

This is November 29, 2020...Advent One

On behalf of the family of faith at Community United Church of Christ, Medford, WI,
welcome to this time of worship!

“No matter who you are or where you are on your life’s journey, you are welcome here!”

During today’s worship, I will be lighting one of the 4 Advent candles on the Advent wreath in the sanctuary. If you have a “real” Advent wreath, or separate candles, or a “crafty” wreath on which to tape a flame, please have it ready. On Wednesdays during Advent “*A Time for Pause*” will be posted on Facebook and the text will also be added to the weekly mailings. It will include, scripture, prayer and a hymn.

We will be celebrating Advent together, even though we are distanced!

Hymn: “*O Come, O Come Emmanuel*” vs.1&2, #154 (Public Domain)

Verse 1: O come, O come, Emmanuel,
And ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appear.
Rejoice, rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.

Verse 2: O come, Thou Dayspring, come and cheer
Our spirits by Thine advent here;
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night,
And death's dark shadows put to flight.
Rejoice, rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.

Advent Candle Lighting

Here we are in God’s presence waiting in hopeful anticipation.

The sun may be dimmed, the moon may lose its light, the stars may fall from the sky,
but, still, the Divine Spirit is with us.

We light the first candle to remind us that Jesus is our hope.

Let us pray: O God, let the coming days of Advent light up our hearts to more compassion and love for one another. Let our eyes be opened to the light of your presence as we hope for the birth of something new and long-awaited, in Jesus Christ, our Savior. Amen.

Mark 13:24-37 The Message Copyright © 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2002.

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Jesus was speaking with his disciples as he also speaks to us today words that can be trusted:

²⁴⁻²⁵ “Following those hard times,” he said, “sun will fade out, moon cloud over, stars fall out of the sky, cosmic powers tremble. ²⁶⁻²⁷ “And then they’ll see the Son of Man enter in grand style, his Arrival filling the sky—no one will miss it! He’ll dispatch the angels; they will pull in the chosen from the four winds, from pole to pole.

²⁸⁻³¹ “Take a lesson from the fig tree. From the moment you notice its buds form, the merest hint of green, you know summer’s just around the corner. And so, it is with you. When you see all these things, you know he is at the door. Don’t take this lightly. I’m not just saying this for some future generation, but for this one, too—these things will happen. Sky and earth will wear out; my words won’t wear out.

³²⁻³⁷ “But the exact day and hour? No one knows that, not even heaven’s angels, not even the Son. Only the Father. So, keep a sharp lookout, for you don’t know the timetable. It’s like a man who takes a trip, leaving home and putting his servants in charge, each assigned a task, and commanding the gatekeeper to stand watch. So, stay at your post, watching. You have no idea when the homeowner is returning, whether evening, midnight, cockcrow, or morning. You don’t want him showing up unannounced, with you asleep on the job. I say it to you, and I’m saying it to all: Stay at your post. Keep watch.”

My message today is entitled. “Waiting in Hope”

Please pray with me: Loving God, may these days of Advent draw us closer to you. Maybe this time, we will truly sense your presence in the new fallen snow or in the twinkle of tree lights. Maybe this year, the ringing of the Salvation Army bells will “ding” differently for us. Maybe now, the dusty ornaments will look a little bit more cheerful. As we hear the old, old story, we pray, let the words fall upon our ears as if you, O God, were whispering them to us one by one. You have been here all along... waiting for us to notice. We pray in the name of Jesus, Emmanuel, God-with-us. Amen.

Today’s Gospel story comes along every three years and it always *seems* to be an inappropriate scripture for Advent. Who wants to hear about a fig tree or the end of time... when we are getting ready to celebrate Christmas? Every time I read it again, the first thing I think of is, “Oh no, that one again!” I make an attempt to come up with another scripture to share on the 1st Sunday of Advent, this first Sunday of the Church Year B and this Sunday of Hope. But, guess what? I didn’t throw it out this year, either.

The story never gets worn out. Each time I read it, something new pops up. Does that ever happen to you? I can sum it up with three words: waiting in hope.

“I’m an impatient, restless person. Slowing down and waiting seem like a waste of time. Yet waiting seems to be an inevitable part of the human condition.” Fooled you! You thought I was talking about myself...well, that may be true, but I am quoting Henri Nouwen, a Dutch Catholic priest, professor, writer and theologian. He also said this: *“Waiting is a period of learning. The longer we wait, the more we hear about **him** for whom we are waiting.”*

In today’s scripture, Jesus paints a picture of that famous fig tree with tiny buds announcing that summer is just around the corner. He tells of how we, are always waiting, should be alert and watch for signs, just like the servants awaiting the return of the homeowner, not knowing when he would arrive. “Stay at your post. Keep alert.” Jesus says this to let us know that he will return. His words never wear out, the longer we wait. No one knows when he will come, but, our hope lies still in the story of his first coming. Let these words not wear old.

