

HOPE PEACE JOY LOVE



ADVENT

A DEVOTIONAL BOOKLET FOR THE

SEASON OF ADVENT - 2016

THE UNION CHURCH IN WABAN

ADVENT

ABOUT THIS BOOK

From Rev. Stacy Swain

In the Christian liturgical year, Advent is a time of preparation and waiting. We are to ready ourselves to receive again on Christmas the gift of God's love made manifest in the person of Jesus.

This booklet is intended as a resource to you as you move through these four weeks in Advent and make your way to Bethlehem.

The booklet is arranged in four sections corresponding to the four weeks in Advent. I encourage you to take your time and make your way slowly through the pages. You will find an opening with Scripture, followed by reflections of those among us, and each section concludes with a prayer.

Go slowly through the readings each week. Read with your heart as well as your mind. Listen for an invitation that may be present to you this season.

May this booklet be a blessing to us in this time of preparation.

For All Ages – Suggestions for Using this Booklet with Children

From Amy Clark Feldman

In this booklet, we have also included pages called 'For All Ages.' On these pages the prayers, activities and songs are age-appropriate for children, as well as adults.

If you have an Advent Wreath at home, you may want use this booklet as you light each candle. The scripture passages, all-age prayers and songs can accompany your weekly candle-lighting. If you don't have an Advent Wreath, but would like to try lighting candles this year, know that you can use any four candles to create one. Of course, you don't need a wreath to share the scripture stories, prayers, songs and ideas!

On the 'All Ages' pages you will also find links to songs and videos you may want to share. If you have a paper copy of this booklet, please know that you can also access these links through the online version of the booklet at www.ucw.org.

However you journey though Advent this season, we hope you (and the kids in your life) enjoy this booklet and find it a helpful companion on your walk toward the hope, peace, joy and love of the manger.

HOPE

WEEK 1 - READINGS AND A PRAYER

Reading 1 - Isaiah 2:1-5

The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord.



Art: Mary and Joseph
2011 Scott Laumann

Reading 2 - Matthew 24:36-44

But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

A Prayer for the Start of Advent by Rev. Mary Luti

*You give us Advent, Lord,
And we are grateful and glad
To abide in your time,
Which is urgent, yet unhurried,
And pregnant with life.*

*You give us Advent, Lord,
And we are grateful and glad
To watch by your light,
Which is candid, yet hidden,
Our lamp for the way.*

*You give us Advent, Lord,
And we are grateful and glad
To rest in your love,
Which is pleasure, yet mystery.
And gift without price.*

*You give us Advent, Lord,
And we are grateful and glad
To receive your new hope,
Which is wholesome, yet fearsome,
And child-shaped on straw.*

*You give us Advent, Lord,
And with your grace
Let us keep it,
Abiding, watching, resting, receiving.*

*Let us keep it, with your help,
for our souls' sake,
which you love,
and the sake of the world,
heart of your heart.
Amen.*

HOPE

WEEK 1 - REFLECTION + POEM

Reflection – by Mark Smith

The light shines on in the dark, and the darkness has never mastered it. John 1:5 (New English Bible)

These are dark times, and the darkness seems to grow deeper each day as we watch the forces of hatred, fear, and racism on the march, building power, and taking office. Never did I imagine that we would see white nationalism on such overt display within the highest offices of the land. Never before could I have imagined that our political leaders would describe the national sins of our past — like the internment of Japanese-Americans — as precedent for future policy.

And never before have I embraced the fragile hope of Advent like I have this year, 2016.

For me, Advent has come in the nick of time. For just as the darkness builds on the horizon, with each day bringing more troubling news than the previous day, we can be thankful that we have entered the season of light to remind ourselves again and again and again, that no matter how deep and frightening the darkness may seem, the light shines on in the dark, illuminating the darkness for what it is; that no matter its power, the darkness will never master the light that has come into our lives - *“and that life was the light of all people.”* (John 1:4b)

And as I cling, fearfully, to the Advent hope this year, girding myself with the life that was the light of all people for the difficult days to come, I gain strength with the knowledge that light overcomes darkness, that love overcomes hatred, that hope overcomes fear, and I recite the words of Leonard Cohen’s “Anthem” as my Advent hymn this year:

“The bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything
That’s how the light gets in.
That’s how the light gets in.”

