

First Sunday of Advent

Biblical Readings

The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem: In days to come, the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that God may teach us God's ways and that we may walk in God's paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. God shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!
– *Isaiah 2:1-5 (NRSV)*¹

I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the Lord!" Our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem. Jerusalem—built as a city that is bound firmly together. To it the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord, as was decreed for Israel, to give thanks to the name of the Lord. For there the thrones for judgment were set up, the thrones of the house of David. Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: "May they prosper who love you. Peace be within your walls, and security within your towers." For the sake of my relatives and friends I will say, "Peace be within you." For the sake of the house of the Lord our God, I will seek your good.
– *Psalms 122 (NRSV)*

Reflection and Meditation

As we begin the Advent season, we light the first candle in honor of peace—a reminder that God's peace will inevitably be achieved. We may not know exactly when or how, but Isaiah's prophecy describes how even tools designed for war will no longer be effective. May that inspire us to know that anything meant to divide or oppress us cannot ultimately achieve its goal. God's peace can also help us cope with loss. There is much that might make our hearts grieve this season, including remembering the lives and legacies of those we have lost during the COVID-19 pandemic. We might also be reminded of the effects of the HIV/AIDS epidemic on our community. As we greet the Advent season with anticipation, let us focus on God's promise of peace and take comfort in the hope that has seen us through our darker times.

Prayer

Oh Benevolent One, may your invitation to walk in your light and promise of peace fill us with your unmatched love and increase our hope until it is impenetrable. Grant us an inner peace through the way you abide in us, just as you abided with the prophets who spoke peace and hope into dark times.

Second Sunday of Advent

Biblical Readings

Then a Shoot (the Messiah) will spring from the stock of Jesse [David's father], and a Branch from his roots will bear fruit. And the Spirit of the Lord will rest on Him—the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and strength, the Spirit of knowledge and of the [reverential and obedient] fear of the Lord. (...) And the wolf will dwell with the lamb, and the leopard will lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the young lion and the fattened steer together; and a little child will lead them. And the cow and the bear will graze [together], their young will lie down together, and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. And the nursing child will [safely] play over the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child will put his hand on the viper's den [and not be hurt]. They will not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. Then in that day, the nations will make supplications to the Root of Jesse who will stand as a signal for the peoples; and His resting place will be glorious.
– *Isaiah 11:1-3, 6-10 (AMP)*

In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the desert in the country of Judea. He said, "Be sorry for your sins and turn from them! The holy nation of heaven is near." The early preacher Isaiah spoke of this man. He said, "Listen! His voice calls out in the desert! 'Make the way ready for the Lord. Make the road straight for Him!'"
– *Matthew 3:1-3 (NLV)*

Reflection and Meditation

Today as we light the second candle, we celebrate the hope embodied in Jesus' transformative leadership and reflect on the possibility of spirited leadership in our own lives. Change and transformation are possible if we allow ourselves to be guided by God and follow Jesus' example. How does your own leadership reflect hope for peace and unity? How do you inspire and empower members of your community to rise up and be their best selves? May we use this time of preparation and introspection to remember that we, too, are connected to Divine wisdom and understanding, counsel and strength. We, too, have the ability to achieve transformative change—in ourselves and the world around us. May the hope available to us from Jesus' example urge us to leadership as we lean on the promises God has provided in Jesus and the nourishing, everlasting Word.

Prayer

Divine and loving Guardian, thank you for guiding our ways and keeping us in your Divine peace and safety. Help us embrace the light and hope in our lives so that they may inspire us to reflect Jesus in the ways we transform ourselves, our communities and the world.

Third Sunday of Advent

Biblical Readings

Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God, who made heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever; who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry. God sets the prisoners free; God opens the eyes of the blind. God lifts up those who are bowed down; God loves the righteous. God watches over the strangers; God upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked God brings to ruin. The Lord will reign forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations. Praise the Lord!
– *Psalms 146:5-10 (NRSV)*

"My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for God has been mindful of the humble state of God's servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is God's name. God's mercy extends to those who fear God, from generation to generation. God has performed mighty deeds with God's arm; God has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. God has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. God has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. God has helped God's servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as God promised our ancestors."
– *Luke 1:46b-55 (NIV)*

Reflection and Meditation

On this third Sunday of Advent, we light the candle of joy! And, indeed, we rejoice and find strength in the psalmist's reminder that our God, creator of heaven and earth, is the God of the oppressed, excluded and ignored—those labelled "alien," "stranger," "other" and "queer." As human beings created in the image of an all-encompassing and transcendent God, we have all felt at times too different to fit in, or too different to satisfy expectations of what it means to be "normal." But Jesus, in seeing our full humanity, embraces our "otherness" and brings us into inclusion. As we reflect on the blessing of community and the joy of standing together in Divine embrace, let us also think of ways we can offer light and ignite joy for those who feel alone in their grief and struggle this year.

