



# Advent

December 2018  
Greendale Ecumenical Group  
Worcester, Massachusetts

Sunday, Dec. 2, 2018  
First Sunday of Advent

## Awake and Rejoice!

Jeremiah 33:14-16; Psalm 25:1-10; 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13; Luke 21:25-36

Today is Sunday, Dec. 2, the sixth anniversary of my brother's death, also on a Sunday in 2012. My brother died at age 59 after an eight-year struggle with early onset Alzheimer's disease. It was not lost on me that the two texts from the Old Testament readings referred to David — my brother's name.

We are all waiting and longing for something in this life; I still wait and long for a cure for Alzheimer's. The Jews in our Old Testament reading in Jeremiah wait and long for a messiah. In the 25th psalm of David, he asks "none that wait for thee be put to shame" and "for thee I wait all the day long."

As we wait, we prepare. In our New Testament reading, Paul gives exhortations and instructions to the people of Thessalonica on how to prepare for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

So, we wait. Waiting is something we humans (particularly Americans) do not like to do. Waiting has negative connotations: to stay in place, to pause, to delay, to hold back. We are a society of instant gratification. Waiting seems to be a waste of time. But, if we wait in expectation and readiness, we may see the signs in the sun, moon, and stars that Jesus tells us about in today's Gospel reading. We will see things taking place and know that the kingdom of God is near.

I will continue to prepare for the day when Alzheimer's disease will be no more. I can do that through prayer and work — raising money, volunteering, bringing awareness to others. Then I can watch and wait with hope and expectation, just as we believers do as we enter the season of Advent.

Awake and rejoice!

— Jackie Walsh  
*Bethel Lutheran (Grace Ministries), Auburn*

Monday, Dec. 3, 2018

## Prepare Ye

2 Peter 3:1-18; Numbers 17:1-11

My favorite musical, *Godspell*, begins with a sounding horn, followed by the hauntingly beautiful song, sung a capella, "Prepare Ye, the Way of the Lord." I feel charged up! Full of spirit! Jesus is coming!

So it is with Advent: Prepare for the birth of Christ! Each year, as the Christmas season approaches, I promise myself (again!) to be fully immersed in the preparation and not

to get tangled up in the world that wants me to view the season its way, with its generic songs, bombardments of advertisements that promises the best Christmas ever.

It's so easy to get caught up in that hysteria, but 2 Peter 3:17 reminds me not to: "Since you already know all this, loved ones, be on your guard so that you are not led astray by the error of the lawless and lose your sure footing."

My family keeps our simple, yet meaningful, traditional activities, yet occasionally, I allow that frenzy to creep in and overwhelm me.

"I will use these rods to identify the man I have chosen: for buds will grow on his rod!" Numbers 17:5

Reflecting upon this, I know that Jesus is the rod. I will remember what the season of Advent is really all about: Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love.

"Instead, keep growing in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Yeshua the Messiah." 2 Peter 3:18 Advent is the opportunity God gives us in the form of a do-over, another chance to get it right.

Jesus is carried away in Godspell's finale, "Long Live God," which morphs into the opening call, "Prepare Ye the Way of the Lord." It sends chills to my bones every time I listen to this piece. Advent is a time to chill out. Come full circle.

Prepare ye, the way of the Lord!

– Maggie Seligman

*Salem Covenant Church (First Congregational Church of Holden)*

Tuesday, Dec. 4, 2018

## Jesus Is Our Guiding Star

The Revelation to John 22:12-16

**T**he Bible offers many names to help us understand who Jesus is. A prophecy in Isaiah 9 declares that the savior will be named Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace. In Matthew 1, Mary and Joseph are told that they will name their child "Emmanuel," which means "God with us." We also know Jesus as Lord, Christ, Savior, Master, Messiah, Rabbi, Light of the World, and the Lamb of God.

In the last chapter of the Bible, Revelation 22:16, Jesus names himself as the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end, also declaring that he is the root and the descendant of David, "the bright morning star."

I have always been fascinated by the stars, pondering the intensity of the stars shining across a distance of light years. Since the earliest times, mariners and travelers have used the stars as a guide and as points of reference. The Magi set out on a long journey by camel to follow the star they believed would lead them to the predicted birth of a child destined to be the King of the Jews. We call that guiding light the Star of Bethlehem, which brought the Magi to the humble stable.

Just as the wise men followed a star, just as that bright morning star pointed travelers the way west, Jesus is our point of reference. Jesus as the bright morning star guides us.

