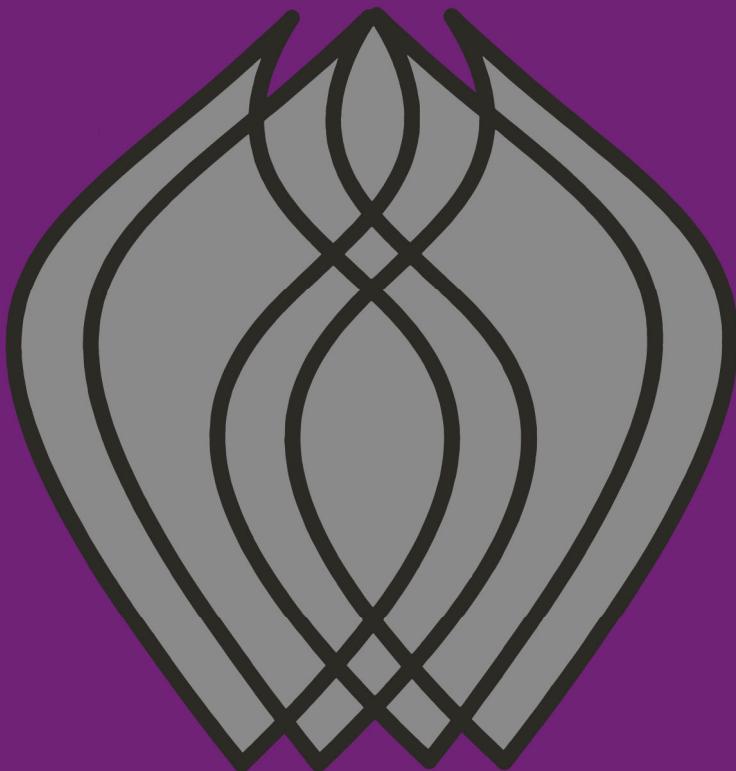


THE SEASON OF ADVENT 2020



Northminster Baptist Church
Jackson, Mississippi

The Season of Advent

2020

“We’re breaking new ground.”

“We’ve never had to do this before.”

“We’ve never had to worship like this before.”

However, if we live according to the broader definition of worship, that is, “the work of the Church,” we’ve been here lots of times. This definition originates in the Code of Jewish Law, the Orach Chayim, citing Proverbs 3:6: “In all your ways, know God, and God will direct your paths.” There is a temporary feature in everything we try to do. Destruction of cities, buildings, twin towers, fires, and floods can take away important parts of our lives. Disease can interrupt living styles, forcing us into new organizations for safety. But Christ still comes! The Church still stands, and Advent recurs year after year to remind us of God’s promises!

Tragedies allow us to find ways to not only survive the tragedy, but to further define the work of the Church and its liturgical identity. During the Cyprian Plague, 5000 died daily in Rome. Yet the growing, missional Church was not defeated. Instead, the Church led its congregations to not only minister to the sick, but to leave major footprints in worship procedures for baptism, communion, daily prayer, and the use of the Lord’s Prayer. In the midst of many deaths, people were healed and new believers were brought into the Church’s teaching. Christian worship continued and was codified and defined in daily and corporate practice. Diseases and wars have played their parts in refining our prayer lives, defining our worship processes, and when over, have helped us to glorify the God of our deliverance. In such ways, the definition and reach of worship has spread broadly, from praise and prayer to daily service and ministry. Church history has left us a vivid record of how liturgy has enlarged its embrace from praise into service and into healing practice.

Wars and plagues have one thing in common. They all eventually ended, or, we learned to prevent them. Humankind survived and found new dimensions of worship practice that includes every aspect of knowing and loving God and others.

In the middle of the Coronovirus 2020, Advent has come again, as Christ, the Lord always comes, bringing opportunities for praise, for healing, and hope. As we take these gentle writings of our fellow church members into our prayer chambers, may we be mindful that God continues to be praised and glorified by Northminster saints. And as we pray and work and heal, Advent turns the corner of our calendars. Christ has come...Christ is coming...Christ will come again!

God of fear, God of night; God of expectation,
In the darkest of nights, turn us toward the advent of Hope
That keeps our believing yet searching lives brimming
with light and with love for others.

Sunday, November 29, First Sunday of Advent

Psalm 80:1-7; 17-19; Isaiah 64:1-9; Mark 13:24-37; I Corinthians 1:3-9

“Restore us, O God; let thy face shine, that we may be saved!”

Psalm 80:3

“All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.”

Dame Julian of Norwich

Dame Julian of Norwich was a fourteenth century English mystic and holy woman who lived during a pandemic, the bubonic plague, which decimated over a third of England's population. The following reflection seems fit as we start an Advent particularly different because of our own pandemic:

“Three outbreaks occurred in Julian of Norwich's city during her lifetime and she almost died of it or another debilitating illness. It must have been overwhelming, with the pain and suffering everywhere. Yet her theological response was of love and hope. Her message of ‘all shall be well’ is not the Hallmark-card statement of those putting on rose-colored glasses, or sticking their heads in the sand pretending all this bad stuff will go away, but the voice of one who has deeply experienced suffering and tried to make sense of it. And she does so through a brutally honest trust in the love of God. It strikes me that this is a prayer we can lean into even when we don't see it or feel it. It is not a descriptive statement of now, but a hopeful statement of what shall be.”

