

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT - HOPE

A Festival of Advent Carols and Lessons

November 29, 2009

Prelude

Improvisation (on an old French Church Tune)

Bedell

Opening Prayer

We can hardly believe it, Lord. The Advent season is upon us. We usually translate that into the buying season in preparation for THE BIG DAY. But when we place our hope in the tinsel, wrappings, tape and boxes, we forget the most glorious gift of all, the gift of your absolute love. Open our eyes, our hearts, our spirits today to behold the gracious love you have for each of us in the fulfillment of all your promises. For we ask this in the name of Jesus. AMEN.

The Lighting of the Advent Candle of Hope

In the first chapter of the Gospel of John we read: *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.*

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.”

The Gospel of John speaks of Christ as the true light coming into the world. In commemoration of that coming, we light candles for the four weeks leading to Christmas and reflect on the coming of Christ. It is significant that the church has always used that language—the *coming* of Christ—because it speaks to a deep truth. Christ *is* coming. Christ is always coming, always entering a troubled world, a wounded heart. And so we light the first candle, the candle of hope, and dare to express our longing for peace, for healing, and the well-being of all creation.

(First candle is lit.)

*Let us pray. Loving God, as we enter this Advent season,
We open all the dark places in our lives and memories to the healing light of Christ.
Show us the creative power of hope.
Prepare our hearts to be transformed by you,
That we may walk in the light of Christ. Amen.*

The First Advent Scripture

Isaiah 7:9, Matthew 1:23

The prophet Isaiah said, *“Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.”*

In the Gospel of Matthew we read, “*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.’*”

The First Advent Lesson

The season of Advent is often a whirl of buying gifts, decorating the tree and a non-stop succession of programs and parties. It was, however, not that way for the Monks of the Middle Ages.

In the monastery, Advent was a time of meditation on serious subjects: death, judgment, heaven and hell. And the month in which we think of Christ’s first coming was used by monks to reflect on His second coming. In the same way, this should be true for Christians today. We glance backward to Bethlehem, but we look forward to the Great White Throne, that is, eternity with God.

Our first Advent hymn has its origin in seven prose Latin sentences which were sung during medieval monastic vespers leading up to Christmas. Its usage dates all the way back to the 9th century. Each stanza (originally, the stanzas were short sentences) salutes the returning Messiah by one of the many titles ascribed to Him in Scripture.

The ancient hymnwriter refers to Jesus as "Emmanuel" and "God with us". He implores Jesus to come and end the Christian’s separation from God. "Israel", used three times in the stanzas and each time in the refrain, signifies the waiting Church. While we can experience reconciliation and friendship with God right now, the hymn longs for that perfect, completed fellowship which will be enjoyed in eternity.

Jesus is also referred to as the "Dayspring" or the "Rising Sun" in Luke 1:78 and is asked to remove the gloom of spiritual night and the shadows of death. Whether writing in the 9th or 21st century, these words still address the yearning of Christians everywhere for Christ’s return.

Another name for Jesus is the "Rod of Jesse" (see Isaiah 11:1). It is a term found in the King James Version of the Bible and signifies Christ’s fight to free His people from Satan, hell and the grave. It harkens back to the time when a rod, the club used by shepherds to fight wild animals, played a significant role in defending the sheep.

This hymn is one of the oldest to be found in any Christian hymnal. Matthew 13:52 tells us, “And he said to them, “Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.” This hymn is a treasure as well and illustrates our great debt to our spiritual ancestors.

But it is also vital for today’s Christian, who, with the seeming obsession for this present world, must be reminded to prepare for the world that is to come.

Please stand if you are able and join now in singing “*O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*”, hymn number 123.

The First Advent Hymn

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel

#123

The Second Advent Scripture

Isaiah 40:1-9

The Prophet Isaiah said, “‘Comfort, O comfort my people,’ says your God. ‘Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins. ‘

A voice cries out: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.’ A voice says, ‘Cry out!’ And I said, ‘What shall I cry?’ All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever. Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, ‘Here is your God!’”