The Morning Star announces the beginning of a new day. Jesus offers us his life, his love, his grace each and every day. When life seems dark, when there is pain, suffering, injustice, hatred, and violence, we can look to the horizon and see the bright morning star, Jesus, to offer light, hope, and salvation.

– Rev. Diane Cusumano  
First Presbyterian Church of Worcester

Wednesday, Dec. 5, 2018

## A Loving Invitation

Psalm 90; Isaiah 1:24-31; Luke 11:29-32

The Psalmist writes: “Lord, through all the generations, you have been our home!” From the very beginning, the story of God and humanity has been one of love and belonging. But for so much of my life, and the lives of those in the Bible, I live in the anxiety of viewing the scriptures as a rule story. I’ve bought the message of religion that offers a prescribed list of do’s and don’ts, along with a promise that if I can just do the right thing and have a better attitude, then I can make God happy. I have thought that the goal is to adjust my behavior for approval. In turn, I missed out on the reality that my actions flow from the inside — from how I see myself, God, and the world around me.

I struggle to accept that God loves me first, that He loved me before I was even born, and that I have never needed to earn His affection. When I live in this anxiety, the vision I have for my life is small, self-centered, and full of fear. I forget all of the ways that He has rescued me, and I doubt that He has enough to care for my needs. I am blinded to the open invitation He has made to live in His loving home as a child who is free and always provided for.

The call of “repentance,” something that often feels intimidating and condemning, is not a religious obligation, but a loving invitation to return home. I am not called to be a perfect person, but to belong in His family — as someone who is loved at my best and, most importantly, at my worst. As my worst parts are met by His endless love, they can be transformed and redeemed. As his love grows within me, then my actions change, and I can even begin to pass along the invitation of love to those around me.

I wonder if you can relate. What parts of yourself are you afraid to let God love? Today may you hear the invitation to come home as a child who is loved, and has always been loved. From the very beginning, God has been our home.

– Ashley & Eric L’Esperance  
Cana Community Church

Thursday, Dec. 6, 2018

## You, My Child — a Prophet of the Most High

Luke 1:68-79

**B**eneath the comforting carols and trappings of tradition, the character of and the characters in this story tell us about who God is, how God acts, and who we are called to be. Light interrupts darkness, a vulnerable baby's cry ends long silent nights, and over and over we hear Love's call liberating us from the comfort, safety and fear's distractions, "Do not fear for God is with you."

I was jolted out of a comfortable understanding of these stories while traveling to Israel on an interfaith trip many years ago. Bethlehem was nothing like I hoped or imagined. Armed military police were stationed on roofs outside the Church of the Nativity, a border wall was being constructed, and any signs that the Prince of Peace "had slept there one silent night" were long gone.

In this season of celebration, may the paradoxical, prophetic, hopeful character and unlikely characters of this story inspire us to receive these words as our urgent call: "For you my child will be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before our God to prepare the way, giving people the knowledge of healing and forgiveness. For such is the tender mercy of our God."

– Kevin Downer  
Greendale People's Church

Friday, Dec. 7, 2018

## Way of Life

Luke 1:68-79; Malachi 3:13-18; Philippians 1:18b-26

**C**hristianity is more than a religion. Believing in Christ is a way of life. Faith is a belief and trust in God. God grants faith as a gift, not a work.

In the Gospel of Luke 1:68-79, we are told Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, had a son, John the Baptist. Zachariah prophesied his son would save the people of Israel from their enemies.

God kept his covenant with the people of Israel. They would serve God without fear. John would prepare the way for Jesus to teach the people the way of salvation. Their sins would be forgiven. Jesus would be the Light of the World.

In Paul's letter to the Philippians, it matters that people are told about Jesus, whether by honest or dishonest motives. Paul said that whether he lived or died, he would honor Christ in his body. He went on to say he wanted to live because if he lived, it would help more people to grow and to be joyful in their faith.

Therefore, today, may we lead lives reflecting the love, forgiveness, and grace of God in our lives so that by our example of faith, more people may learn to live in the light of God's love.

Amen

– Roberta F. Briggs  
Bethel Lutheran Church, Auburn

Saturday, Dec. 8, 2018

## Rejoice, Rejoice, Emmanuel

Luke 1:68-79; Malachi 4:1-6; Luke 9:1-6

**D**riving into work on this November morning, the cold rain is pelting the windshield, obscuring my view of the road ahead. The “life’s journey” analogy doesn’t escape me ... going forward not knowing what lies ahead ...