It may be a while before our lives fully return to the way they were before the pandemic. It may be a while before we gather as a full community. And yet, how we do church is not the church we are. We will navigate these uncharted waters as so many of the saints have done before us, leaning into the wind of the Spirit as the Spirit carries us forward into whatever is next. God keeps us, and God will keep the church, even if and when it looks different than it did before. And ‘all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.’”

Reflections on Julian of Norwich,
Rev. Lindsay Ross-Hunt, Bellingham, Washington

Monday, November 30

Psalm 1, 2, 3; Amos 2:6-16; II Peter 1:1-11; Matthew 21:1-11

“Many are rising against me, but Thou, O Lord, art a shield about me. I cry aloud to the Lord and the Lord answers me from the holy hill.”

Psalm 3:1,3

The passage from Amos refers to destruction, and as we take the long view, we know that after destruction renewal will come, for Christ came hundreds of years after Amos was written. In the passage from Psalm 3, in the face of mighty odds, help comes. Advent can be a time of introspection to consider what needs to be done away with in order that new life can come, for we know that God is our help and we know that Advent is but a readiness for a time of Emanuel or “God with us.” So, as we reflect during this seasonal time of darkness, let us not lose hope.

Let us pray for those of us who are on the fringes. Not only on the fringes of the economic scale or society but also on the fringes of emotional states because of lost loved ones during the past year and changed lives. Let us also remember those of us who are on the fringes of expectations—we who believe there to be no hope, no peace, and those of us who are lonely and those of us who feel that our lives are devoid of joyous feeling. Let us pray for the sick and the disheartened that they may be healed and have hope. Let us pray during this season of Advent as we wait expectantly for a light to shine forth out of the darkness, that all of us—we who are on the fringes as well as those of us who feel secure—discover the light within ourselves. Let us discover the light of God within us, waiting to be born. Let us discover the love of God surrounding us, that wants us to be one of God’s own and not on the fringes.

Sister Hilda Mary of Bristol, England offers these words of blessing and hope:

Comfort of God, flow through us today.
Light of God, shine in the darkness of this world.
Ease of God, comfort those in pain.
Challenge of God, pierce our complacency.
Energy of God, galvanize us into right action.
Peace of God, hold steady our hearts.
Foolishness of God, laugh through our lives.

Tuesday, December 1

Psalm 5, 6; Amos 3:1-11; II Peter 1:12-21; Matthew 21: 12-22

The Path, The Psalm, and The Gift

While anticipating the Season of Advent, we pictured a road and the action of going, or being on a journey; from here to there; from there to here. The beautiful book of Psalms encapsulates divergent moods: joy, bitterness, resistance, or acceptance, plus many others. As our day unfolds, it is up to us to choose which road our journey will take us down, or what our present mood will be. Since Advent leads up to the birth of the Christ Child, this lesson focuses on God's gift to the world: His only son, Jesus.

Christmas was always an exciting time at home. Family gathered from far and wide. Students were home from college. The table was laden with the best recipes, and gifts were exchanged. The youngest daughter was in her second semester of her first year of college and was excited to be with family and share this wonderful season, Christmas! Under the brightly lighted tree was a small box with her name on it. She shook it and untied the red ribbon. Inside the small box was a neatly folded letter with this poem:

The Gift

This cross is made of more than gold, it is made of all the love my heart
can hold.

It is given to remind you of God above, And God's Son who came to show
His love.

Please wear this cross with love and pride, remembering our Savior, for
our sins he died.

Remember your Mom who loves you too, and keep thoughts of Jesus,
Mom, and the Cross near your whole life through.

All My Love, Mom

Our day begins; we have a road to travel. It is our choice whether we journey
down the bitter road or take the joy-filled path. PLEASE CHOOSE JOY!

Some results of doing God's will

Amos cautions us that nothing is done without a reason.
II Peter reminds us:

To be fruit-bearing Christians.

That our salvation will be confirmed.

That we will never knowingly slip back into sin.

That we will gain entrance into Heaven.

Wednesday, December 2

Psalm 119:1-24; Amos 3:12-4:5; II Peter 3:1-10; Matthew 21:23-32

My Peace I Give to You.

Signed, GOD

Bible drills were challenging and always fun. You memorized the books of the Bible. You memorized verses and memorized and memorized. Years pass and you never forget how to turn to a certain book, delighting in the fact that you nailed it. But, did all that young memorization stay with you?

“Thy Word have I hid in my heart, that I might not sin against God.”

Psalm 119:11

“When we confess our sins, God casts them into the deepest ocean, gone forever.”

Corrie ten Boom was speaking to a group of people and mentioned the name of her concentration camp. One of her captors was in the audience. Since years had passed, the man did not recognize her, but there he stood, a born-again Christian, seeking forgiveness from a person he did not remember; but she could not forget. This story stings and then warms almost simultaneously.

“Jesus, help me,” she prayed silently, as an unknown force overcame her. “I forgive you, Brother!” she cried. “With all my heart.”