The Second Advent Lesson

To black slaves in the United States, the birth of a Savior who would set all men free was a miracle to be sung about. Just as Israel had longed for a Messiah and deliverer, so did the slaves long for delivery from the tyranny under which they suffered. The coming of Savior offered hope to all who heard. Just as in the times of Isaiah, the prophet, there was Good News to be shared. And when there was something so notable to tell, what better place to tell it from than a mountain, just as Jesus had chosen for His Sermon on the Mount.

The prophet Isaiah said, “Get you up to a high mountain, herald of good tidings. Lift up your voice with strength. Say, “Here is your God!” When the angels appeared to the shepherds, they fell to their knees. But then they got up and went to see the babe. But they didn’t just gaze on the baby and go on about their ordinary lives. The Bible tells us that they returned to their homes and neighbors, “*glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.*”

We are *all* called to share the Good News. While we may not climb to the top of a mountain and begin shouting, we are *all* told to go into the world and spread the Good News. We share the Gospel everywhere we are, at work, at the mall, at the park, on a plane, but especially here in church.

Go Tell It on the Mountain, a traditional spiritual that dates from the early 1800s, was first popularized in 1879 by the Fisk University Jubilee Singers. This chorus traveled throughout the United States and Europe at the end of the 19th century, earning scholarship-fund money for Fisk, a school founded to educate freed slaves. They sang of the Good News. They sang it joyfully and they sang it often. And all who listened heard the message that “Here is your God! - Jesus Christ is born!”

The Second Advent Carol

Go, Tell It On the Mountain
soloist

The Prayers of the People and the Lord’s Prayer

Dear Lord, help us to look forward in hope to the coming of our Savior. May we live as he taught, ready to welcome him with burning love and faith. We pray for the virtue of hope, that amidst the trials and difficulties of this world, we may keep our hearts fixed upon you, who reigns over the world. May your grace enliven us, strengthen us, and defend us, as we await your coming in glory. During this Advent, let your light of peace and love shine in our

world. Give us eyes to see the signs of your presence in the world. Help us to prepare our lives and our homes to receive the One who said, "I am the light of the world." We thank you for friends and strangers who have received us when we were lonely, afraid, or tired. Make room in our hearts for people who need us. May we be ready to receive the love you offer us and have the courage to share that love with others through loving action. Send us your grace this Advent Season so that we can prepare for your coming. Touch our hearts with longing so that we can better love and serve you and each other. Fill us with the hope that we can be transformed by your spirit and so help transform the world. Give us the peace of knowing that you came to share our human life and redeem us for the sake of love. We ask these things in the name of Jesus, who taught us to pray, saying, "Our Father . . . Amen

The Third Advent Scripture

Philippians 4:4-7

The Apostle Paul wrote to the Philippians: *"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.*

"Let your gentleness be known to everyone.

"The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your request be made known to God.

"And the Peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

The Third Advent Lesson

Has it happened at your house yet? It happened at ours this past week - our first Christmas card of the season. It wasn't one of those mass mailing cards from our insurance company, either. This was a bona fide expression of Christmas cheer from people we actually know.

Have you ever noticed how Christmas cards tend to emphasize themes like "peace" and "joy"? Keep an eye on the cards you receive this year. See how many contain the words "peace", "joy" or even both. And it's not just Christmas cards. It's Christmas carols. Remember "Good Christian Men Rejoice"?

Or how about "O Thou Joyful"?

"O thou joyful, o thou wonderful, peace revealing Christmastide!
Darkness disappeareth, God's own light now neareth.
Peace and joy to all betide!"

The language may be a bit archaic, but there's no mistaking the emphasis on peace and joy.