Waiting. It’s something we are never quite finished with. The season of Advent will be different this year. This Advent, we find ourselves waiting for hugs; for seeing our families in person; for the day when we can gather here in the sanctuary; for the day when we will not have to worry that everyone we walk by in the grocery store could be a corona virus carrier. We are waiting for a vaccine.

In the watching and waiting during these weeks of Advent, there is more to do. First, we shouldn’t be just sitting there complaining about what we *cannot have* during the holidays. We shouldn’t be the idle ones if this year, Jesus happens to return. Christmas is not a worn-out tradition. There is always some excitement involved, even when you set out some ornaments or put up a tree yourself. When there is a shortage of extra money, remember that caring for each other and giving someone the gift of a phone or zoom call or a message, is priceless to the receiver and the giver. Hoping is also not an old-fashioned attitude to be tossed aside this year.

These words of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark, the Message interpretation, are where I said, “Aha! That’s it! “Waiting in hope.” For today, for this week and for the future in which God is already waiting for us, we hear these words of Jesus, “My words won’t wear out...” as interpreted in the Message; and ³¹“Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away...” as translated in the New Revised Standard Version.

The scriptures remind us that we always have something to wait and hope for. Be alert to what God is doing all around you and reflect the light of this candle of hope wherever you may find yourself this week.

One of my favorite stories of hope is a true story about a nine-year-old named Wallace Purling.

Wallace was in the second grade that year, although he should have been in the fourth. He had difficulty keeping up, was a little slow and clumsy but was also very kind. The kids tried to exclude him from their games, but Wally hung around, ever the protector of the children at risk.

Wally so hoped to be a shepherd with a wooden flute in the nativity play that December. His teacher, however, assigned him a minor speaking part, that of the innkeeper. Wally got caught up in the timeless story unfolding on the stage as he stood, mesmerized.

When the time came, Joseph guided Mary to the door of the inn. Joseph knocked hard on the plywood, and Wally, the innkeeper, was there waiting. Wally tried to sound mean when Joseph asked for lodging. 'Seek it elsewhere. The inn is filled,' said Wally as he stared straight ahead.

'We have asked everywhere in vain. We have traveled far and are very tired,' Joseph tried again. Once again, a stern-looking Wally reiterated the fact: there was no room in the inn. 'Please, good innkeeper, this is my wife, Mary. She is heavy with child and needs a place to rest. Surely you must have some small corner for her. She is so tired.'

Wally relaxed his stiff pose and, for the first time, really looked at Mary. He paused so long that the audience began to get nervous. The prompter whispered: 'Be gone!' Wally repeated the whisper: 'Be gone.'

Joseph sadly put his arm around Mary; she rested her head on his shoulder as the two slowly moved away. The innkeeper did not move. He stood transfixed in the doorway of the cardboard inn. His mouth opened, his brow furrowed, and his eyes filled with tears. And suddenly this Christmas pageant took an unexpected turn.

'Don't go, Joseph,' Wally called after them. 'Bring Mary back.'
Now Wally Purling's face shone. "You can have my room.'

The story first appeared via Dina Donohue, "Trouble at the Inn," in *Guideposts Greetings* (Carmel, NY: Guideposts, 2004), 3-5; as referenced by Jeanne Stevenson-Moessner, *A Primer in Pastoral Care* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 91-92.

Wally was the watchful one...he hesitated to say "go away." because God spoke to him that day...he was nudged to change the script, and without knowing it, he changed each one in that room that day... and, I don't know about you, but, this story changes me every time I hear it.

Eugene Peterson, the author of *The Message*, interprets the words of Paul to the Romans 8:24 in this way: "Waiting does not diminish us any more than waiting diminishes a pregnant mother."

We are enlarged in the waiting" During times of waiting, God is vibrantly at work within us.

--Luci Shaw, *"Nourishment for the journey," in Nouwen Then, Christopher de Vinck, ed. (Zondervan, 1999)*

This Advent, cling to the old, but, ever new story about God so loving the world that he gave his only son. Look and see how God is still speaking and creating all around us. Keep awake and alert as we become *large* with unexpected hope...the oh, so unswerving hope in the waiting! May your "Christmassing" be merry and bright!