With Advent upon us, we are reminded that to forgive takes work. It requires a swallowing of pride and the difficulty of admitting.

More rare and precious than all is the kind of forgiveness that happened precisely once: the rare and precious act of God forgiving us, insisting on nothing, expecting everything. It is this Gospel forgiveness we celebrate every Advent: the forgiveness that brings ultimate peace. It is the forgiveness of God reaching down to us out of kindness and mercy with the intent of creating a new people who will worship God and love one another. It is the eternal shalom.

More Bible drills remembered:

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to God's purpose.

Romans 8:28

Thursday, December 3

Psalm 18:1-20; Amos 4:6-13; II Peter 3:11-18; Matthew 21:33-46

The parable of the vineyard appears in three of the gospels, and is more complete in Matthew's version.

Jesus is speaking to the religious leaders who have confronted him and questioned his authority to teach after his triumphant entry into Jerusalem for Passover. In this parable a landowner established a lush and bountiful vineyard with a wine press, a fence, and a watchtower. Typical for the Roman Empire, he became an absentee landlord and left the vineyard in the hands of tenants, who were to pay him a portion of the proceeds. When the landowner (God) sent his servants (prophets) to collect the rent, they were beaten and one of the "wicked tenants" was killed. He then sent other servants (more prophets, including John the Baptist) who were also killed. Then the landowner sent his son (Jesus) to collect his half of the proceeds. The tenants, realizing that if the son was dead, the landowner would have no heir and by law they would inherit the vineyard. So, they killed him as well. Here, Jesus is telling these leaders what they will do to him.

Then Jesus asks them what they think the landowner will do when he comes to the vineyard. They immediately respond that he will punish them severely and replace them with good tenants. Jesus then quotes Psalm 118:22-23:

"The stone the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;
the Lord has done this,
and it is marvelous in our eyes."

At that point, the Pharisees, who probably thought they were the landowners in the story, now realized they were in fact the wicked tenants. And that Jesus was talking about leaving them out of the Kingdom of God that he was building, and for which he would be the cornerstone. The laws of grace and love would replace the old system of laws as justification.

From this point, the Jewish leaders met in secret, afraid of Jesus' popularity, to plot his death.

This Advent season, we, who know how the story turned out, anticipate the coming of our Lord and the full realization of his Kingdom on earth.

Prayer: God, we pray that we will be like good tenants living by the example of Jesus Christ. Amen

Friday, December 4

Psalm 16, 17; Amos 5:1-17; Jude 1-16; Matthew 22:1-14

The story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is generally a Palm Sunday theme. What is it doing in an Advent lectionary? Why do we want to think about the beginning of his last act during a time of anticipation of his first act, his arrival as a baby?

We are all familiar with this story. Jesus had prearranged for an ass, which had never been ridden before to be available to him to ride into Jerusalem during Passover. The use of an unridden ass or colt was symbolic. The Ark of the Covenant was moved on a cart that had never been used before. It is estimated that 250,000 people had come to Jerusalem for the Passover (based on a count of the number of lambs consumed). And his usual motley crowd of people he had healed, women whom he treated as equals, children whom he loved, and his disciples, who thought that he would use his power to drive out the Romans from Israel, accompanied Jesus. The symbolism is rampant in the story. Palm branches were waved when Simon Maccabaeus rode into Jerusalem after a victory, and when Judas Maccabaeus had driven out the Greeks who had conquered Palestine 200 years earlier and Judas restored the Temple, the people carried palm branches and sang psalms on that day. Prophets such as Zechariah had seen a Messiah king coming to Jerusalem, humble and riding upon an ass. This was Jesus invoking the messianic tradition and also casting his die that he knew would lead to his death. They yelled out "hosanna," which meant "Save us." They expected him to save them from Rome.

But why do we use this Scripture for Advent? Advent looks forward with anticipation to the birth of Jesus. But it also is a time during which we anticipate the coming of His kingdom. That is not a single event, neither his birth nor his death and resurrection, but it is an ongoing process of becoming. We are not fully formed Christians; we are becoming Christians. We are anticipating the birth of Jesus in the church calendar, but we are anticipating eagerly the birth of Jesus in our hearts as well. We are looking back at events that have been over for 2000 years and yet are still playing out today and every day. We know how that story began at the birth and ended at death, but we also know that death did not contain it and Christ is alive today and working in our lives. We look forward to his Second Advent to usher in his Kingdom, while realizing that we can build that Kingdom now, a kingdom of love and grace and peace.

Prayer: God, in this season of Advent, may we celebrate the coming of Jesus but also the presence of Jesus in our lives, in our Church and in our world. Help us to bring his love and peace to all. Amen

Saturday, December 5

Psalm 20, 21: 1-7; Amos 5:18-27; Jude 17-25; Matthew 22:15-22

After Jesus rebuked the Jewish leaders in his parables of the Two Sons and the Vineyard, they regrouped and sought to throw questions at him that would put him in an impossible situation in front of a crowd. They asked Jesus, “Is it, or is it not, lawful to pay tribute to Rome?” (Palestine was an occupied country and the Jews were subject to the Roman Empire.)