The Colors of Christmas in Haiku
by Sandra DaDalt

A RED holly bush
bursts forth with life’s pulsating
blood of salvation.

Wreath of GREEN needles
evokes the circle of life,
piercing to the soul.

WHITE snowflakes float down,
spinning gently to the ground,
pure as the new babe.

SILVER icicles,
melting in spring’s warm sunshine,
bring hope of rebirth.

GOLD star in the sky
brightens the dark, lonely night,
extinguishing fear.

HOPE

WEEK 1 - BLESSING

A Blessing for New Beginnings – by John O'Donohue

In out-of-the-way places of the heart,
Where your thoughts never think to wander,
This beginning has been quietly forming,
Waiting until you were ready to emerge.

For a long time it has watched your desire,
Feeling the emptiness growing inside you,
Noticing how you willed yourself on,
Still unable to leave what you had outgrown.

It watched you play with the seduction of safety
And the gray promises that sameness whispered,
Heard the waves of turmoil rise and relent,
Wondered would you always live like this.

Then the delight, when your courage kindled,
And out you stepped onto new ground,
Your eyes young again with energy and dream,
A path of plenitude opening before you.

Though your destination is not yet clear
You can trust the promise of this opening;
Unfurl yourself into the grace of beginning
That is at one with your life's desire.

Awaken your spirit to adventure;
Hold nothing back, learn to find ease in risk;
Soon you will be home in a new rhythm,
For your soul senses the world that awaits you.

HOPE

FOR ALL AGES



It is the first week of the journey of Advent. It is a journey through four weeks; a journey of wonder and waiting; a journey of preparing – not just our homes, but our hearts and our whole selves – to welcome Jesus again. In the wait and the wonder, we open ourselves to receive anew the gifts of Hope, Peace, Joy and Love.

It is a journey we take day by day, week by week. We look ahead with HOPE to the season, and are invited to pause – right now – to consider our path to the manger this season. How and with whom do we hope to journey? What do we carry with us to the manger? What do we need to set aside to make space for the true gifts of the season?

Perhaps tonight in our homes – and in our hearts – we light the first candle of Advent, remembering God's perfect light; praying that God will light our path, step by step, back to the manger this Advent.



SING: O Come, O Come, Emmanuel

O come, O come, Emmanuel,
and ransom captive Israel
that mourns in lonely exile here
until the Son of God appear.

Refrain:

**Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
shall come to you, O Israel.**

O come, O Wisdom from on high,
who ordered all things mightily;
to us the path of knowledge show
and teach us in its ways to go. **Refrain**

IDEAS FOR THIS WEEK:

- Find four candles and prepare a simple Advent wreath for the season — or make one out of construction paper!
- Choose a mitten (or two or three) from The Union Church Mitten Tree and find gifts that will bring Hope, Peace, Love and Joy to our dear friends at the Waban Health Center.
- Go for a walk in nature—breathe, listen, and notice God's creatures and beauty around you. How is God preparing you and your family for your journey this season?



PRAY

Mysterious God, star-maker,

May your star-light shine down on us
as we begin this journey through Advent.

May your star-light flood this dark winter world
with bright beaming light that fills every dark corner.

May your star-light enter every human being
and fill them with your never ending love.

May your star-light guide us back to you
as we wait patiently with Mary and Joseph
to welcome you once more into our world.

May your star-light give us strength:
strength to stand firm in our faith.

May your star-light revive our tired
bodies and minds and give us energy
for the weeks ahead.

May your star-light shine in us
and through us so that everyone
may know of your amazing light,
the light that shines in the darkness,
the light that can never be put out.
Star-maker, help us to shine for you.

Amen.

From Spillbeans.org.uk

PEACE

WEEK 2 - READINGS

Reading 1 - Isaiah 11: 1-10

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.