Peace and joy as predominant themes of the Christmas tradition are not accidental. In Luke 1, Mary, pregnant with Jesus, visited her cousin Elizabeth, who was pregnant with John the Baptist. Upon greeting Mary, Elizabeth exclaimed in a loud voice, "As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy." A bit later, Mary herself proclaimed, "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,..." In Luke 2, the night Jesus was born, an angel appeared to shepherds and announced, "I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people." Later, having seen the child, the shepherds returned to their flocks rejoicing.

This scriptural emphasis on Christmas joy is also true of Christmas peace. Consider the Christmas prophecy of Isaiah 9:6-7: "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given,...and he will be called...Prince of Peace." There's also Zechariah's prophecy in Luke 1:79 that Jesus would be born "...to guide our feet into the path of peace." Further, we have something else

the angels proclaimed to the shepherds in Luke 2: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests." Peace and joy. That these qualities are repeatedly emphasized in the Bible's Christmas prophecies and narratives tells us something. Peace and joy are at the heart of Jesus' incarnation. Jesus was born to bring peace and joy.

In JOHN 14:27, Jesus said, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you." Just a few moments later, in JOHN 15:11, Jesus further stated his intent: "...that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete." Jesus' life began with proclamations of peace and joy and in the hours just before his arrest and eventual crucifixion, proclamations of peace and joy were still on Jesus' lips. Jesus was born into this world, he lived among us, he served us, he suffered and died on our behalf, he rose again and ascended to the Father - all this that you and I might know, among other things, the genuine peace and joy of God. If you haven't figured it out yet, you will. The peace and joy of Christmas will never be found in the foolishness that's grown up around the holiday. The peace and joy of Christmas is found in Jesus Christ alone.

Please stand if you are able and join in singing our next carol, *O, Thou Joyful*, hymn number 119.

The Third Advent Carol

O, Thou Joyful

#119

The Fourth Advent Scripture

Habakkuk 2:20, I John 3:8
John 1:9, John 8:12

In Habakkuk 2:20, we read, *"Let all the earth keep silence before Him"*

And then in I John 3:8, the writer of the epistle tells us, *"The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work."*

Speaking of Jesus' arrival, the Apostle John wrote in the 9th verse of the first chapter, *"The true light that enlightens every man was coming in to the world.:"*

After His arrival, Jesus boldly announced: *"I am the light of the world"*(John 8:12)

The Fourth Advent Lesson

Our fourth Advent carol is an ancient chant of Eucharistic devotion based on Scripture taken from Habakkuk, one of the 12 minor prophets. The original was composed in Greek as a Cherubic Hymn for the Offertory of the Divine Liturgy of St James in the fourth Century AD. In our scriptures, it is made clear that Jesus is light. Our ancient hymn writer embraces the same theme:

The Light of light descendeth
from the realms of endless day
that the powers of hell may vanish
as the darkness clears away.

We are fascinated with light: astronomers study it; poets sing of it; inventors find new ways to capture and share it; children love to play with it. And light became one of the earliest and most common metaphors for God.

Light illumines: no person can see anything in total darkness. So Jesus Christ illumines our minds about the person of God, about what we are, about how we can be reconciled to Him and how we are to live in His light.

Light also brings life: no plant will grow, no flower will bloom and no fruit will ripen if there is no light. So, Jesus came to bring the light which produces abundant and eternal life.

Light cheers. We often hear in Church that real joy does not depend on the weather. That's true, but sunlight does bring joy to a dark day. And so Christ came to bring us joy, even when life is anything but joyful. After five terrible beatings and two horrific stonings, this most jubilant Apostle, Paul, got up and dusted off the opposition with the shout:

Rejoice in the Lord always.

And light purifies. Mildew exposed to light is destroyed. A stain on my shirt can be bleached away when it hangs in the sun. So Christ came to destroy the evil deeds the devil continually entices us to commit.

A singer in New York City once lamented, "It's been a long time since I liked myself." Perhaps you feel the same way today. But there is good news for him and for you: Jesus, the Light of the world, forgives - He washes you totally clean of your sin. And Jesus, the Light, will destroy the devil's work.