The Jews paid three regular taxes to Rome. There was a ground tax: a man must pay to the government one tenth of the grain, and one fifth of the oil and wine which he produced, paid partly in kind and partly in coin. There was an income tax that was one percent of a man’s income. There was also a poll tax paid by every male from the age of fourteen to age sixty-five and amounting to one denarius. That is the coin that Jesus called the tribute coin, equivalent to about 4p when 3p was a typical day’s wage.

The question was meant to corner Jesus. If he said it was not lawful to pay the tax, they could report him to the Roman government officials as a seditious person and he would be arrested. If he said it was lawful to pay the tax, he would risk being discredited in the eyes of many people who resented the tax. When Matthew was being written in AD 80-90, the Temple had been destroyed, yet Rome required the Jews to pay the Temple tax anyway, but to a pagan temple. Jesus asked for a denarius coin, which was stamped with Tiberius Caesar’s head. He asked whose image was on the coin. When they replied, “Caesar’s,” He said, “then give it back to Caesar.” “Render under Caesar that which is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.” This is one of the most remembered sayings in the Bible. In that answer he both concedes the payment of the tax while subverting the reach of the emperor.

I wish Jesus had said more on this topic! What does he make of our Constitution, which draws a line between our obligations to our faith and our government? Should one person’s faith and strongly held religious beliefs be imposed on the rest of us? I think that if Jesus were to come back to earth today, he would not have much of anything to say about the government of the U.S or China or any other country. That would not be his concern. His concern would be loving the unloved and caring for the uncared for, as it was when he walked the earth two thousand years ago.

And as we look forward to his coming again, may we exhibit his principles and values in our relationships with everyone around us.

Prayer: God, as we anticipate the birth of Jesus, guide us to better reflect his love for others. Amen

December 6, Second Sunday of Advent

Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13; Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1: 1-8; II Peter 3:8-15

“But, beloved, do not forget this one thing, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.”

II Peter 3:8-9

“Fly away old bird, fly away old bird
Set your wings to fly like a thief in the night
You've got news to tell, like the woman from the well
Go wake this sleepy town and tell them what you've found”

Claire Holley, Fly Away Old Bird

Monday, December 7

Psalm 25; Amos 7:1-9; Revelation 1:1-8; Matthew 22:23-33

Tender mercies may seem fleeting,
but their goodness lingers on.
Knowing that the night is coming,
shall not wrest from me the dawn.

from Lifted, by Susan Noyes Anderson

Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul
and sings the tune without the words and never stops at all.

Emily Dickinson

Tuesday, December 8

Psalm 26, 28; Amos 7:10-17; Revelation 1:9-16; Matthew 22:34-46

"A prison cell, in which one waits, hopes . . . and is completely dependent on the fact that the door of freedom has to be opened from the outside, is not a bad picture of Advent."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 1943

In the Bleak Mid-winter

In the bleak mid-winter 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 mid-winter, long ago.

Our God, heaven cannot hold him nor earth sustain;
Heaven and earth shall flee away when He comes to reign:
In the bleak mid-winter a stable-place sufficed
The Lord God Almighty Jesus Christ.

Enough for Him, whom Cherubim worship night and day,
A breastful of milk, and a mangerful of hay;
Enough for Him, who Angels fall down before,
The ox and ass and camel which adore.

Angels and archangels may have gathered there,
Cherubim and Seraphim thronged the air –
But only His mother in her maiden bliss
Worshipped the Beloved with a kiss.

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.

Christina Rossetti

Wednesday, December 9

Psalm 38; Amos 8:1-14; Revelation 1:17-2:7; Matthew 23:1-12

“For whoever exalts himself will be humbled,
and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.”

Matthew 23:12

Frederick Buechner was in a church when he wrote, “Look at the windows that burn like fire when the sun shines through them, and at the image of Christ and the saints, at the flowers and candles, . . . the sounds that break the silence, the organ, the choir, the preacher, our own voices praying.”

Buechner asks, “What is it we are essentially doing in this building?” and answers, “Deep beneath all of this in our innermost hearts, I think we are waiting.”

And so, we wait, and sometime in the weeks of Advent ahead,

perhaps here, as you sing a favorite hymn or carol, or eat bread and drink the cup

or perhaps in the midst of business, a crowded sidewalk, a meal with friends,

or perhaps in a quiet moment, as you remember, as you wait,

Christ will come.

Thursday, December 10

Psalm 37:1-18; Amos 9:1-10; Revelation 2:8-17; Matthew 23:13-26

An Exhortation to Patience and Trust

Selected verses from Psalm 37

Do not fret because of the wicked;
do not be envious of wrongdoers;
For they will soon fade like the grass,
and wither like the green herb.
Trust in the Lord, and do good;
so, you will live in the land, and enjoy security.

Commit your way to the Lord,
trust in him, and he will act.

Be still before the Lord, and wait patiently for him
do not fret – it leads only to evil.