Reading 2 - Luke 1: 46-55

And Mary said:

“My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”



Art by Nicole Besack

PEACE

WEEK 2 - REFLECTION

Uncommon Gratitude – by Priscilla Lasmarias Kelso

It is mid to late November. The leaves are still falling after a long drought and an extended autumn. As we approach Thanksgiving and Christmas, the bruising election season we've just been through makes the close of 2016 feel quite different from other years.

And yet it is another Advent again. The liturgical calendar keeps on repeating itself even as current events ricochet, leaving us feeling a bit on edge. As I try to find my footing after election day, I stumbled across a book by Joan Chittister, a Benedictine nun, on "Uncommon Gratitude," about being grateful when things don't go our way. Why seek the face of God when plans go awry?

"...The answer is almost too obvious to bear. It is the spiritual consciousness that having made the world, having given it everything it needs to continue, having brought it to the point of abundance and possibility and dynamism, God left it for us to finish. God left it for us to be the mercy and the justice, the charity and the care, the righteousness and the commitment, all that it will take for people to bring the goodness of God to outweigh the rest."

These words bring me to tears. They remind me of the arduous work required of those who were part of the first Christmas story—Mary about to give birth in the midst of ungracious circumstances, Joseph bearing the brunt of transporting his family because of a government decree, the wise men going out of their comfort zone in search of the Child, the mothers of infants fearing for the lives of their babies in the hands of a murderous and tyrannical king.

They persevered, so why shouldn't we? To continue the work of the Gospel despite setbacks is a form of "uncommon gratitude" that enables us to cut our losses, move forward, and together finish the work that God has started. A hundred years from now, this election will be a footnote in American history. In contrast, the Advent story has a permanence that has outlasted time and space and cultures and civilizations. As people of faith, may we be remembered as those who chose, with gratitude, to be part of God's story, no matter what.

PEACE

WEEK 2 - PRAYER

Prayer – Excerpt from *An Advent Prayer* by Joyce Rupp

God of all those who yearn for a glimmer of assurance on the long journey home to you, come! Come with a vast storehouse of renewed dreams, hopes and peacefulness.

God of Hope, come! Enter into this heart of mine which often loses itself in self, missing the message of your encouragement because I am so entangled in the web of my own whirl of life. Enable me to not lose sight of the power of your presence or the truth of your consolation.

God of Hope, come! Enter into the lives of those I hold dear, the ones whose lives are marked with pain, struggle, and deep anxiety, those whose lives bear ongoing heartaches, those whose difficulties threaten to overwhelm them with helplessness and despair. Come and gift them with a deep belief about you and your never-ending faithfulness and companionship.

God of Hope, come! Enter into every human heart that cries out for a glimpse of your love, for a sigh of your welcoming presence, for a taste of your happiness. Be the one who calms the restless and gentles the aches of the human journey.

God of Hope, come! Enter into this Advent season with a grace of joy and laughter. Fill faces with smiles of delight and voices with sounds of pleasure. Let this gift come from deep within. Replenish all with the joyful blessings that only your peace can bring.

God of Hope, come! Be the Morning Star in our midst, the Light that can never go out, the Beacon of Hope guiding our way to you. Come into our midst and make of our lives a home, where your everlasting goodness resonates with assuring love and vigorous hope. AMEN



PEACE

FOR ALL AGES



It is the second week of our Advent journey. This week we remember Mary's courage and love when she learns about the special role she will play in birthing God's great plan into being. We remember the song she sings – a song that shares a vision for the world filled with peace, justice and abundance. It is the same enduring vision Isaiah shares; and the same vision Hannah shared in her song so any generations before. It is the vision of God's dream for us and this beautiful world. We, like Mary are invited to help make this dream a reality. This week we light the candle of Peace, praying that we too, in the words of St. Francis, may be instruments of God's Peace.



SING: Let There Be Peace On Earth

Let there be peace on earth,
And let it begin with me.
Let there be peace on earth,
The peace that is meant to be.

With God as Creator,
We are family,
Let us walk with each other,
In perfect harmony.

Let peace begin with me,
Let this be the moment now.
With every step I take,
Let this be my joyous vow.

To take each moment,
And live each moment
In peace eternally,
Let there be peace on earth,
And let it begin with me.