Jesus tells us that one day there will be a "new heaven and a new earth." God's new creation will be filled only with righteousness - only that which is pure and perfect. But, He can fill you with righteousness right now, if you let Him. For if a scientist can make penicillin out of mold, God can make something good of the singer - and you!

The Fourth Advent Carol

Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence
Chancel Choir

The Fifth Advent Scripture

Isaiah 9:6, Micah 5:2

The prophet Isaiah said, *"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."*

And the prophet Micah prophesied, *"But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days."*

The Fifth Advent Lesson

Most radio stations play some type of Christmas music during the holiday season, but many of the songs have become so familiar to us that we no longer consider their content. In between the secular songs like "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" and "Up on a Housetop," you may hear the strains of an old hymn by Charles Wesley called "Come Thou Long-Expected Jesus." It was written in 1744, and it reads,

**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.
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 own sufficient merit, raise us to Thy glorious throne.

"Come Thou Long-Expected Jesus" is a little heavier than most of the music we are used to hearing today, and if we are not careful we will miss much of the meaning. The first verse focuses on the fact that the coming of Jesus Christ fulfilled Israel's longing for the Messiah. As the one whose coming was prophesied in the Old Testament, He is the "long-expected Jesus."

A few of the prophecies that Jesus fulfilled are Isaiah 7:14, which spoke of a virgin giving birth to a child whose name would mean "God with us;" Isaiah 9:6, which told of a child whose name would be called "Wonderful, Counselor, the Mighty God, eternal Father, the Prince of Peace;" and Micah 5:2, which said that from Bethlehem would come a ruler whose "goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity."

These and many similar prophecies looked forward to the coming of the Messiah, and many devout Jews prayed earnestly for the day when He would arrive. Luke 2 tells of Simeon, a man of faith who was "looking for the consolation of Israel" (v. 25). When he saw Jesus as an infant, Simeon knew that this Child was the fulfillment of his messianic hope. Charles Wesley was borrowing from this passage when he described Jesus in this song as "Israel's strength and consolation."

Although He fulfilled Israel's prophecies, Jesus came to bring salvation to the entire world, which is what Wesley was referring to when he described Christ as the "hope of all the earth" and the "dear desire of every nation." More than that, He is the "joy of every longing heart." He alone is the one who can satisfy every soul.

The second verse tells us why Jesus can meet our expectations: He was "born a child and yet a King." As the One who is both God and man, Jesus was able to satisfy God's wrath completely by dying on the cross for our sins. When Wesley wrote about Jesus' "all sufficient merit," he was referring to Christ's ability to bring us to salvation.

"Come Thou Long-Expected Jesus" is a great song for Advent, focusing on the "long-expected Jesus" who was born to set us free from sin and to bring us salvation by His death. Please stand if you are able and join in singing *Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus*, hymn number 124.

The Fifth Advent Carol

Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus

#124

The Sixth Advent Scripture

John 3:16-17

In the Gospel of John it is declared, "*For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him shall not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.*"

The Sixth Advent Lesson

One of the great traditional Christmas texts, our next carol was written by Marcus Aurelius Clemens Prudentius. Prudentius, one of the last writers of the Roman empire was also one of the very first Christian poets. Born in northern Spain in 348, and trained as a lawyer, he rose through the ranks of the empire, finishing his work as an official in the court of the Emperor Theodosius. At the age of 57, weary of civic life, he retired to write poetry. His poetry became some of the most treasured sources of hymnody through the Middle Ages. That collection of 12 long poems, one for each hour of the day, easily became the foundation of several of the greatest hymns of the church. This hymn comes from Prudentius' poem for the 9th hour, beginning "Da puer plectrum."

The hymn starts straight off on why a small baby was born in Bethlehem. There was a cosmic quality to this birth, an eternal element, an ingredient that defies reason and logic. "Of the Father's love begotten." God so love the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life (John 3:16). And this begetting occurred before the world was created! The joyful message of Christmas is this: God knew what all people would do before he created the world and us people in it. He knew what each of us would do before he created each one of us. Yet he still created the world, and he still sent His Son to die for us. No matter what you did, you are forgiven through the blood of Christ.