“I remember sitting parked by the roadside once, terribly depressed and afraid about my daughter’s illness and what was going on in our family, when out of nowhere a car came along down the highway with a license plate that bore on it the one word out of all the words in the dictionary that I needed most to see exactly then. The word was TRUST. What do you call a moment like that? Something to laugh off as the kind of joke life plays on us every once in a while? The word of God? I am willing to believe that maybe it was something of both, but for me it was an epiphany. The owner of the car turned out to be, as I’d suspected, a trust officer in a bank, and not long ago, having read an account I wrote of the incident somewhere, he found out where I lived and one afternoon brought me the license plate itself, which sits propped up on a bookshelf in my house to this day. It is rusty around the edges and a little battered, and it is also as holy a relic as I have ever seen.”

Frederick Buechner, in *Telling Secrets*

Gracious God,
Guide us to be still before you, wait patiently for you, and most importantly, to trust in you. Amen.

Friday, December 11

Psalm 31; Haggai 1:1-15; Revelation 2:18-29; Matthew 23:27-39

“Be strong, and let your heart take courage,
all you who wait for the Lord.”

Psalm 31:24

“I think we are waiting. That is what is at the heart of it. Even when we don't know that we are waiting, I think we are waiting. Even when we can't find words for what we are waiting for, I think we are waiting. An ancient Advent prayer supplies us with the words. “Give us grace,” it says, “that we may cast off the works of darkness and put upon us the armor of light.” We who live much of the time in the darkness are waiting not just at Advent, but at all times for the advent of light, of that ultimate light that is redemptive and terrifying at the same time. It is redemptive because it puts an end to the darkness, and that is also why it is terrifying, because for so long, for all our lives, the darkness has been home, and because to leave home is always cause for terror.

So, to wait for Christ to come in his fullness is not just a passive thing, a pious, prayerful, churchly thing. On the contrary, to wait for Christ to come in his fullness is above all else to act in Christ's stead as fully as we know how. To wait for Christ is as best we can to be Christ to those who need us to be Christ to them most and to bring them the most we have of Christ's healing and hope because unless we bring it, it may never be brought at all.”

Frederick Buechner, in *Secrets in the Dark*

Father God,

We seek the light, yet are afraid to embrace it because we are so comfortable in our own darkness. Show us your light, ignite us, and send us out to be your light in the world, radiant with the hope of Christ's birth, life, and great sacrifice. Amen.

Saturday, December 12

Psalm 30, 32; Haggai 2:1-9; Revelation 3:1-6; Matthew 24:1-14

The following words are to a song on a Christmas album by Andrea Bocelli. It is a duet with Katherine Jenkins and is written by Eric Lévi, a French rock musician.

I Believe

One day I'll hear the laugh of children
In a world where war has been banned

One day I'll see men of all colors
Sharing words of love and devotion

Stand up and feel The Holy Spirit
Find the power of your faith

Open your heart to those who need you
In the name of love and devotion

Yes, I believe

I believe in the people of all nations
To join and to care
For love

I believe in a world where light will guide us
And giving our love, we'll make heaven on earth

I believe.

Amid the shopping and obligations of the season, take a moment to imagine the world described in this song. Jesus Christ is born! It is a joyous time. He will come again and this world will be a reality. I believe.

December 13, Third Sunday of Advent

Psalm 126; Isaiah 61:14, 8-11; John 1:6-8, 19-28; I Thessalonians 5:16-24

Today we light the Candle of Joy, sometimes referred to as the Shepherd's Candle. The liturgical color for joy is rose, therefore the pink candle is used on the third Sunday of Advent. The lighting of this candle reminds us of the joy that the world experienced at the birth of Jesus, as well as the joy that the faithful have reached the midpoint of Advent. I found this lovely prayer as I was exploring ideas for this writing. The author is unknown.

A PRAYER FOR THE THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Joy-filled Giver of Life,
let the anticipation of your birth
fill us with overflowing joy.

May our excitement and anticipation
be a sign to the world
that you are always near.

AMEN.

Monday, December 14

Psalm 41, 52; Zechariah 1:7-17; Revelation 3:7-13; Matthew 24:15-31

Jesus came to save us all. Jesus will come again to reward the faithful. In the Apostolic Creed we confess: And in Jesus Christ His only Son who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and buried; the third day He rose from the dead; He ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

When Jesus came the first time, His purpose was to die on the Cross to set up a universal forgiveness for all of us. Once Jesus defeated the power of sin and death, the eternal life and abundant life under the guidance of the Holy Spirit is available to everyone who believes in it. God has given us a blank check signed by Jesus and it is ours to use. That is exactly why Jesus will come again the second time. Jesus will come to see how well we use the check that He signed for us. Jesus will ask two questions:

- (1) Did you tell others there is a check available to them?
- (2) Did you use the check to serve others and God?

We want to be able to answer those two questions saying:

- (1) Yes, Lord, we have shared the Good News with our family, our neighbors, and with everybody that we have encountered in our lives.
- (2) Yes, Lord, we spent our time, money, and talent to serve others and YOU.

As long as we are being faithful, we do not have to worry about the judgement. Let us focus on the reward that we are going to receive when we hear, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

I have heard a sound coming on the wind, changing hearts and minds, healing brokenness,

I feel a generation breaking through despair, I hear a generation full of faith declare,

And our song, it will be out of the darkness, we will rise and sing!

