

Our Spirit Waits

Advent & Christmas worship series

First Sunday of Advent – Our Shocking Hope

December 3, 2023

Isaiah 64:1-9 Mark 13:24-37

Color: Purple, Blue

Advent is here, and we begin the Christian year anew with a season of waiting. As the days grow darker, we draw closer to the arrival of the Light that turns the world upside down—or right-side up! The journey toward and beyond the manger is one of reversing expectations, encountering what we thought we already knew in brand new ways, and receiving good news in unexpected places. So, with one foot in the prophets and another in the Gospels, we journey together as our spirit waits to welcome the Christ child and carry hope, peace, joy, and love as we live as disciples who anticipate the now-and-not-yet kingdom of God.

PLANNING NOTES

It's here! The season of waiting we've all been waiting for is here! Too much? Probably. But nonetheless, this first Sunday of Advent comes with a sense of arrival. Last week, we anticipated the fulfillment of Christ's salvific work as we celebrated Reign of Christ. Today, we turn to a new page of the calendar and begin once again at the start of the Christian year. But this arrival is not like finally making it to your grandmother's house on Christmas morning. No, Advent 1 is all about arriving to wait. Of course, this arrival to wait is not new. Every year when we return to Advent, we dip our toe into a river that is both familiar and always new. Every year, Advent 1 invites us to notice something new in the midst of our familiar preparations for Christmas.

This year, our texts invite us to consider how to wait actively and faithfully. Thus, the whole of worship is an opportunity to help our congregations not just think about and pray about waiting but embody it. Practice it. Live it together in worship, so we can live as faithful, active wait-ers out in the world. As you plan, give yourself permission to mix the familiar and the new—both are necessary for good, active, faithful waiting.

Take Advent 1. Our Shocking Hope. Talk about a mix of familiar and new. We know hope. But shocking? That's a new one. So, let's take this opportunity to pull out our purple and/or blue paraments, create those Advent altarscapes that mix deep colors and candlelight, place the Advent wreath front and center—whatever visual cues signal to your congregation that Advent is here. Go back to last year's hymns; remember the ones your community really put their heart into singing and plan to sing them again over the next four weeks. Provide plenty of opportunities for your congregation to sing their heart songs, participate in yearly traditions, and live into the rhythms of this season in a space that is set apart from the rush toward Christmas. Plan the familiar into every week of Advent and Christmastide.

Certainly, be careful not to feed nostalgia. Embracing our traditions during Advent is not—or should not be—about putting an idealized past at the center of our story. Rather, we embrace the familiar at Advent to remind ourselves of all the ways God has been and continues to be at the center of our story, showing up again and again in surprising and hope-filled ways, whether in Isaiah, the Gospel of Mark, or the community we build during the Hanging of the Greens.

And *then*. Offer new opportunities to remember that we are a people of hope. Shake up the timing of worship by offering more space for silent reflection or prayer. Sit and meditate on the lone candle of hope lit on the Advent wreath. Invite congregants to give a short testimony about when hope took them by surprise. Sing a song that everyone knows but that you never sing during Advent. Practice paying attention to how God is at work in your midst. Give your people the chance to tell the story of God's shocking hope in as many ways as possible, so that as we wait together in this season of Advent—and beyond—we learn how to watch for the signs of God at work so we can join in.

PREACHING NOTES

Yikes, it's Advent! That is the proper liturgical formulation for this season: "Yikes, it's Advent." It is an admission that no matter how closely we pay attention to the calendar, no matter how much we follow the development of the Christian year, we are still surprised when Advent comes. Even though we have been decorating for Christmas at church, it still surprises us. Because, it just seems like it is too early. "It's too early!" we exclaim to all we meet. It can't be time for this, we opine. I'm not even sure what opine means, but it seems to fit this season. And not because of the greenery!

We are just not ready, we have too much to do, our lists grow longer, our accomplishments are fewer. For everything we check off, six more tasks slip onto the list. How does that happen? This is where the whole legend about elves came into being: people found their Christmas to-do lists growing almost before their eyes. Who is doing this? Must be elves. We're not ready.