The Sixth Advent Carol

Of the Father's Love Begotten
soloist

Call to Offering

As we look with hope to the coming of the Messiah, let us consider those who live without hope. Christ calls us to share the good news of his coming. We share our gifts, our talents and our treasure to bring this hope to a hurting world.

Presentation of Tithes and Offerings

Offertory

O Had I Jubal's Lyre

Handel

*Doxology

Prayer of Thanksgiving

The Seventh Advent Scripture

Isaiah 7:9

Isaiah said, "All right then, the Lord himself will give you the sign. Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son and will call him Emmanuel (which means 'God is with us')."

The Seventh Advent Lesson

St. Augustine wrote, "What, then, is the God I worship? ... You are the most hidden from us and yet the most present among us, the most beautiful and yet the most strong, ever enduring; and yet we cannot comprehend you."

When the virgin gave birth to this Son, Immanuel was at last present among us, yet in so many ways he was still hidden from us. Romans 11:33 says, "Oh, how great are God's riches and wisdom and knowledge! How impossible it is for us to understand his decisions and his ways!"

Have you ever wondered why God would want to live among us and even within us, when we cannot fully comprehend him?

If you've ever gone to live in a foreign country, you've known the temporary loneliness and frustration of living among people who can't fully understand you. In spite of the hardship, most likely you endured because you knew that one day you would eventually be fully understood.

1 Corinthians 13:12 promises a day when we will no longer see through imperfect eyes: "Now we see things imperfectly as in a cloudy mirror, but then we will see everything with perfect clarity. All that I know now is partial and incomplete, but then I will know everything completely, just as God now knows me completely."

Could it be that Immanuel—God With Us—is looking forward to that day just as much as we are, that day when we see him with perfect clarity and know him completely? He continues to dwell among us, to work with us and through us, and to love us unconditionally, even though we can't know him fully. Our lack of full understanding does not hinder his love. Regardless, of our understanding, he remains Emmanuel, God With Us.

Please stand if you are able and join in singing *Emmanuel*, hymn number 134.

The Seventh Advent Carol

Emanuel

#134

The Eighth Advent Scripture

Luke 2:8-9

In the Gospel of Luke we read, "*And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.*"

The Eighth Advent Lesson

Our eighth Advent Carol is *It Came Upon a Midnight Clear*, one familiar to us all. This American carol deals with more than the pleasant atmosphere of Christmas. It directly acknowledges that mankind to this day is suffering, and that the message of Christ still offers hope. The inspiring and forthright words were written one cold snowy day in December, 1849, by a Unitarian minister from New England, Rev. Edmund Sears.

No movie set designer could have devised a more romantic setting for the position of a Christmas poem. Outside, a snowfall was in progress and inside, the fireplace in the study was erupting with warmth and light. No doubt this picturesque New England scene and the holiday season inspired the frail minister, and his pen scratched out several stanzas of verse about the birth of Jesus

The poem was not the first Christmas poetry by the Reverend Sears. He had written other Nativity lyrics and several books on religious topics. In addition, he was the editor for the Boston-based *Monthly Religious Magazine* from 1859 to 1871.

Only a few years before, it would have been unlikely to find a carol being written, let alone performed, in New England. From 1659 to 1681, Christmas celebrations in this "Puritan" region were forbidden by law. A child missing school on Christmas Day in Boston public schools as recently as 1870 would be punished and possibly dismissed. Workmen missing work would also be penalized.

The writing of this carol represented the emerging acceptance of Christmas in New England as a "Holiday."

Oliver Wendell Holmes once declared this hymn to be "one of the finest and most beautiful ever written." Sears, a retiring young Unitarian minister in Massachusetts, was dismayed by such public praise, saying he preferred to lead a quiet life in some half-forgotten parish. Yet his legacy lives to this day. The message of the angels to the shepherds still rings through the ages.