He is faithful, He is glorious and He is Jesus, and all my hope is in Him.
He is freedom, He is healing right now, He is hope, and joy, peace, and love!

I have seen a light like the break of dawn, giving blind men sight, letting lame men walk,

I see a generation with resurrection life; We are a generation filled with the power of Christ!

He has paid the highest price, He has proven His great love for us;
We will praise Him with our lives, and proclaim our love for Him.

Bryan Torwalt

Tuesday, December 15

Psalm 45; Zechariah 2:1-13; Revelation 3:14-22; Matthew 24:32-44

One of my favorite spiritual leaders is Fr. Richard Rohr. So often when I am discouraged, worried, or just out of sorts, I look to him for his spiritual guidance and wisdom. I share some of his thoughts on Advent, hoping it will make your journey through the season more meaningful.

“Come, Lord Jesus,” the Advent mantra, means that all of Christian history has to live out of a kind of deliberate emptiness, a kind of chosen non-fulfillment. Perfect fullness is always to come, and we do not need to demand it now. This keeps the field of life wide open and especially open to grace and to a future created by God rather than ourselves. This is exactly what it means to be “awake” as the Gospel urges us! We can also use other words for Advent: aware, alive, attentive, alert, are all appropriate. Advent is, above all else, a call to full consciousness and a forewarning about the high price of consciousness.

When we demand satisfaction of one another, when we demand any completion to history on our terms, when we demand that our anxiety or any dissatisfaction be taken away, saying as it were, “Why weren’t You this for me?” “Why didn’t life do that for me?” We are refusing to say “Come, Lord Jesus.” We are refusing to hold out for the full picture that is always given by God.

“Come, Lord Jesus” is a leap into the kind of freedom and surrender that is rightly call the virtue of hope. The theological virtue of hope is the patient and trustful willingness to live without closure. We are able to trust that He will come again, just as Jesus has come into our past, into our private dilemmas and into our suffering world. Our Christian past then becomes our Christian prologue, and “Come, Lord Jesus” is not a cry of desperation, but an assured shout of cosmic hope. So, as we travel the path of Advent, what expectations and demands of life can we let go of so that we can be more prepared for the coming of Jesus?

Long the day of waiting, longer still the night,
Dark, the dead of winter, yearning for the light,
Watching for the sunrise, reaching for the dawn,
Let us pray with eyes wide open this our Advent song.

Come, O come, Lord Jesus, like the morning sun!
Cast your light across our darkness, Make our hearts your home.
Lost the word of wisdom, missing what is true,
Seeking after knowledge without knowing you.

Listening for a prophet, hearing only noise;
Loud the thoughts within us, silencing your voice,
Harsh the guilt we carry, evils we have done,
Pleading for your presence, wounded and alone.

So we come believing, in the dark of night,
That your saving presence will bring Life and Light.
Come, O Come, Lord Jesus like the morning sun!
Cast your light across our darkness, Make our hearts your home.

Mark Shepherd

Open wide your door to the One who comes. Open your soul, throw
open the depths of your heart to see the riches of simplicity, the treasures
of peace, the sweetness of grace. Open your heart and run to meet
the Sun of eternal light that illuminates all men.

Ambrose of Milan

Wednesday, December 16

Psalm 119:49-72; Zechariah 3:1-10; Revelation 4:1-8; Matthew 24:45-51

Dear Lord, I have swept and I have washed but
Still nothing is as shining as it should be
For you. Under the sink, for example, is an
Uproar of mice—it is the season of their
Many children. What shall I do? And under the eaves
And through the walls the squirrels
Have gnawed their ragged entrances—but it is the season
When they need shelter, so what shall I do? And
The raccoon limps into the kitchen and opens the cupboard
While the dog snores, the cat hugs the pillow;
What shall I do? Beautiful is the new snow falling
In the yard and the fox who is staring boldly
Up the path, to the door. And still I believe you will
Come, Lord: you will, when I speak to the fox
The sparrow, the lost dog, the shivering sea-goose, know
That really I am speaking to you whenever I say,
As I do all morning and afternoon: Come in, Come in.

Mary Oliver, “Making the House Ready for the Lord”

Thursday, December 17

Psalm 50; Zechariah 4:1-14; Revelation 4:9-5:5; Matthew 25:1-13

It was a time like this,
War and tumult of war,
a horror in the air.
Hungry yawned the abyss—
and yet there came the star
and the child most wonderfully there.

It was a time like this,
of fear and lust for power,
license and greed and blight—
and yet the Prince of bliss
came into the darkest hour
in quiet & silent light.

And in a time like this,
how celebrate his birth
when all things fall apart?
Ah! Wonderful it is
with no room on the earth
the stable is our heart.

Madeleine L'Engle, "Into the Darkest Hour"

Friday, December 18

Psalm 40, 54; Zechariah 7:8-8:8; Revelation 5:6-14; Matthew 25:14-30

Here is an Advent Illustration for kids and those of us who used to be kids and remember what it is like. Suppose you and your mom get separated in the grocery store and you start to get scared and panic and don't know which way to go, and you run to the end of the aisle, and just before you start to cry, you see a shadow on the floor at the end of the aisle that looks just like your mom. It makes you really happy and you feel hope. But which is better? The happiness of seeing the shadow, or having your mom step around the corner and its really her?