Which is precisely why we need Advent. The originators of the Christian calendar knew that we all would need a swift kick to get the new year started. So, Advent begins with a call to get ready. Because we aren't ready. Worse than that, we've forgotten that we have anything to get ready for. Or we thought that what we are supposed to be getting ready for is a celebration of the past. We are preparing for a historical observation of something God did at one time. And we are still grateful for it; we are still defined by it; we still try to live differently because of it. But it is, to an extent, old news. It is a case of "been there, done that" when it comes right down to it. Or is it?

What is it that we are waiting for? What are we looking for? The first reading for this first Sunday of Advent reminds us that what we long for is not a historical remembrance but a new reality, a new encounter.

"O that you would tear open the heavens and come down" (Isaiah 64:1a, NRSV) is the plea. We know you are present; our faith tells us that you are here. But we need to know it beyond a shadow of a doubt. Shake us up so that we can be certain again. We've begun to wonder; we've begun to doubt. So, do it again, Lord. Do it again.

This is where our historical observance comes in. This is where telling the story becomes so important. Not just so that we can look back with a sigh and long for the good old days, not so that we can wistfully wish for the blessing that they had back in the day, but so that we can learn to recognize it when it comes again.

That is the task of Advent: to pay attention to what is and what might be, not simply to look back at what was. The people of God were in exile; the foundations of their nation had been shaken; their comforts were taken from them. The human institutions that they had constructed no longer held the security that they had begun to take for granted. So, they began to look elsewhere, and they realized that their faith was shaky as well. They needed a boost. So, they looked backward and forward at the same time. The mountains of our society were shaken, so shake the mountains, O Lord. The foundations of our nation were shaken, so shake the foundations, O God.

They needed an Advent upside the head! They needed a hope that shocked them. We remember, they claimed, we remember how you used to deal with us, and we want that again. We want to remember as you remember. Their words seem like they were reminding God, but really, they were reminding themselves. The look back was not just to give them a warm feeling about what once was, but also a way to spur them to live differently.

Advent is a reminder to get out of our sense of complacency. It is hard to be complacent when things are difficult. When all is going well, then we need the two-by-four of Advent to wake us. But when things are difficult, we use Advent as a prayer, as a reminder to hope.

Believe it or not, that is the call of Jesus in our Gospel passage for the week. It is a call to hope. But a shocking hope, a hope that startles, that shakes us to the core if we're thinking about it. But a hope nonetheless. We sometimes must listen hard to hear something hopeful in these descriptions, but it is there. Underneath sometimes, but still there.

But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. ... "But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. ... And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake."

Mark 13:24-26, 32-33, 37, NRSV

Nervous? Well, yes, because there is much to do and a deadline to meet. But at the same time, we hear the promise that the master is near. Not as a threat, but as a promise. We are not alone. What we see in front of us is not all that there is. History is heading somewhere. We may not know where exactly, except that it is someplace called the Kingdom of Heaven. Or as Jesus was fond of describing it, it is Life. And that is what we long for in the end, life. Life in all its fullness and meaning, life in all its joy and promise. That's what is coming; that is what is promised.

And we forget every now and then. We forget that we are looking for anything, that we are hoping for anything. Until Advent comes and knocks us upside the head with a not-so-subtle reminder: Watch!

Second Sunday of Advent – Our Just Peace

December 10, 2023

Isaiah 40:1-11 Mark 1:1-8

Color: Purple, Blue

PLANNING NOTES

We're less than two weeks into December, and I don't know about you, but I need a break. My sensory overload is at a maximum. My calendar is overbooked, but what am I supposed to let go of? Everything this time of year feels necessary. Important. Like it won't be Christmas unless I make it to every party, every sale, every program. Many of us experienced a Christmas season (or two or three) where it didn't feel safe to gather, which lends even more import to the opportunities we get to gather and celebrate now. I must say, though, it feels like the only thing not on my schedule or my to-do list right now is time to breathe.