Please stand if you are able and join in singing our eight Advent Carol, *It Came Upon a Midnight Clear*, hymn number 128.

The Eighth Advent Carol

It Came Upon a Midnight Clear

#128

The Ninth Advent Scripture

1 Thessalonians 5: 16-18

In I Thessalonians 5, the Apostle Paul admonishes us to *“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”*

The Ninth Advent Lesson

The first letter of Paul to the Thessalonians is the oldest writings of the New Testament, and the earliest of Paul’s famous letters. It is a letter of encouragement in the midst of stress, pressures and even persecution. The Church of Jesus Christ was only about twenty years old when he wrote it, half the age of MCC today.

Paul speaks passionately to them with affection, as family. He urges steadfastness, radical hope and vigilance. In subsequent verses to the passage we read, he tells them, and us, not to quench the Spirit, but to hold fast to what is good!

Imagine, if just for one day, we could do those things - ***rejoice constantly, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances***. Notice, it is not ***for*** all circumstances . . . Imagine if we could manage it for a week. How would everything, even in one church community, be totally transformed. Rejoice constantly, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances. What a mantra for these times!

Paul was exhorting with all his heart to change the **orientation** of this Church of Jesus. He wanted them to be oriented towards JOY.

Joy is not happiness. Happiness depends on our circumstances and mood. Joy depends on our openness to God’s amazing grace. Joy cannot be planned, or manufactured. It must be experienced. It is a gift.

Joy contains an element of awe. Joy is also transformation. It does not ignore pain or sorrow. It is not naïve or superficial. Joy takes all into account, and embraces a larger, transcendent experience that, like Julian of Norwich, knows that “all is well, all is well, all manner of things are well.”

Joy is the discipline of continuing to see God at work, to see victories, even in the midst of enormous challenges.

“It occurred to me recently that the way to Christmas is through Bethlehem - the lowly place of shepherds and servants not worthy or wealthy or clean enough to reside in the nearby Temple of Jerusalem. Bethlehem where Rachel is buried, where Ruth and Naomi covenanted to journey together despite convention and their dire circumstances; Bethlehem where Samuel is sent to find God’s anointed one from among Jesse’s sons. Bethlehem,

where God reminds the prophet that God looks beyond the superficial things and chooses the forgotten one.

Bethlehem, where Jesus was born on the outskirts, on the margins. Where angels sang for joy.

In old evangelical, Pentecostal traditions, they told us never to “let the devil steal our joy.” No matter what your theology, I know everyone can relate to that image. There are forces within and outside of us that would threaten to defeat us, to discourage us, to undermine our orientation to JOY. Everyone who has ever tried to change an unjust law, build a community in the midst of oppression, preach good news to broken-hearted, has experienced this. Jesus knew this, and lived this. What attracted people to him was that spark of divine, liberating joy in the midst of terrible oppression.

I remember a preacher saying, that when she asked a church member, “how are you doing?” the person replied, “Well, pretty good, under the circumstances.” “What are you doing under there?” said the preacher!

The best antidote to any attempt to steal our joy is, truly, to the very best of our ability, with vigilance, *to rejoice always, to pray without ceasing, to give thanks in all circumstances*. Our circumstances cannot define us, if we are open to JOY.

Joy is an *orientation* - to life, to ministry, it is a response to God’s grace and power at work within us. May joy be yours this season - whatever your circumstances, whatever your need or your desire to give. May joy be deep and wide in this place, in every church, in every home and heart today. Amen.

The Ninth Advent Carol

How Great Our Joy

#144

The Choral Benediction

Peace, Peace/Silent Night

Benediction

God's presence and promises are real. Go now into God's world, trusting in God's love and placing your hope in God. Go in peace.

And remember . . .

Leader:	God is Good
People:	All the time!
Leader:	All the time
People:	God is Good!

Postlude

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel

Plainsong