My mind drifts as I think about putting together an Advent devotion. I have read over all three texts and the instruction that we can choose to reflect on one reading or all three. I believe everything is connected if you keep the conversation going long enough. I know there will be a common thread, and I am determined to find it. I’m sure it will be easier than finding a lost coin, a lost sheep or a lost child.

Luke 1:68-79 begins with praise and thanks, and speaks of a promised Savior, a branch from the House of David; first, a prophet to prepare the way for his arrival, signaling a new day ... the promise of dawn from on high giving light to guide the people into the way of peace.

Malachi 4 begins with a vision of God’s consuming fire, burning the wicked to ashes and saving believers in the name of the sun of righteousness rising, with healing in its wings ... followed by joy and a promise of protection.

Luke 9:1-6 begins with Jesus calling the disciples, by his Spirit, granting them power to heal and authority over evil, followed by instructions to take nothing with them for their journey, only share the good news.

This Advent season, praise be to God for the dawn of each new day, full of promise. As I drive by St. Peter Marion High School, I glance at the school sign by the roadside: “In all things, give thanks,” I Thessalonians 5:18.

Traffic is moving again ... the essence of thankfulness surrounds me, reflecting in the raindrops ... Emmanuel.

– Lynne Orsted  
Salem Covenant Church

Sunday, Dec. 9, 2018  
Second Sunday of Advent

## Prepare the Way

Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 3:1-6

**G**od speaks through the Old Testament prophet Malachi that God will “send my messenger to prepare the way before me.”

This prophecy was declared 450-500 years before the birth of Jesus. Perhaps this ancient scripture does not seem relevant to our Advent/Christmas season, or to our world today. Advent is a time of coming or arrival. During Advent, we remember and celebrate the coming, the birth of the Savior. And we know the end of the story, that the prophecies were fulfilled through Jesus.

How long were the people of Israel waiting, hoping, praying for a Savior? Hundreds of years. Malachi gave them hope that God would send someone to prepare the way. There is hope. But that someone does not arrive for nearly 500 years. The scripture in Luke records the birth of John, who came to be known as John the Baptizer, who proclaimed a baptism of repentance declaring “prepare the way of the Lord.”

We live in a fast-paced culture. With rapid transit and almost lightning-speed communication, we want, expect, and demand everything now. We are not patient people.

In addition to celebrating the birth of Jesus, the Advent season also incorporates the hope and waiting for the Second Coming of Jesus. We do not know when that might be. Through our faith, we must trust in God’s timing.

We may not be called by God, as John was, to preach salvation and repentance and offer baptism in the local river. But we are mandated to share the gospel message: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.” (Matthew 28:19) We are called to prepare hearts for Jesus by following Christ’s teachings to love one another, to love all God’s children. St. Francis of Assisi spoke words to live by as we await the Second Coming of Christ: “Preach the gospel at all times. When necessary, use words.”

– Rev. Diane Cusumano  
First Presbyterian Church of Worcester

Monday, Dec. 10, 2018

## Bleak Midwinter

Psalms 126; Isaiah 40:1-11; Romans 8:22-25

**T**he church pews of my youth were sharply angled, wooden, and had a small shelf on the inside that carried two books: a Bible and a hymnal. Only one of

those was really ever used. The hymnal, a dull green thing of equal thickness and heft as the Bible, sat unused and was lifted out of place by children only in infrequent, desperate attempts to overcome especially long-winded sermons.

As such, I was unaware of the existence of Advent hymns until a friend of mine asked me why I, as the worship leader for my church, didn't play them. In researching his question, I walked blindly into a deep pool of questioning and longing.

Romans 8: 22-25 speaks about our groaning (as in childbirth) in wait for the Lord. These are the sharp cries of our life here, suffering in need of comfort. When the psalmist wrote that "Those who sow with tears, will reap with songs of joy" (Psalm 126, 5), those tears spilled are well-deserved and find their place among Christ's own. Modern worship tends to displace suffering, to jump past Advent, straight to Christmas, as if in doing so we could turn a blind eye to our pain and pray it away in our exuberance for Christ.

As the makers of those early pews surely knew, suffering is a part of our existence. Advent is an acknowledgment of the truth of our condition in hope for the comfort that comes beyond suffering. "Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence," "In the Bleak Midwinter," "O Come, O Come Emmanuel," "Come Thou Long Expected Jesus" — all of these ground us in our shared suffering and point us to hope beyond it.

Those two, hope and suffering, pain and comfort, Advent and finally Christmas, are our story and our hope.