I have to believe I'm not the only one in this boat. Christmas is mere weeks away, and all I need is some peace and quiet. It's funny, though. I don't think "peace and quiet" is what Isaiah meant when he conveyed God's message, "Comfort, O comfort my people..." Or, more specifically, I don't think he meant *quiet*. Quiet isn't the right adjective for the just peace that we are both waiting for and called to live into as we wait in this season. No, this just peace cries out not from halls of power but from the wilderness. It is a peace that refuses to stand by and be quiet while all the things that keep us from right relationship with God, one another, and all creation remain.

So, as you plan worship, don't be afraid to get a little loud. Help your people find their voices. Imagine how to make the passing of the peace a communal act of just peace. Invite congregants to participate in prayer by naming the places where they see a need for peace and a proclamation of comfort in your community. Sing "Let There Be Peace on Earth" (*United Methodist Hymnal*, 431) or "For the Healing of the Nations" (*United Methodist Hymnal*, 428) or "Peace for the Children" (*Worship & Song*, 3125) as a response to God's call to live as doers of just peace.

But that doesn't mean there isn't a place for quiet. God's just peace may not be quiet, but quiet is absolutely necessary for us to be able to participate in God's just peace. We are paradoxical beings. The more we are overstimulated, the less we are able to connect with one another and with God. We need time and space to quiet the constant input, so we can listen and notice and connect with God and with our neighbors. So, set aside time for your congregation to rest in the quiet and breathe deeply. Create and curate visuals in your worship space that are uncluttered and calm. Choose to move through the liturgy deliberately and slowly. Offer the community the gift of silence, even if they are hesitant to receive it as a gift. Let the piano or a solo instrument be part of the proclamation, declaring life and peace to the part of us that understands beyond words. However you approach this balance between quiet preparation and loud declaration, remember this: peace requires community to live and breathe and thrive. So, may your worship form and strengthen a community that waits for and participates with God's just peace.

PREACHING NOTES

It's still Advent. I know you knew that. This season doesn't sneak up on anyone anymore. I know I used it last week: "Wow, is it that time already?" But it doesn't really work anymore. Not because we are in better control of our calendars, always ready for every event that comes roaring around the corner at us. Not because we keep better track of where we are and what's going on all around us, not because we keep our heads up and our eyes focused, not because we are leaning forward as we were told to lean forward into God's promised advent. No, that's not why it isn't a surprise.

Rather, it's not a surprise because marketing has been telling us it is the season long before it was the season. "Christmas as it is meant to be," a radio station says, while we're "Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree." "This is 'Thanks-getting' so be sure you get what you really want," says an electronics company. And does Santa drive a red imported sports car to deliver the presents or does he rely on an international shipping firm? Either way, no need to fear that you won't get your gifts this year, because a big-box store says "you aren't 'elf-in' around" because gift giving and getting is serious business. They all say that. And who's going to argue with them?

When our way of life is threatened, of course, we lash back. If we don't spend a lot of money this year, our enemies win. That's the underlying message, it seems to me. Buy our way out of the doldrums. "Retail therapy" some call it. More stuff. It insulates us from the emptiness, from what our hearts really long for. From what is wrong with us as individuals and as a nation. Let's splurge this Christmas on our way to peace. Hey, I like stuff, too. I've got a list somewhere. It works, to a degree. For a while, we feel better. We feel loved. Which is good enough. Until.

Until the arms of the new cozy armchair, while comfy and soft, don't pulse with life and love and acceptance. Until our gizmos and gadgets that can talk to us and answer our questions can't wipe away the tears of loneliness and hold us until the empty spaces in our souls are filled. Until the brokenness we know surrounds us as a society, as a people, overwhelms our consumer contentment, and we decide that maybe Christmas needs to mean a little bit more – thanks for that, Mr. Grinch! Sorry to be so cliché. It's just that sometimes something we all know needs to be said again. That love needs to be embodied. Incarnated. That peace needs to put on flesh. We need real flesh-and-blood arms to gather us up. We long to be gathered. To be loved. To know justice and peace. In a way, we can feel, even when we think we don't. When we think we are doing just fine. We can get along with knowing we are loved. We don't have to feel it. I mean, really, do we?

"Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God." (Isaiah 40:1, NRSV) There's a committee meeting going on in the Kingdom. I know, bad news for those of us who aren't terribly fond of meetings. Those who just came through charge conference, sorry. I hope this won't bring back the trauma. But Isaiah says a committee meeting is going on in the Kingdom.

God has the floor, pacing back and forth, ready to release the latest and greatest new idea from the divine office. The whole committee of heaven leans in, the archangels stop tapping their pens on the table. The cherubim stop eyeing the bagels on the side table. The seraphim put down their phones and start listening at last, because God's about to speak. About to pass judgment, about to lower the boom, they think. But they never know. The One has this annoying - can the One be annoying? Of course not! The One has this omniscient habit of saying something completely surprising on a regular basis.

“Comfort,” thunders the voice that made planets and galaxies, “O comfort my people!” Michael and Gabriel exchange furtive glances around the huge conference table. Brows knit and eyes narrow among the angelic beings high and low. “Did I hear ‘comfort’?” Comfort? Not judgment? Not burn or fry but comfort? No one questions, however, because the Presence isn’t done yet. Just catching breath before the words come pouring out like a soaking rain on a parched ground. “Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid.”

The book of Isaiah covers such a span of time that there had to be more than one person who wrote under that name. Chapters 1 through 39 is “first” Isaiah and is concerned about the faithfulness of the people of God. A variety of moods are represented in those chapters, but the dominant one is judgment. The people were complacent, selfish and self-centered. They found solace in things and not in the ever-present Spirit of God in their midst. Isaiah preached until he was blue in the face, and it didn’t amount to much. Until Babylon. Until Assyria. Double for all their sins. Northern Kingdom and Southern Kingdom both, overrun by enemies who caught them with their guard down, and now there is desolation, desert in the middle of the Holy Land. Desert, a land forsaken. Now, in Chapter 40, they are broken, afraid, longing for arms to gather them up and croon a lullaby.

After the initial shock, the beings around the table begin to nod along with the echoes of the Lord’s proclamation. And the amen corner pipes up, a voice, “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord.” In the wilderness that used to be a lush garden, find an oasis. In a sandy, windswept desert that used to be a marketplace, clear a path. But this roadwork, they understand and want us to understand isn’t so that we can get out. It’s so that God can get in. Make straight the highway for God.

It’s not that God’s GPS isn’t functioning; it’s that God needs to know we want a visit. The consummate gentle presence, God never comes where God isn’t welcomed. God never opens doors that we barricade. God never climbs the mountains we build to block access to the deepest parts of ourselves. The committee meeting becomes a gospel choir and as always happens in God’s kingdom, worship breaks out.

Around the table a voice says, “Can I have an amen?” Another says, “What are we amen-ing?” Then one jumps onto the table and sings out, “That these troublesome, yet lovable, fragile and yet creatures beloved by God have access to eternity!” “In the Word,” the chorus rings out, “In the Word, is eternity, hope, reclamation, restoration!” “AMEN,” rumbles God as the I Am slides to the door to usher out the swaying angelic beings. “Head to the rooftops, to the mountaintops; shout, and sing, again and again, until all can see. God is coming.”

They rush out to tell us. Again. And at the door stands the Word, who smiles and says, “Soon. I’ll be there soon. Save some room for me.” And the chorus echoes all the way through the years to John, sitting in the desert, eating his bugs ‘n honey breakfast cereal, and his head starts to bob, and his toes start to tap. “Amen,” rumbles from the core of his being, as he becomes the voice that repeats the words and prepares the way.

