water our parched souls with laughter;

you teach dance steps to those

too weary to tap their toes;

you fill our emptiness with overflowing gladness!

Blessed are you! Blessed are we, as we worship you!

CALL TO RECONCILIATION:

Have we really been to Bethlehem? Have we
worshiped at the manger? Have we changed, for the
better? Or have we simply gone back to being the
people we were before the joy, the peace, the gifts
of Christmas? Let us confess how we have not lived
as those who have seen the Baby, as we pray
together, saying,



UNISON PRAYER FOR FORGIVENESS:

God of Christmas: we are still playing with our new
toys, the manger figures have not
been put away; we have the
stacks of Christmas cards,
but we memorize the words
sin has taught us;



we set limits on who we will love,
we make promises we cannot keep,
we fail to see the pain and hurt we cause.

God of the angels and shepherds, forgive us.

Your Word has come to reshape our lives;

your Light has come to show us the way home;

your Son has come to make us your family.

Have mercy and make us new people. This we pray
in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Silence is kept

ASSURANCE OF PARDON:

Like the Baby of Bethlehem, we are born anew.

God's forgiveness cradles us; God's love is poured
out on us. What a marvelous gift - forgiveness!

Filled with hope and new life, we can sing God's
praises forever. Amen.

SCRIPTURE: Jeremiah 31:7-14

⁷ The LORD proclaims:

Sing joyfully for the people of Jacob;

shout for the leading nation.

Raise your voices with praise and call out:

“The LORD has saved his people,^[a]
the remaining few in Israel!”

⁸ I’m going to bring them back from the north;
I will gather them from the ends of the earth.
Among them will be the blind and the disabled,
expectant mothers and those in labor;
a great throng will return here.
⁹ With tears of joy they will come;
while they pray, I will bring them back.
I will lead them by quiet streams
and on smooth paths so they don’t stumble.
I will be Israel’s father,
Ephraim (*another term for the northern country*)
will be my oldest child.
¹⁰ Listen to the LORD’s word, you nations,
and announce it to the distant islands:
The one who scattered Israel will gather them
and keep them safe, as a shepherd his flock.
¹¹ The LORD will rescue the people of Jacob
and deliver them from the power of those
stronger than they are.
¹² They will come shouting for joy on the hills of Zion,
jubilant over the LORD’s gifts:
grain, wine, oil, flocks, and herds.
Their lives will be like a lush garden;
they will grieve no more.
¹³ Then the young women will dance for joy;
the young and old men will join in.
I will turn their mourning into laughter
and their sadness into joy;
I will comfort them.

¹⁴ I will lavish the priests with abundance
and shower my people with my gifts,
declares the LORD.

MESSAGE: “How can we praise God at a time like this?” (*With thoughts from Gene M. Tucker*)

Since the first Sunday of Advent, we have been reading from the prophets in the First (Old) Testament. We have read from Isaiah and 2 Samuel and today we hear from the prophet Jeremiah who lived during the two exiles in Israel’s history.

The land where the Israelites were living, on the Eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea, was a land that was very desirable. It was a trade route between Egypt and what is now Turkey and Greece. It was also a strategic area for the military under many kings and foreign countries.

From 745 – 627 BC the Assyrians invaded the land and forced the Israelites to be deported and exiled. Over 3 and a half million persons were sent out of their homeland. From 597 – 539 BC it was the Babylonians, again forcing the deportation of the Israelites. Jeramiah’s ministry was 626 – 587 BC approximately.

Most of us in the Western world of today do not realize the trauma either of being exiled or of watching family and friends being deported and settled elsewhere. Many aging parents in the ancient world watched their children led away and spent the rest of their lives hoping to see them again. Many a caravan that arrived from afar must

have been greeted with the hope that loved ones were returning home. And, of course, there were no cell phones, facetime, or Zoom opportunities to communicate with loved ones.

During this pandemic, many of us feel we have been exiled to our homes. No church, no schools, no restaurants, no movie theaters, no concerts, no gatherings of friends and families. Even with the present ways to communicate, it's not the same as seeing people in person or hugging and kissing our grandchildren.



And yet, Jeremiah wants us to celebrate, in advance, the return and restoration of exiles. In chapters 30 – 31 of the Book of Jeremiah, we possess what has been called the prophet's Book of Comfort, two chapters concerned with the return of exiles to their homeland. Jeremiah 31:1-22 speaks of the return from exile of northern Israelites and their renewed life in the land. Even though Jeremiah preached over a hundred years after the exile of the northerners, the hope of return still remained alive.

In verses 7-14 Jeremiah speaks of the assurance of the return of the exiles. Verse 7 there is celebration. In verses 8-9, the extent of the return is noted. Exiles will come from the ends of the earth. There will be a great company even including those whom one would normally not expect on a journey: the lame, the blind, the pregnant, and the newborn. The return will be characterized by weeping for joy, consolation or compassion, and a journey eased by

refreshing brooks for rest stops and a level road (or straight path) for safe travel.