– Dave Bronson  
*Worship Leader, Cana Community Church*

Tuesday, Dec. 11, 2018

## Love Born Among Us

2 Peter 1:3-7

**M**y first love outside my family was Mr. Rogers. I adored this man. He chose his words carefully and spoke with purpose. He taught me many important things. I learned that I would never go down the drain, I can talk about my feelings, and we are all neighbors. He told me, "You make each day a special day. You know how, by just your being you." He also talked about loving one another.

Besides watching Mr. Rogers, I read voraciously. One of my favorite series was *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C.S. Lewis. I was fascinated by the character of Aslan. It was only when I took British Literature in college that I understood that Aslan was Jesus Christ. Aslan was one mighty lion. He knew things without being there. He was a great protector. He could obtain the truth from you with just a stare. Here's bit from the series:

For what stood in the doorway was Aslan himself, The Lion, the highest of all High Kings. And he was solid and real and warm and he let her kiss

him and bury herself in his shining mane. And from the low, earthquake-like sound that came from inside him, Lucy even dared to think that he was purring.

“Oh, Aslan,” said she, “it was kind of you to come.”

“I have been here all the time,” said he, “but you have just made me visible.”

– Ellen Green  
Greendale People’s Church

Wednesday, Dec. 12, 2018

## What Do You See?

Luke 7:18-30

**O**ur upbringing informs, to a high degree, our observations. If our parents, guardians, taught us to have an open mind, we are more likely to listen, hear, and weigh what we are confronted with honestly with an eye toward affirming that which is positive, healthy, and helpful.

Those of us with an upbringing in the faith also test what we are confronted with by our own “litmus test” for how it agrees/disagrees with our understanding: for me that is whether it jibes with God, Jesus and the Spirit as Grace and Mercy.

Verse 24b-25 is verified by the “Q” tradition as a saying of Jesus. Luke, as a good pastor, nestled these words in the middle of his devotion to lift up the reality of God and faith expectations as NOT rooted in human expectation; basically, “Don’t try to make God into who you want God to be and you’ll be OK.”

This happened to emphasize Jesus’ work, and by extension our work in his name, as being radical insofar as meeting need without concern for appearances. Many leaders, not all, in the Hebrew church at the time were all about appearances and following “tradition” without an understanding for its true rootedness in action through Grace and Mercy. There was no heart in their leading or interpretation. See in the final verse a direct reference to this by Luke.

The gospel passage for this season’s devotion challenges us to find God in and around us, and the encouragement for us being loosed by the Spirit’s power in helping family, friends, whoever it is, to better confront and deal with life (the blind see, the lame walk, the deaf hear).

In this season, we are confronted not only with God-come-down-on-earth (Emanuel), but our ability to recognize this Grace and authentically respond without reservation to the Mercy through Love seeking to find and help us live in wholeness and in harmony with creation and the entire human family.

– Rev. Andrew Borden  
Grace Ministries, ELCA

Thursday, Dec. 13, 2018

## The Power of Trusting in God

Isaiah 12:2-6; Amos 6:1-8; 2 Corinthians 8:1-15

**W**ith all the change and uncertainty in our lives, it can be challenging to trust in God and not be afraid. No matter how difficult it may be, however, the reading in Isaiah reminds us to do just that. The reading in Amos reminds us that we should not become too comfortable with the riches of this world.

Instead, we need to seek God's will for us. If we seek an easy way of life, or material goods that have limited value and can be taken away, we are not showing our trust in God. When we trust in Him, and do His will, we find contentment and joy.

How do we do this? Like the answers to many questions, a great way to discern God's will for us is through prayer. Scripture also provides guidance, and the reading in Second Corinthians relates Paul's admiration for the rich generosity of the Macedonian churches. He admonishes the members of the Christian church at Corinth, as well as us, to "excel in this grace of giving." He further explains that the purpose of giving "is not that others might be relieved while we are hard pressed, but that there may be equality." Remembering this purpose when we give our offerings to the church can alleviate some of the fears we may have about concerns in our own lives.

It can be very difficult to not be afraid. Change, whether it is of our choice or caused by circumstances beyond our control, can cause tension and concern that lead to fear. We need to remember that God is acquainted with His children; he knows our fears and wants what is best for us. If we follow His will for us, truly we do not need to be afraid.

– Marilyn and Scott O'Brien  
Salem Covenant Church

Friday, Dec. 14, 2018

## No Erosion to God's Love

Isaiah 12:2-6; Amos 8:4-12; Corinthians 9:1-15

**I**n this advent season, I want you to consider the long coastline at a town called Plum Island, Mass. It is a place I used to visit regularly in northern Massachusetts for sunrise photography. Those sunrises are a continual source of peace, even though I have not visited it in years. Some places, people, or events can have a permanence that seems to be unshakable.