But wait! Is John’s message in our Gospel text one of peace? Of comfort? Notice that he includes the words about preparing, but he skips the comfort bit. John isn’t about comfort. Or at least comfort as we imagine it. Comfort as in taking it easy. Comfort as in lying back and letting go. That’s not a John sort of sermon. He’s stirring up, not lying back; he’s about working hard and not taking it easy. He’s not about soothing troubled waters but about turning things upside down. And that is certainly true. But beneath

the words and the bluster and the creative costumes, John is confident that the One who is coming will offer true peace. A peace that transforms, equips and unites. A just peace that lifts up those who have been pressed down, gathers in those who have been ignored, strengthens those who have been made weak. We are called to move beyond individualistic thinking. The comfort proclaimed in Isaiah and echoed by John in the Gospel of Mark is not my comfort or your comfort, but it is our comfort. We are called to think beyond the "I" into the "we," from the "me" to the "us." That's the Advent call, the invitation to invite God to inhabit our world by working together to open the roads, remove the barriers and fill in the pits so that we can see God coming and rush to worship together.

Third Sunday of Advent – Our Fierce Joy
December 17, 2023
Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 John 1:6-8, 19-28
Color: Purple, Blue

PLANNING NOTES

In Advent 1, we talked a bit about weaving the new with the familiar or the new with tradition this Advent season. Of the four Sundays in Advent, Advent 3 is perhaps the one most rife with traditions in many congregations. Gaudete Sunday gets its name from the opening words of the Latin introit antiphon for the Third Sunday in Advent in the Roman Catholic Church, “Rejoice (*Gaudete*) in the Lord always.” It is also sometimes called Rose Sunday because it was appropriate for the celebrant of the Mass to wear rose-colored vestments. Today, this tradition is reflected in many Protestant congregations through the lighting of the pink candle on the Advent wreath.

No matter what your community calls this day, it is often the Sunday when we set aside some of the seriousness of Advent and bring out the joyful music. Many congregations choose to do a Christmas cantata or an all-music service on this Sunday, reflecting both the spirit of Gaudete Sunday and the practicalities of scheduling a music-heavy service before congregants start going out of town to be with family on Christmas. This is especially true this year, as Advent 4 and Christmas Eve land on the same day, but more on that next week. No matter what your traditions are for Gaudete Sunday—do them! Revel in them. Use them to breathe life into worship. Between now and next week, we will experience the longest night of the year. So, let the songs of joy ring out. Let the altar reflect the abundance of God’s goodness and light. Fill your prayers with grateful praise for God’s faithfulness. Take time to delight at being together, whether online or in-person.

Yet, take note, Gaudete Sunday comes *before* Christmas Eve. That’s not to say that you resist telling the story of Christmas, especially if that is your tradition. Rather, embrace this opportunity to invite your congregation to sit in the tension of the now and not yet. In Advent, we anticipate the arrival of the Christ child *who we know is coming* to remember how to wait for the fulfillment of God’s kin-dom on earth as it is in heaven. A fulfillment we are *still waiting for*.

So, in the midst of all the traditions, let Gaudete Sunday also be a practice session, a rehearsal for living with fierce joy in the midst of the tension of the now and the not yet. On your altar, in the worship space, or even on the screens, balance light and darkness, depth and brilliance in the visual elements. In both the Gathering and the Sending Forth, call the congregation to exercise fierce joy *now*, to witness to the Light *now*. Active, faithful waiting doesn’t postpone joy until the end of the story. So, if you’re planning on the musicians leading you through Gaudete Sunday, wonderful! But also, don’t skimp on opportunities for the whole congregation to practice fierce joy together—to read, pray, sing, and bless one another as a people who, in the midst of all that is wrong in the world, choose to live the good news *together*.

PREACHING NOTES

Is it just me, or does the lectionary seem fixated on John the Baptist this Advent season? Of course, he is our Advent icon, all that preparing the way and warnings and baptisms. People, get ready! That is the song that is always on his lips, beating in time with his heart. "There was a man sent from God, whose name was John." (*John 1:6, NRSV*) We're like the priests and Levites who ask the obvious question: Who are you? Except our question is more complex. It isn't simply a question of identity, but one of purpose, of intention. What have you to do with us, John the forerunner? The precursor? And what are we waiting for?