This deliverance and return will be proclaimed among the nations of the world. They will be ransomed and reclaimed from the strong hands of the oppressor who had exiled them; their homeland will be restored to its old status.

In verses 12-14, Jeremiah describes the conditions that will prevail in the days of salvation to come. Jerusalem will be the place to worship. People will be radiant over the blessings of Yahweh – the grain, wind, oil, and newborn of the flock. In other words, a return to normalcy. Life will be like a watered garden, always productive and bearing. Rejoicing would be characteristic of life. “Then shall maidens dance gaily/young and old men alike will dance for joy and well-being.

This section of the text closes with Yahweh's promise to reverse the patterns of past existence – mourning to joy, gladness to sorrow. All will enjoy “their fill of fatness,” for the priests will share in the people's sacrifices that would follow on their receipt of bounty.

Now that the opportunity to be given the Covid 19 vaccine will soon be upon us, do you see the prophecy of Jeremiah coming true for us?

THANK YOU FOR SHARING:

Thank you for continuing your support of the church.

PRAYER OF DEDICATION/OFFERING:

The gift of Bethlehem has come to bless us, and so may our gifts bring hope, bring healing, bring peace, and bring grace to Birmingham, to Belfast, to Bangladesh, in every place where folks hunger for your gifts, O God. This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

GREAT PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING:

Holy Communion

(Please read and enjoy the beautiful words of the liturgy written by Rev. Shuman)

May the God of newness be with you.

And also with you.

People of Christmas, offer your hearts to God.

**We lift them to the One who comes,
new hope and life cradled in loving hands.**

People of the Holy One of Bethlehem, sing glad praises to our God.

We come, for we have received the good news,
**we have believed the Word, we are given joyful
songs to sing.**

When chaos thought there was no end,
you began, Fullness of all time.

Your Word ran sprints through creation,
scattering the seeds which sprang forth
into fruit, flowers, mountains and molehills.

Your Spirit sang songs of wonder and hope,
that Breath which gave your children life.

We were as close to your heart
as the blood which flows through ours,
but the soft, insistent whispers of sin
grew louder and louder in our ears,
and we ran off, letting the shadows
of seduction overwhelm us.

Time and again, every time you could,
you sent your messengers to us,
crying out in love and hope, 'return!'
but we did not recognize them
nor listen to their words.

So turning to the angels,
you said, 'Watch!' as you
sent Jesus to bring us home to you.

So, with those in every place,
and with those from every time,
we join our voices, singing to you:

**Holy, holy, holy, God of every blessing.
All creation lavishes praise on you.
Hosanna in the highest!**

**Blessed is the One who comes to live among us.
Hosanna in the highest!**

You could have kept us scattered
to the limits of loneliness, God of Wonder,
but you sent Jesus, your Glory,
to become the Gatherer of those
who had wandered far from you.



Peering into the shadows of our lives,
he is the Light which overcomes
all our fears, our doubts, our worries.
Speaking into the hollows of our hearts,
he is the Word who teaches us
new songs of gratitude and awe.
Gathering the cross into his arms,
he is the Deliverer who breaks
sin's death grip on us,
walking with us by the brooks of water,
into the kingdom of life eternal.

As we begin this year with hope,
we remember his promise to be with us always,
even as we tell of that mystery we call faith:

**At the beginning of time,
Christ was the Word of creation;
at the right time,
Christ was the Word of redemption;
at the end of time,
Christ will be the Word who brings us home.**

And in this time, in this place,
with these people, we come to your Table,
Gatherer of your children. (*Raise the elements*)
The simple gifts we take for granted,
the bread which has been a staple of life,
the cup which refreshes us when we thirst,
you transform into imaginative grace,
the Meal which is blessed by the presence

of your Spirit of power and peace.
You bring us from every point on the compass -
young and old, the mother with her son,
the grandfather balancing the girl on his knee,
those who run circles around us,
and those who point the way with their canes -
welcoming that great parade of your children
who come with outstretched hearts
to receive every blessing imaginable.

And when our beginning has come to your fullness,
when we come, our faces glowing with wonder,
our voices ringing with the songs of freedom,
we will gather around your Table in heaven,
comfort and gladness our eternal inheritance from
you. We are forever grateful. (*Partake.*)

SENDING:

As you go, remember the gift of God's Word.

We will tell of the good news to the world.

As you go, remember the simple graces of the bread
and cup.

**We will seek to feed those who hunger and thirst
for life.**

As you go, remember the gifts of oil and water.

**We will live out our baptismal promises in all the
days to come.**

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PRAYER LIST: We pray for the health and well-being of all affected by the pandemic and we especially pray for: Rich Schmitt, Nelson Libell, Dave Seneczyn, Eric White, Lori Riess, Donna Isselhard, Mitch Nallie, Candy Pearce, Greg Talley, Leah Williams, Pat Holtgrave, Jane Riess, Shari Hamilton, Becky Ballard, Amy Annis, Janice Petroff, Luz Captain, Craig Meyer.



May you all have a safe and happy new year.