Now consider the reality that the Plum Island sands have been eroding slowly over time. Through the Atlantic waves and rising sea levels, the place I used to visit

is slowly disappearing.

This reality, erosion, is very natural and sometimes happens to the tangible and intangible parts of our lives. Think about something you used to enjoy when you had more resources (time, money), and reflect on whether you still have that same freedom.

Now consider a relationship with someone you know or spent time with. Consider how selfish actions can slowly erode the trust of the relationship.

These conceptual erosions are as much a part of nature as they are part of our lives. We don't always stay with the same people from decade to decade. We may have to change jobs from time to time. Change is inevitable.

However, we can cherish and find joy in knowing a God whose love for us never changes. His love does not erode slowly over time. He loves us now as much as he loved us before we knew him. And as much as he will ever love us.

Meditate on each of these attributes mentioned in scripture:

God is your well of salvation.

God's word is satisfying water.

God's love is so abundant we don't have to flaunt our freedoms.

– Ruben Brito  
*Cana Community Church*

Saturday, Dec. 15, 2018

## The Birth of John the Baptist

Luke 1:57-66

**D**uring Advent, we celebrate the birth of Jesus, but another birth is important to the Christmas story. The scripture details the birth of a son to priest Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth.

First, we must look at previous verses to understand the significance of this first birth. Zechariah and Elizabeth were getting on in years, and Elizabeth was barren. Zechariah was terrified by a visit of an angel of the Lord, who told him Elizabeth would bear a son and name him John. He will be great in the sight of the Lord. Zechariah doubted and questioned the angel. Gabriel replied: "Because you did not believe my words which will be fulfilled in time, you will become mute, unable to speak until these things occur."

A son is born, fulfilling the angel's prophecy. Circumcision on the eighth day is a Hebrew tradition, and the child is usually named after the father. Those gathered were surprised when Elizabeth declared: He is to be called John. People turned to Zechariah for confirmation, but he still could not speak. He wrote the name John on a slate, and he then began to speak and praise God.

The people were amazed at what God had done. They asked, "What then will this child become?" Zechariah spoke a prophecy that "the child will be called the prophet of the Most High and will go before the Lord to prepare his way." John

grew to be John the Baptizer.

Our God is a god of surprises and miracles, not only in the Bible stories, but in our lives today. God's Holy Spirit is ever-present. God is always calling us, but all too often we do not listen. During this holy season with deepest gratitude for the amazing and incredible gift of Jesus Christ, may we slow down, open our hearts, pray, and listen so that we may faithfully follow in the footsteps of our Lord and Savior, Jesus, the Messiah.

– Rev. Diane Cusumano  
*First Presbyterian Church of Worcester*

Sunday, Dec. 16, 2018  
Third Sunday of Advent

## What Then Shall We Do?

Luke 3:7-13

I heard a while ago that there is a difference between a present and a gift. A present is something that one presents to another, while a gift is something given. Used interchangeably, there is a difference. Presents are popular things we give out of courtesy, tradition, social convention, obligation, or to curry favor. Gifts, on the other hand, aren't about the "things" but rather the act of giving. Presents are externally motivated. Gifts flow from the heart and are tangible reflections of a life transformed by God's love and lived in celebration of the gifts we have already been given.

Creator God, in this season of giving, give us the courage to resist the temptation of buying presents no one really needs. Let us heed John's word and follow Christ's call to give gifts in, out of, and through Your love. Gifts that comfort those who mourn. Gifts that clothe the naked. Gifts that feed the hungry, liberate the oppressed, and bring transformational healing to our hurting, fear-filled world.

Amen.

– Toby Bishop  
*Greendale People's Church*

Monday, Dec. 17, 2018

## Promises

Isaiah 11:1-9

How many times have you been promised something? And how often was a promise broken?

The Hebrew people needed some good news. They needed a promise with a positive outcome in which to take heart because life seemed endlessly gloomy.

Have you been there? I know I have had moments when hope has been clouded over, when promises were broken and I could have been.

Yet in the midst of doubt, I remembered the ultimate promise: that God persists for us all, bends OVER to meet us in our condition AND loves us when we feel unlovable and broken.

The first prophet known as Isaiah pointed toward a new hope. I'm not talking about the Star Wars sequel but God's work in coming to Earth to meet humanity in person. Emanuel, God-with-us, the interpreted "stump of Jesse" that would bear fruit through the faith and trust of us all who accept and live into this blessing, this promise.