That's the way it is when Jesus comes to be our High Priest. That's what Christmas is. Christmas is the replacement of shadows with the real thing.

John Piper

It is now, at Advent, that I am given the chance to suspend all expectation and instead to revel in the mystery.

Jerusalem Jackson Greer

Saturday, December 19

Psalm 55; Zechariah 8:9-17; Revelation 6:1-17; Matthew 25:31-46

The thing I love best about Advent is the heartbreak. The utter and complete heartbreak.

Jerusalem Jackson Greer

Life in a prison cell may well be compared to Advent; one waits, hopes, and does this, that, or the other- things that are of no real consequence - the door is shut, and can be opened only from the outside.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Letters from Prison, November 21, 1943

Every time we open our mouths, and speak, we are either saying let there be light or let there be darkness.

Max Lucado

December 20, Fourth Sunday of Advent

II Samuel 7:1-11, 16; Luke 1:46-55; Romans 16:25-27; Luke 1:26-38

“The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.””

Luke 1:30

This fourth Sunday of Advent, the fourth candle of the Advent Wreath reminds us of LOVE. However, the light of the second candle continues to remind us of PEACE. Perhaps in preparing our hearts to accept the vastness of God’s love, we first must accept God’s peace.

The gospel lesson in Luke tells a story that probably would not have been considered peaceful by the main character – Mary. She is addressed by an angel sent from God. She is perplexed by the angel’s greeting and announcement. The scene is obviously not peaceful because the angel reassures Mary with the words, “Do not be afraid.”

In the Children’s Atrium, asking questions is a natural way of learning. When reading the various stories of the birth of Jesus, the children compare the stories and ask, “What do you hear in the stories that is the same?” Often a child responds, “The angel says, ‘Do not be afraid.’” Finding comfort in these words, the children are accepting of the startling appearances and unexpected news following this reassuring phrase.

In this story, the phrase serves as a reset button. No longer a scene of tense uncertainty, the phrase transforms the scene into one in which Mary can hear the good news – she will have a baby. Perhaps it is this sense of peace that allows Mary to willingly accept news that is both unexpected and unsettling with the words, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

As we prepare our hearts for the coming Christmas season, may we hear those words of assurance, “Do not be afraid.” Only then can we fully accept that the peace of Christ is with us even in the most unexpected and unsettling of moments.

Monday, December 21

Psalm 119:49-72; Zechariah 3:1-10; Revelation 4:1-8; Matthew 24:45-51

“Day and night without ceasing they sing,
‘Holy, holy, holy,
The Lord God the Almighty,
Who was and is and is to come.’”

Revelation 4:8

The first Sunday in Advent sets the tone for this period of waiting – HOPE. Each of the scripture readings today offers hope during a time in which all is uncertain. During this pandemic, people have been troubled by the uncertainty of the future. One of the common coping mechanisms has been to provide a litany of things that have not changed. Some of these are simple – your family is still your family; the sun continues to rise and set; your name is still your name; ice cream is still cold. Feeding these sustainable expectations brings a sense of calm. In today’s big news of storms and sickness and wildfires and racial unrest, all seems lost. But individual stories of compassion and selflessness and newly found friendships provide that small chirp of hope. In the words of Emily Dickinson:

“Hope” is the thing with feathers -
That perches in the soul -
And sings the tune without the words -
And never stops - at all -

And sweetest - in the Gale - is heard -
And sore must be the storm -
That could abash the little Bird
That kept so many warm -

I’ve heard it in the chillest land -
And on the strangest Sea -
Yet - never - in Extremity,
It asked a crumb - of me.

In the scripture passage from Revelation, living creatures with wings remind us of perhaps the most important, simple, unchanging truth:

The Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come.

Tuesday, December 22

Psalm 50; Zechariah 4: 1-14; Revelation 4:9-5:5; Matthew 25: 1-13

The Neighborhood Nativity

Every year, as a child growing up on East Manor Drive, I could not contain my excitement when early each December the Iupe family would set up their outdoor nativity. In this 1970's world of my childhood the annual placement of the nativity inspired wonder and awe. All the characters were there: Mary, Joseph, baby Jesus in a manger with pine straw and a sheltered wooden enclosure, shepherds, camels, donkeys, cows, sheep, and the magi. All the figurines were fashioned out of plastic and brilliantly detailed in color that illuminated ever so brightly each evening when the nativity was turned on. The Iupe house backed up to the back corner of my backyard and me and my friends used to venture over to the next-door-neighbor's backyard and slowly work our way up the hill into the Iupe front yard to gaze in wonder at the holy scene.

I still remember the sense of childlike glee and comfort that the Iupe nativity gave to me each year growing up. As an adult, it is with the same wonder-filled anticipation that I await the birth of the Christ child. My great hope for all of you is that you may climb carefully the hill of your own making while charting your own pilgrimage to discover the wonder of your very own neighborhood nativity in your heart. For in the Christ child there is peace, hope, and love for us all. The best part of the journey is getting there, and we are always welcome at the nativity.