Ideas for This Week:

- Light the second candle of Advent, the candle of Peace. Read together; Pray and sing.
- **Songs for the Season:** The lovely kids' Advent album, *Rain for Roots: Waiting Songs*, shares Mary's Song (*Magnificat*) and a version of this week's *Isaiah 11* scripture. Songs may be accessed for free or downloaded at: rainforroots.bandcamp.com/album/waiting-songs.
- **Family Movie Night** *A Charlie Brown Christmas: The Meaning of Christmas* (YouTube link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cM64LfhmisU>)



PRAY

Lord, you have a dream for a world where justice and peace abound, where lion and lamb live together, where everyone has enough.

O God, the world as it is today has a long way to go to become that dream.

Help us to keep dreaming, to keep striving to make the dream a reality.

Help us to trust in you to hope in your Son, to be guided by your Spirit.

Help us to seek out Good News stories, to share them widely, to multiply them and allow them to bring healing and wholeness to people.

Help us to receive bad news stories, with sadness and compassion but not to allow them to overwhelm us, but to spur us on to do more.

Let us really hear the words of Isaiah, And the song of Mary Help us to see their vision of peace and hope, and make it our own.

Let us answer your call to be the Good News, to be the ones who need healing, release and restoration.

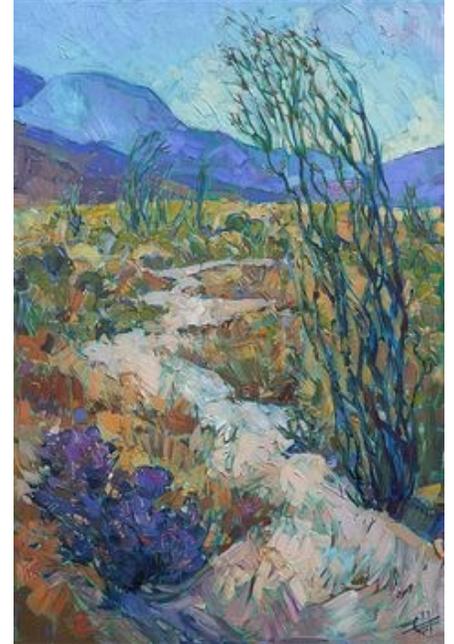
May we bring the dream to reality, even if only to a few people. If each one of us can bring a small change to even just one person then the world will be one step closer to realizing your dream. How amazing that you allow us to be part of your dream, dear Lord. Amen.

JOY

WEEK 3 - READINGS

Reading 1 - Isaiah 35:1-10

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God. Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you." Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes. A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray. No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there. And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.



Desert in Bloom by Erin Hanson

Reading 2 - Matthew 11: 2-11

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.' Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. In remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

JOY

WEEK 3 - REFLECTION

Reflection – by Alan M. Cody

An article that I read in the November 14, 2016 issue of “The New Yorker” entitled, “Desert Bloom,” described the nearly unprecedented and intense “super blooming” of the desert in Death Valley earlier this year. Very heavy rainfall in October 2015 produced this magnificent blooming, and the number of visitors during March of this year went beyond anything the National Park Service had expected. The story reminded me of the preceding passage from Isaiah. The blooming of Death Valley brought exceptional beauty to an area of extreme climate that, according to the article, was also known for get rich quick schemes, criminal activity and other, less serious excesses such as car racing. Isaiah’s metaphor of the desert blooming intended to prophecy a glorious awakening of strength, new vision and a “Holy Way” in a difficult place for humans. Like the anticipation of a better world in this prophetic passage, our celebration of the birth of Christ gives me hope each year for our modern but troubled world. Just as the blooming of Death Valley brought many visitors to a place transformed from arid desert to beautiful color, the birth of Christ brought an enduring message of hope and love that changed the world despite the adverse environment for many living under Roman rule. Each year Advent gives me a chance to search for the meaning of that enduring message in my own life.