Let us revel in anticipation and celebration of the promise fulfilled and celebrated in the Palestinian birth of our hope in Bethlehem: the itinerant preacher whose life modeled Grace and Mercy in the face of oppression and injustice as a model for lives of wholeness and hopefulness!

– Rev. Andrew Borden  
Grace Ministries, ELCA

Tuesday, Dec. 18, 2018

## Our Stumps Ain't Dead

Isaiah 11:1-9

**A**h, my favorite: a shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

It is as crazy as crazy can be, but a stump can become a shoot — it is not dead.

We all go through times when our lives, once robust, green, and growing forests, feel suddenly neutered, cut off, sawed off, and left for dead. Perhaps this is how the early Hebrews felt in those evil days of displacement and devastation in 587 B.C. It was a catastrophe. That long trusted, celebrated, and reveled-in dynasty of David had come to a close. Now the only image the poet could envision was that of a "stump" — hopeless and wounded. And yet, the poet juxtaposed this failed image of a stump with another word — spirit (wind, breath, "ruah"), one word, but a word that made all the difference.

Inexplicable as it is, this same Spirit is with within us (and our stumps) today through the power of the One coming who animates shoots of new life and glory.

Wow!

– Mark Nilson  
Salem Covenant Church

Wednesday, Dec. 19, 2018

## Put Judgement Aside

Luke 7:31-35

**S**even main principles guide Unitarian Universalist congregations. The first two are:

The inherent worth and dignity of every person

Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations.

This Bible passage allows me to explore these principles.

The young people in this passage from Luke judge their elders. Jesus tells us they think that John the Baptist had a demon, or that Jesus himself was a glutton, a drunkard, and a friend of tax collectors and sinners. Jesus calls them out for judging people.

As we go through our daily lives, there is an abundance of judgement.

We judge ourselves against some ridiculously high standard we have set. We judge others all the time: the man begging on the street corner, a family member who does not agree with our opinions, people in our congregations, a person who holds another political position, etc.

We judge the poor for being lazy, and hear people say that if they would just get jobs, they would be able to feed themselves. Politicians judge immigrants as a group of criminals. (Even the children are to blame and are locked up in cages.) And, sometimes, a person of another race is harshly judged by the criminal justice system or may even lose his/her life without an opportunity to be judged by a jury of their peers.

As we take time to reflect this Advent season, let us reflect on the worth and dignity of each person, and not let our judgements get in the way of a truly happy holiday season.

– Dianne Mann

*Unitarian Universalist Church of Worcester*

Thursday, Dec. 20, 2018

## Forgive and Forget

Hebrews 10:10-18

**I**am so humbled by these verses. “Their sins and lawless acts, I will remember no more.” (Hebrews 10:17b)

I am big on forgiveness. I am, after all, a Christian, right? Our faith is based on love and forgiveness. I am quick to forgive. The minute someone tells me they’re sorry, I am fast to say, “I forgive you, but ... ” I forgive you, but that really hurt me.

I forgive you, but please don't do it again. Even if there is no apology, I will forgive them anyway. It is as much for myself as it is for them. Anger is a heavy load to carry. I find it easy to forgive, to love unconditionally.

But I don't forget the pain it caused. I don't forget that I may not be able to trust them. I can forgive, but I can't always forget.

Yet, He does. The Holy Spirit says He will remember no more. How amazing is that? He who is without sin, can not only forgive us our iniquities, but forget them as well. It becomes that which has never happened. "And where these have been forgiven, sacrifice for sin is no longer necessary." (Hebrews 10:18)

Christmas is fast approaching. We are waiting with joy and hope for the coming of our savior. The promise of redemption. Of our sins not only being forgiven, but no longer remembered. Let us try to mirror that in ourselves for others. Let us practice forgiveness, with no buts. Let's release the things that lay heavy on our hearts to make space for the love of the risen Lord.

Prayer:

Father, as we ready our hearts for the coming of the Savior, let us remember to forgive as we are forgiven. To heal our relationships with forgiveness, and to forget the hurts that we have held onto. Thank you for the gift of our Lord, Jesus, and the redemption that comes through Him. Please help us to mirror that love in this world, Lord, and to be a beacon of your love to shine in the darkness.

In your name, Amen.

– *Desiree Leader*  
*Cana Community Church*

Friday, Dec. 21, 2018

## Sing to the Lord a New Song

Isaiah 42:10-12

“Sing to the Lord a new song, His praise from the end of the earth! Let the sea roar and all that fills it, the coastlands and their inhabitants.