Let's spend a few moments in silent prayer. Take a deep breath. And breath it out.

Let us pray together: Let us pray together: Almighty God, true Hope of all the earth, prepare in us a warm and welcoming place, where we may receive the King of Creation in the center of these unprecedented days. Let us create a quiet place of light and peace, where we can, this year, celebrate these holidays as the holy days they were meant to be. Help us help those whom you hold in special care for the sake of their special needs. For them we ask gifts that only you can give.

To those who are waiting for grief to be less, especially the family of Lorraine Schmidt and Vivian Knospe, give them a deepened awareness of your arm around them and peaceful certainty that your other arm is around the loved one they are missing.

To those who are waiting to be well again, open a window of insight so that they can glimpse your healing plan for them with patient endurance...especially Jeff, Jamie H, Brian N, Mike K, Jessica, Angie, Mike G-P, Barry, Jane, Matt, Ron J...and all others we mention in silence.

For those who are waiting to find work or a place to call home, go before them to open a path through their troubles, that they may follow you to a brighter future.

For those who wait for reunions with family members that are in quarantine, let them know patience.

For all who wait and watch, help us to be attentive and ready for the outcomes that you envision to be best and in your perfect timing. Hear now the joys and concerns we hold in our hearts...we pray with hope, in the words Jesus taught us:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy Name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our sins, as we forgive those

**who sin against us. And lead us not into temptation, but, deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen**

This is our time of intention and thanks: I am quoting Anabel Proffitt: "May you stay in that place of wonder and wisdom that lies between the uncertainty of the world and the dependable grace of our God."

Let us pray: Ever giving God, we ask that, as we have received, we now know better the intent to give; as we have prospered, we now intend to model your gracious sharing. We dedicate new gifts of time and talents, as well as sharing our treasures to further the mission of your Church. Amen.

Benediction: Go now knowing, that God's kingdom is nothing like we would expect, and Jesus acts nothing like the king that everyone was waiting for.

Because of that, we are able to live our lives in a way that the world least expects – forgiving, praying, serving, and loving those around us.

Go now and live Advent differently. Live the life to which God calls you. -Rev. Melissa Kessler

Wednesday Devotional: Hello, dear friends! This is the first week of Advent and it's "A Time for Pause."

The landscape has changed overnight! It's December already! We haven't even had time to realize that when we were young, the "wait" for December seemed so long. December comes to us with shorter days and darker nights. This year, it comes amidst this unsettling time of pandemic.

The prophet, Isaiah, predicted a waiting time 100's of years before the birth of Jesus. We, as people of faith, have added symbols of anticipation to this holy season such as stars and candles, evergreens and wreaths. During these days of waiting, we proclaim our belief in an un-quenchable light and an unswerving hope.

Listen now to the words of the prophet **Isaiah 64:1-4** New International Version (NIV)

Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you!

² As when fire sets twigs ablaze and causes water to boil, come down to make your name known to your enemies and cause the nations to quake before you!

³ For when you did awesome things that we did not expect, you came down, and the mountains trembled before you.

⁴ Since ancient times no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who acts on behalf of those who wait for him.

Let us pray: Merciful God, as we begin our journey to the light, we confess that we have not always lived in ways pleasing to you. We sometimes feel distant from You... who are both Mother and Father to us; You, in whose hands we are like clay. Even now, our longing for You, who have torn open the heavens and have come down, kindles like a fire in our souls. Even now as we wait, *we dare to hope.*



Response: O Come let us adore Him... O Come let us adore Him, Christ the Lord!

We who are pregnant with anticipation, feel hope rise up within us. So, we light this first candle and name it "Hope."

Let's sing an **Advent hymn** (over 100 yr. old): "*Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus*" #153

Verse 1 Come Thou long expected Jesus Born to set Thy people free From our fears and sins release us
Let us find our rest in Thee Israel's strength and consolation Hope of all the earth Thou art
Dear desire of every nation Joy of every longing heart

Verse 2 Born Thy people to deliver Born a child and yet a King Born to reign in us forever
Now Thy gracious Kingdom bring By Thine own eternal Spirit Rule in all our hearts alone
By Thine all sufficient merit Raise us to Thy glorious throne

Holy One, we give you thanks and praise this day and every day, for loving us so much that you sent your Son.
The blessing of God, Creator, Redeemer and comforter is with us.

Blessings to one and all this first week of Advent!

Pastor Mary Jo