Prayer

God who sees, help us recognize the Divinity in each other and in ourselves. Help us be joy and light for one another, embodying the liberating goodness of your kingdom, especially in times of darkness and despair. Lift us up so we may we radiate joy as we reflect your vast and diverse beauty.

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Biblical Readings

Hear us, Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock. You who sit enthroned between the cherubim, shine forth before Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh. Awaken your might; come and save us. Restore us, O God; make your face shine on us, that we may be saved. How long, Lord God Almighty, will your anger smolder against the prayers of your people? You have fed them with the bread of tears; you have made them drink tears by the bowlful. You have made us an object of derision to our neighbors, and our enemies mock us. Restore us, God Almighty; make your face shine on us, that we may be saved. Let your hand rest on the man at your right hand, the son of man you have raised up for yourself. Then we will not turn away from you; revive us, and we will call on your name. Restore us, Lord God Almighty; make your face shine on us, that we may be saved.

– *Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19 (NIV)*

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

– *Matthew 1:18-25 (NRSV)*

Reflection and Meditation

As we light the fourth candle and meditate on love, we begin with the psalmist’s lament for Divine intervention from collective plight before reading about Mary’s social location as an unwed pregnant woman. Joseph attempts to be compassionate within the confines of patriarchal customs by gently dismissing her and not exposing her to possible violence. However, he receives Divine command to instead dismiss the norms and expectations of marriage and take care of his new, non-traditional family. He gives Mary her physical and emotional space and co-parents. How has love shown up for you this year when the global community is experiencing the pandemic, food and housing insecurity, loss, fear and injustice? How has love fortified you through these times?

Prayer

Oh God who loves, illuminate our lives with love! Fill us abundantly with love that will drive us and carry us through the various landscapes of our life journeys. Help us be loving and tender to ourselves, and may our love be the driving force that brings transformative change, protection and acceptance in our lives and to all those vulnerable in our communities.

Be Light Together - A Believe Out Loud Advent message

As the year comes to an end and the light of the Advent candles begins to warm our homes, we are filled with gratitude for all of you around the world who give life and meaning to Believe Out Loud. Our community is a source of light and love because of you! The knowledge that we are connected to each other across borders, oceans, time zones and nationalities in a shared pursuit to live authentically and believe in a God who loves unconditionally is a powerful reminder of the Divine presence in all of us.

The past year has presented most of us with unprecedented challenges. In beginning this Advent season with the candle of peace, we acknowledge the need for peace to return to our hurting hearts. As we move through the Advent season, let us honor how we have been light, hope and guidance for each other this year; how we have treated our neighbor with care, concern and love. May we use this time of anticipation to reaffirm our ability to believe in ourselves, believe in each other and *Be Light Together*.

The Season of Advent - its symbols, themes and structure

Advent is a season in the liturgical calendar that begins four Sundays before Christmas and focuses on the spiritual preparation for the arrival of Jesus Christ. For Christians all over the world, this period of reflection and prayer provides an opportunity to center our minds and hearts and embrace the possibility for peace, hope, joy and love that Jesus’ *adventus* (the Latin word for “arrival”) signifies.

Although the specific rituals and traditions of the Advent season vary, people all over the world light candles and gather around a wreath of evergreens in these days leading up to Christmas. “The symbols of the Advent wreath are interpreted in many ways. The circle of evergreens reminds Christians of the eternal and ever-renewing promises of Christ. The lighting of candles, spanning the season, acknowledges the deepening of our preparation and the increasing light that bursts forth at Christmas. The colors of the candles also vary. Often the candles are purple or blue, noting the season’s expectations of royalty, liberation, redemption, and hope. For the third Sunday of Advent, occasionally a pink candle is lit. Finally, on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day, a center white candle is lit. The light of Christ is fully present. Jesus is born.”²

Liturgical resources:

¹ The selection of Scripture passages is based on the readings for Year A (2019-2020) of the Revised Common Lectionary.

² Excerpts from: Sidney D. Fowler and Arthur Clyde, “Advent – Liturgy for Lighting Advent Candles”, United Church of Christ, https://www.ucc.org/worship_worship-ways_year-a_ace_advent-liturgy-for.



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Be Light Together



Advent Devotional 2020