Let the desert and its towns lift up their voice, the villages that Kedar inhabits; let the inhabitants of Sela sing for joy, let them shout from the tops of the mountains. Let them give glory to the Lord, and declare His praise in the coastlands.” (Isaiah 42: 10-12)

Within darkness the earth waits... the entire universe waits. We, the children of God approaching Advent, wait. Echoing through the ages, and from within our minds come the memories of heavenly hosts proclaiming, “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom His favor rests.” (Luke 2:14)

This moment is pregnant with divine promise. Eternal Love with Almighty intent evokes a resounding roar of praise to the glory of God from the heights and

depths of the earth. From within this planet's roar, we hear the prophet's call, "Sing to the Lord a new song, His praise from the end of the earth!" (Isaiah 42:10)

By heavenly prompting we are called to join with the sounds of this earth, all the inhabitants in its watery depths, and all winged creatures in its air above... in a new liturgy of worship to God. "Let them give glory to the Lord and declare His praise." (Isaiah 42:12) Let the melody within our hearts accompany the lyrics of God's great deeds which we hold in our minds. Let us bring forth this hymn of praise as our new song to God. Let all inhabitants of the towns from the deserts, from mountain tops and valleys, to the coastal shores and islands raise voices in a shout of praise to God. As the roar of this planet's response combines with our shouts of praise, we will be living and singing a new song to God.

God graciously calls us forward from waiting. The Almighty leads us into Advent, accompanied by the song He has placed in our hearts. Our Advent journey brings us into the awesome presence of the Divine. As we encounter the blessed Child of the manger, let us break forth singing God's new song of Love for this day.

– Loyall C. Allen  
*Greendale People's Church*

Saturday, Dec. 22, 2018

## **Commitment**

Isaiah 66:7-11

**G**od's time is not our time. We can be an impatient bunch!

As I drive down the highway and secondary roads, the number of impatient people seeking to cut us off, who ignore merging courtesies, tailgating to move us out of the way, threatens our blood pressure and overall health, directly and indirectly.

In an expanded way, society finds people clustering in groups and cliques who operate in a similar fashion and threaten much more than our physical health; they threaten the trajectory of humanity, strides in justice and honoring God's work in creation and sanctity of life.

By the time of the third prophet known as Isaiah, the Hebrew people had not fully settled after their exile. The prophet's words of Godly metaphor speak of Divine commitment in the PROCESS of bringing about change for the better: PROCESS that takes time and can threaten those who are impatient while it unfolds.

Once again in scripture we are witness to God's persistence in bearing with humanity that has become broken due to its own deceit from believing "we know better" without Godly counsel. The story is not just a metaphor for societal sins, but our individual poverty whenever we believe we know better than God.

Let us pray God's will be done, trusting less in ourselves and more in God. Let us find nourishment as we are nursed by Word and Sacrament to deliver us from evil intent instead to revel in wholeness!

Advent is an opportunity for remembering and anticipating what can unfold in God's time when we trust that the Divine knows best and proved it by walking the face of Creation to fulfill a promise of accompaniment and hope.

– Rev. Andrew Borden  
Grace Ministries, ELCA

Sunday, Dec. 23, 2018  
Third Sunday of Advent

## The Peace Initiative

Micah 2:2-5a

And he shall be the one of peace.

It's the final line from the Micah text, and a big order in any day, in any age, from the beginning of time to the end of time. Can you think of anything more desperately needed in our days than that of peace?

Tomorrow, I will baptize little Charlie. I've been getting to know her over the past few months, hoping that with each interaction I will become less and less "a stranger" and that she might feel some comfort in my arms when it comes time to place water on her forehead. She is in those ripe months of "stranger anxiety," for which anyone can cause discomfort and worry in her little mind. It is an important developmental hurdle that we all face in life's journey.

I'm not worried about Charlie, however. It's you and me I wonder about. In this season of Advent, we have been hearing of a caravan coming from down south — foreigners, strangers fleeing poverty, war, violence, hopelessness. Troops have already been sent to reinforce our borders. Fear of strangers, and stranger anxiety, is not just in the 6-month to 2-year-olds. We all struggle, do we not? And when our belief that there's something greater than us, something rooted in love and compassion breaks, as Brené Brown writes in her book "True Belonging," "We are more likely to retreat to our bunkers, to hate from afar, and dehumanize others."

Will this one of peace come to our day and help us overcome our fears and anxieties? Come Lord Jesus, come, and be our peace.