For many years, Advent was a time for me to buy and receive presents, spend time with family or attend services at church. Many years ago during a period of significant personal stress mostly over finances, I set out for Christmas Eve service at a church in Boston that offered an especially beautiful service of lessons and carols. The typically foggy New England night lowered my already dismal spirits even a bit more. As I walked to the church, I noticed a man standing out on the street by himself quietly asking for money. Whatever his story, it was Christmas Eve and I could not walk by without helping him with a modest contribution. Later during the service a remarkable feeling of comfort and security came over me, a feeling that all would be well whatever my current situation happened to be. For me Advent and Christmas became in that moment, in Isaiah’s words, a time to “Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees.” Perhaps I exaggerated the spiritual reward of a small kindness on Christmas Eve to someone unknown to me. Nevertheless, that moment on a Christmas Eve changed my Advent away from the mad rush to buy presents to what it was always meant to be — the renewal of a greater commitment to embracing Christ’s message of caring for all — not just those whom we know well and are familiar to us. We reinforced that commitment in our family in subsequent years, at the suggestion of my son, by substituting contributions to those in need for the usual presents that pile up and may or may not be used. For that special moment one Christmas Eve, I can only say, thanks be to God.

JOY

WEEK 3 - POEM

*Sonnet to Christmas
by Sandra DaDault*

HOPE is the angel announcing his birth;
With the multitudes, her song becomes clear.
They brighten the sky with heralding mirth,
That whisks away the centuries of fear.

JOY is the star perched high in the sky.
With streams of light radiating to earth,
She marks dusty paths to the babe most high,
Who sleeps in a barn to hide his true worth.

LOVE is the mother quiet, meek, and mild;
So humbly born, she brought life to a king.
No silks no satins to swaddle the child;
All she can give is tender embracing.

May your Joy and Hope and Love never cease;
Welcome, alleluia, the Prince of PEACE.



JOY

FOR ALL AGES



This is the third week of Advent, a week of Joy! Mary and Joseph are on their journey to the manger. Sometimes the journey isn't easy. It can feel like we'll never get there. Sometimes we get lost and take the wrong path. There may be times when we feel tired or scared; times when we miss the people who used to walk with us that aren't with us anymore. Through it all, we can know we are not alone. We walk together, and God is with us; guiding us, step by step towards the great Love of the manger – a Love that endures and always overcomes; a Love that changes everything. This, as the angels say, is Good News of a Great Joy for all peoples – including us!



SING: Joy to the World!

Joy to the world! The Lord is come;
Let earth receive her king;
Let every heart prepare him room,
And heaven and nature sing,
And heaven and nature sing,
And heaven, and heaven, and nature sing.

Joy to the earth! the savior reigns;
Let men their songs employ;
While fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains
Repeat the sounding joy,
Repeat the sounding joy,
Repeat, repeat the sounding joy.

He rules the world with truth and grace,
And makes the nations prove
The glories of his righteousness,
And wonders of his love,
And wonders of his love,
And wonders, wonders, of his love.

**Listener Kids has a sweet video and version of this carol at:*
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OTGPokt-Z3M>

Ideas for This Week:

- Light the third candle of Advent, the Candle of Joy. Pray and sing with loud voices!
- Come to the Christmas Pageant at Union Church during worship on December 11th and share the Joy!
- **Watch:** *The Christmas Story*, created by St. Paul's Church, Auckland, New Zealand YouTube link: www.youtube.com/watch?v=kWq60oyrHVQ



PRAY

'Let me tell you how I love you,' goes the song of God, a song that never ends, instead becoming more elaborate as time goes on.

The God of love goes to extremes to show us how we are loved beyond measure.

God never tires of finding new ways, revealing to us when least expected the height, and depth, and width of love.

And, just when we think we've got the message, we are stunned again by the enormity of such love that pursues us to the ends of the earth, stopping us in our tracks, in our daily grind compelling us to look up and wonder, and be filled with hope peace, and joy as we bask in God's love for us.

Loving God, in this Advent week of JOY, we thank you! AMEN

From Spillbeans.org.uk



LOVE

WEEK 4 - READINGS

Reading 1 - Isaiah 9:2-7

The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.

You have multiplied the nation,
you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as people exult when dividing plunder.

For the yoke of their burden,
and the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian.

For all the boots of the tramping warriors
and all the garments rolled in blood
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.