Wednesday, December 23

Psalm 40, 54; Zechariah 7:8-8:8; Revelation 5:6-14; Matthew 25:14-30

A Charlie Brown Christmas

“Isn’t there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?” yells Charlie Brown in exasperation! This is where Linus steps in and says “Sure Charlie Brown, I can tell you what Christmas is all about” as he proceeds to recite the narrative of the birth of Jesus from Luke Chapter 2.

This 1965 holiday classic which is a winner of both the Emmy and Peabody Awards is a timeless gem that has endured generations. Its message of the true spirit of Christmas is delivered in true PEANUTS fashion thanks to writer and creator Charles M. Schulz. We, like the Charlie Brown Christmas tree, all just need a “little love” to grow and flourish. We also know that like Charlie Brown, it is hard to break through all the hype and commercialization of Christmas sometimes and embrace the true meaning of Christmas. That is where we must mirror the example set by Linus and live out the spirit of Christmas.

2020 has been a difficult year for us all. Sometimes I long for the simpler times of the 1970s & 1980s of my childhood. Times that were always made special with the help of the PEANUTS gang. Practice love and kindness this Christmas to all with whom you cross paths. You never know what someone you encounter may be struggling with or what burdens they may bear. Baby Jesus is almost here. Let us be ready!

Thursday, December 24

Psalm 55; Zechariah 8:9-17; Revelation 6:1-17; Matthew 25:31-46

O Come, All Ye Faithful

“O Come, All Ye Faithful” is, hands down, my favorite Christmas carol. I can barely hold back tears of joy as the congregation stands to sing this beloved carol at the beginning of the Christmas Eve Candlelight Communion Service every year. All the Northminster faithful are gathered in tight while overflowing the balcony and spilling out into the narthex. Voices sing in unison accompanied by the majestic notes of the organ... “O Come Let Us Adore Him, O Come Let Us Adore Him, O Come Let Us Adore Him...Christ the Lord.” You might say this is my “thin place” or, better yet, “thin moment,” each year where time and space stand still and everything is as perfect as can be in my world. I know that if I can just make it to that next Christmas Eve at Northminster that everything will be all right.

As I write these words in mid-September of 2020, I am led to wonder how we might get there once again in this year of COVID-19. I do know that we are indeed the Northminster faithful and whether we gather in person, by virtual live stream, or, on our own, that song will stir and swell in our hearts and we will worship where we are. Christmas is coming, and the babe is in the manger after all.

This reminds me of a beloved childhood tale titled, “How the Grinch Stole Christmas!” by Dr. Seuss. The Grinch did his best to steal Christmas from the Whos down in Whoville, but they still woke up Christmas morning and sang. The Grinch had a change of heart and joined the Whos in celebrating Christmas. While we may not be rid of COVID-19 by Christmas Eve, you can be sure we can come together, as the Northminster faithful once again, and sing from wherever we are... “O Come Let Us Adore Him, O Come Let Us Adore Him, O Come Let Us Adore Him...Christ the Lord.”

In Appreciation

We are deeply thankful for the creative expressions contributed by members of the Worship and Music Committee for this year's edition of The Season of Advent.

Introduction.....	Richard Joiner
Sunday, November 29 (First Sunday of Advent).....	Jeanne Cook
Monday, November 30.....	Jeanne Cook
Tuesday, December 1.....	Jo Ann Welch
Wednesday, December 2.....	Jo Ann Welch
Thursday, December 3.....	Rush Miller
Friday, December 4.....	Rush Miller
Saturday, December 5.....	Rush Miller
Sunday, December 6 (Second Sunday of Advent)....	Monica Daniels
Monday, December 7.....	Monica Daniels
Tuesday, December 8.....	Shirley Foster
Wednesday, December 9.....	Shirley Foster
Thursday, December 10.....	Crisler Boone
Friday, December 11.....	Crisler Boone
Saturday, December 12.....	Gwen Anderson
Sunday, December 13 (Third Sunday of Advent)...	Gwen Anderson
Monday, December 14.....	Joe Rankin
Tuesday, December 15.....	Joe Rankin
Wednesday, December 16.....	Amy Williams
Thursday, December 17.....	Amy Williams
Friday, December 18.....	Linda McGehee
Saturday, December 19.....	Linda McGehee
Sunday, December 20 (Fourth Sunday of Advent).....	Holly Wiggs
Monday, December 21.....	Holly Wiggs
Tuesday, December 22.....	Gray Jackson
Wednesday, December 23.....	Gray Jackson
Thursday, December 24.....	Gray Jackson
Cover Art and Layout Design.....	Amy Williams
Editor.....	Richard Joiner

Cover Art:

Look...

Do you see the flames of Advent,
Illuminating the darkness of night?
Do you see the flicker of hope and peace,
Making all things right?

Do you see the radiance of joy and love,
Kindling hearts, setting us free?
Can you be this light for others?
It may be the only light they will see.

Look...

Do you see the angel, Gabriel?
Glad Tidings to Mary he brings,
Told that she'd been chosen,
As the mother of The King?

Look...

Do you see the Light so perfect?
Feel the Light within you grow,
As we await again Christ's coming -
Jesus, our E'er Blooming Rose.