– Mark Nilson  
Salem Covenant Church

Monday, Dec. 24, 2018  
Nativity of the Lord

## The Gift of Presence

Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-14 (15-20)

“**F**or the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly . . .” writes the author of Titus.

A vision of what it means to be faithfully present. It is an interesting passage to ponder on Christmas Eve, a night that is often the celebratory highlight of the year, when we gather in community to hear once again the story of the birth of Jesus, to ponder the miracle and mystery of that moment described in the Christian gospels. We sing songs that bring us back to childhood memories of wonder, and light candles to dispel the darkness and bask in the glow of illumined faces.

If we're lucky, we return home for celebration with family and friends, or, as so often has been the case for many, to the frenzy of last-minute preparations for the morning to come, assembling and wrapping presents, baking, washing dishes, etc., returning too often to the anxiety that we haven't done enough, that what we give isn't good enough, wanting to give more, be more prepared, less tired, and far more relaxed.

Luke reminds us that such feelings are an essential part of the narrative we return to on this eve. A couple, tired of journeying, anxious about the life that is to come, with no place to lay their heads. And then the vision of compassion, and humility, to birth the sacred wherever we find a place, even a stable. To turn our anxieties into awe and lose ourselves in the moment of new life beginning.

— Rev. Aaron Payson

*Unitarian Universalist Church of Worcester*

Tuesday, Dec. 25, 2018  
Nativity of the Lord

## God Is Waiting

Isaiah 52:7-10; Psalm 98; Hebrews 1:1-4, (5-12); John 1:1-14

In the beginning was the Word  
the Word was with God  
the Word was God.

**T**his is how John begins his gospel.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word said, “Let there be light,” and “Let us create humans in Our own image and likeness.” Creation and humans

were one with God. They possessed the very essence of God. The light of God shone through them, so that when one saw them, they saw God.

So when Adam looked at Eve and creation, he saw God. He walked with God, and talked with God. It was the same with Eve when she looked at Adam and creation. It wasn't until they turned away from God, and wanted to be a god different than the God that created them that they no longer saw God in each other, and were no longer one with God. No longer did they let the light of God shine through them.

Since then, humanity has been waiting for God to be with us. The wait ended when Jesus was born. Mary, Joseph, shepherds, magi, apostles, and faith-filled people saw the presence of God. But as we know, not everyone sees God today in His creation or in their fellow human beings, and so we continue to wait.

In Advent, the religious community stresses the waiting for God to manifest Himself to us. So we look out to see if God is present or to feel His embrace or to hear His Word. The fact is the Word has already spoken, creating us in His own image so that we possess His very essence. We should be able to look at our neighbors ("Who is my neighbor. He who does the will of God") and see God.

We should be able to walk with our neighbors and feel we are in the presence of God. For us to see God, we need to let His light shine through us. We need to get in touch with the person God created us to be. We need to let God's light, love, compassion, and oneness emanate from us so that others can look at us and see, feel, and hear the Word that is God. Maybe we need to stop waiting for God to make His appearance and act like the people God created us to be, so that God can stop waiting for us to be the people He created us to be, one with Him and the Word and to be His presence in the world.

— *Dennis O'Malley*  
*Greendale People's Church*

Tuesday, Dec. 25, 2018  
Nativity of the Lord

## Love Came Down

Titus 3:4-7; Luke 2:1-20; Psalm 97; Isaiah 62:6-12

So often, humankind's attempts to understand, to know, to worship, to be loved by God are based solely in a form of "transactionalism," in which we strive to please God enough that God will condescend to love us.

And so all of our doing, our forced pieties, our religious dances, are designed to appease God. Even our most simple efforts — the gathering together at church, the reading of Scripture, the prayers, the breaking of bread, become nothing but hopeful attempts to make the God of this universe love us.

But what if that is not the point at all? What if St. Paul, in his letter to Titus, was right? What if God came among us to show us how much we are already loved

“as we are and not as we should be”? (As Brennan Manning always used to say it.)

What if the point of gathering together, of praying, of breaking bread is to discover how much we are loved by God? What if Ann Voskamp is right when she says, “Reading God’s word is not about getting God to love you, it is about getting yourself to the place where you can hear God tell you He loves you.” I think this is good news, and I think this is why the angels said it would be “great joy to all people.”

Christmas Day is about so many things, I suppose. But maybe it is really just about one — the one and only thing any of us ever need — the definitive announcement that God loves us, that God has always loved us and always will. May our observance of this Holy Day be about our observance of this holy truth: We are loved, always.

— *David Gentleman*  
*Cana Community Church*