For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.
He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time onward and forevermore.
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

Reading 2 - Matthew 1:18-25

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

LOVE

WEEK 4 - REFLECTION + PRAYER

Reflection – by Karen Weisgerber

They were difficult times. Poverty was on the rise, political tension was swelling, more and more people were displaced and oppressed. It was a dark time, yet one with hope. There was news that a savior would come.

So was it a cruel joke that the savior they found was a newborn infant? That there was no mighty king, no high priest, no rebel to set it all right? There was a baby, dependent, vulnerable, incapable, requiring tireless care in a time when people were fatigued beyond our imagination. There was a child who required protection, whose very life put at risk the lives of those around him. An infant who would need feeding, tending, teaching, who would need time to grow and carry forth. Was it a cruel joke that this faint hope would need years to mature into a living savior? Or was that the point?

These are difficult times. Poverty, political conflict, oppression – we know how dark it can be. And at this time, in Advent, we are reminded of what true hope may look like. It might be so small that we don't recognize it at first. It may require our discomfort, our efforts and tending. We may need to be patient and work hard to foster it. We may need to feed, nurture and care for it to blossom into the full manifestation of what hope can bring.

From the smallest of beings came the greatest hope they could imagine. Some things never change.

Prayer: *Advent Readings from Iona*, written in 2000, by Brian Woodcock and Jan Sutch Pickard.

*The land is waiting,
waiting for the frost
to destroy the diseased plants, to cleanse the soil of pests;
waiting for the snow
to blanket and protect new shoots;
the world is waiting for the shortest day, the longest night,
for the turning of the year
and the return of light.*

*The people are waiting, waiting for justice -
to change their lives.
Refugees are waiting, in their in-between world,
to return home, for the past to be restored,
or for the future to be different.*

*The landless are trying to build a better society
starting from the favelas and on the rubbish tips;
People like you and me are waiting
waiting for health care, waiting for a loving word,
waiting on the street for the price of a cup of tea,*

*Victims of prejudice, hearsay, poverty, power misused-
the people are waiting
for a different kind of power to transform the land;
the gentle power of wisdom, of wonder, of God-with-us,
The people are waiting, yearning, eager, expectant...
The world is waiting.*

Prayer
*God of latent life and growing shoots,
we wait for you in an expectant world;
we long for your wisdom to be at work in our lives
and, with our sisters and brothers,
we yearn for your justice to be done on earth.
Amen*

LOVE

WEEK 4 - REFLECTION

Reflection – by Cindy Spertner

Nature and spirituality are tightly wound concepts for me. I know God's peace when walking through a forest of white pines. I come a bit closer to understanding the communion between life and its source when ocean waves lap at my ankles. Growing up, I listened to the crows caw over the cornfields and I heard something more. And for me there is no baptism like immersing myself in a chilly mountain stream.

So, in this time of Advent, my heart is always made full by bringing a tree into my living room. Like a moth to a flame, I can't seem to get enough of it. Despite its commercialism, in my own home, the Christmas tree is a symbol of a living God, one that infiltrates my senses: the sharp smell of pine, the branches stretching proudly beneath lights, the gift of life brought in from the cold.

When I was a young girl, my father would drive our family to the local nursery. My heart would sink a bit when I jealously watched other families traipse off into the woods with saws and sleighs. My dad, a science teacher and ever the conservationist, would lead us to a small section of potted pines. Barely reaching my chin, the little trees looked lonely and forgotten; I, too, wanted a huge tree – one we would have to struggle to get in the front door, a treetop that scratched the ceiling. But, we would drive home with our tiny potted tree, prop it on a table in front of the living room window, and decorate it with care and joy all the same. However small, the tree was a center of meditation and anticipation of Christmas day. My family came together around the tree. We told stories. We read the Bible. We gave gifts. We prayed. Today when I visit my childhood home, I am amazed by those very trees that were planted in the yard after Christmas, now towering over the house. Where lights and ornaments once hung, the branches are now home to squirrels and birds. They create a small forest of memories, one that keeps growing and living.

This year much of my Advent will be spent sitting around my own Christmas tree, meditating on the gifts I have been given and those I have to give others. I will feel the thrill of anticipation and the quiet peace that resides in those moments when I choose to stop and sit and take in the beauty of the tree. In his poem, "little tree," e.e. cummings captures so beautifully what will be in my heart.

little tree by e.e. cummings

little tree
little silent Christmas tree
you are so little
you are more like a flower

who found you in the green forest
and were you very sorry to come away?
see i will comfort you
because you smell so sweetly

i will kiss your cool bark
and hug you safe and tight
just as your mother would,
only don't be afraid

look the spangles
that sleep all the year in a dark box
dreaming of being taken out and allowed to shine,
the balls the chains red and gold the fluffy threads,

put up your little arms
and i'll give them all to you to hold
every finger shall have its ring
and there won't be a single place dark or unhappy

then when you're quite dressed
you'll stand in the window for everyone to see
and how they'll stare!
oh but you'll be very proud

and my little sister and i will take hands
and looking up at our beautiful tree
we'll dance and sing
"Noel Noel"

LOVE

FOR ALL AGES



Our Advent Journey is almost at an end, our holy waiting is almost over. We stand with awe and wonder within sight of the manger. This week we celebrate Love – God's great Love, for us and for the world. God's great Love shown to us in a humble manger and in the life of Jesus. As we light the candle of Love, we can pray that the light of God's Love will shine brightly in us and through us – Lighting up our lives and the lives of those around us, as brightly as a star over a manger.



SING: Silent Night

Silent night! Holy night!
All is calm, all is bright
'round yon virgin mother and child!

Holy infant, so tender and mild,
sleep in heavenly peace,
sleep in heavenly peace.

Silent night! Holy night!
Son of God, love's pure light,
radiant beams from thy holy face
with the dawn of redeeming grace,
Jesus, Lord, at thy birth!
Jesus Lord, at thy birth!

Ideas For This Week:

- Light the fourth candle of Advent, the Candle of Love. Read the story of Jesus' birth in Luke 2. Sing and Pray!
- Take time to look at the lights and all your Advent preparations. Remember all you saw and did on your Advent journey, and all of those who have walked with you. Where have you seen God's Love? How can you share that Love with others tonight?
- If you are able, come celebrate Christmas Eve together with your fellow Advent pilgrims at the Union Church!



PRAY

Good news bringer,
on this fourth Sunday in Advent
we journey to you,
with eyes open for your good news.

Your good news offers
comfort to the heartbroken,
freedom to the captives,
and sight to the blind.

In these Advent days
full of tinsel and trees,
mince pies and turkey,
writing cards and
wrapping presents;
we pray that you
would help us
turn our focus to you,
to the real good news story,
to a couple having a baby,
to a people welcoming a savior,
and to a world welcoming the light.

As we prepare for parties and family gatherings
help us prepare our hearts to welcome
the Hope, Peace, Joy and Love
that came to us in the form of a tiny,
fragile human baby.

Filled with your good news,
may we turn to each other, and all we meet,
and share abundantly.
Amen.



Cover Art from Story Warren

CHRISTMAS EVE

FOR ALL AGES



Image from the Jesus Storybook Bible

A Prayer – by Brita Lynn Gill-Austern

Holy One cradle our heart this advent in a manger
a lowly, humble place where we may come to know You.
Just for this Advent help us to shift perspectives.
Help us to imagine the gift you would most like to receive.
Convince us we cannot buy it at a store and wrap it up.
Rather awaken our heart to welcome you into the center of our Advent by:
Cultivating peace within and without,
Finding joy in the simplest of things,
Bringing into our homes the lonely and broken,
Feeding the hungry, rather than our appetites for more of what we don't need,
Visiting someone who needs a warm presence,
Letting go of the resentment we have held far too long,
Opening our heart to someone to whom it was closed.
Remind us you were born in a humble place,
Waiting to be found by kings and shepherds in this vulnerable place.
Help us to look for You in holy vulnerability where you will reveal Your love.
Bless us with the gift of finding You.
Amen.

With gratitude for all those who so generously contributed to this Advent Booklet.

Cover Art: From Story Warren