Of course, we know that it isn't a what, but a who. And it isn't a what but a how. John not only points to the who, the one who comes, but he also tells us how. How to wait. How to live while we wait. How to be while we wait. Waiting sounds so passive, until we watch John do it. Until we lean into the vibrant personality, the one who seems so alive in his waiting, in his anticipation. He seems almost gleeful as he shakes off every guess they throw at him. "Nope," he says, "not the Messiah. Nope, not Elijah." "Then who are you; what are you?" "I'm me," he says, "I'm the voice. I'm you. I'm us. All of us. All of us leaning into what is coming. All of us knowing that what is isn't what is going to be. That's who I am. I'm the one who hopes. Who knows peace. I'm the one who embraces joy with fierceness. A tenacity. That's who I am. Deal with it."

Did they deal with it? Who knows? They probably left as confused as they arrived. But the crowds knew. Or they sensed. Or they wanted something of that fierce joy that he had. They came in droves; they waded into the water looking for the new start, the new hope that John proclaimed. They were clinging to something in John that built them up. They were desperate for a new way of living, a new way of being alive in the world. And John was that way. Or in his words, he pointed to that way. He promised that a new way of being was on its way. In fact, read just one more verse from our Gospel text this week and you'll see it too. "The next day he saw Jesus ..." (v.29) We're desperate to see that too, to see him. Aren't we?

Isaiah understood desperation. The people in the latter part of this multithemed prophetic tome understood it. We recognize at least two moods in Isaiah - the first half, when things were going well for the people as a nation, was a mode of warning and judgment. Pay attention, the prophet said repeatedly. Look at what you are doing to one another. Look at how you are living, look at the source of your wealth, look at the foundations of your society. Does your socioeconomic system reflect your status as a people of God? The second half of the book speaks to a desperate people who have lost all, who are hungry, afraid and homeless; they are refugees, without status or rights. Now the mood shifts, the tone of the book is starkly different. Now it is a word of hope, a promise. And a call to live, even in desperate times, by a different standard. To embrace the fierce joy of living as the people of God, no matter the circumstance in which you find yourselves.

Things are bad; take my word for it. The prophet comes to the people and says ... what? Good news! Good news for the oppressed, good news for the brokenhearted, good news to captives and prisoners, good news to those who mourn. Great. What is this good news? What do they get? Garlands, oil, a mantle. Uh. What? Where is the promise of wealth and goods? Where is the promise of vengeance? Where is the righting of wrongs?

God comes to people who are desperate and tells them to decorate. It doesn't seem right. It doesn't seem enough. Decorations are nice and all, but they hardly serve to make things better. We can't count on them to change the world. Can they? Why do we bother, in the end? Are we just shouting in the darkness?

Well, yes, in a way. But shouting in the darkness is a noble profession. It is a calling. When we shout, when we decorate our homes and our churches, we are not saying that we are unaware of difficulties, that we are oblivious to bad news. We are saying that we choose to live by good news. We are saying that we choose to live by hope and not despair.

But what keeps this from becoming a rose-colored glasses scenario is the prophetic call to act in hope. Look back at Isaiah's words. The Lord brings the good news; the Lord, through the prophet, proclaims the year of the Lord's favor. But then we are the ones who bind up hearts, who set people free, who rebuild. We work because we believe. We build because we hope. And because we hope, we are blessed. And that blessing is lived out in a fierce joy, an in-your-face kind of joy that says, "No matter what might happen to me, I choose to trust in God." The fierce joy that says, "No matter what my individual feelings and inclinations might be, I am going to join with the community that is doing good in the world." We light our lights and put up the garland not to just look pretty or to win a neighborhood contest, but also so that we can declare that the darkness is not the final answer. It is the fierce joy that sustains us. No, wait! It is the fierce joy in community – the shared fierce joy that enables us to bring light to a world needing to learn to see again.

Fourth Sunday of Advent – Love that Transforms Us
December 24, 2023
2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16 Luke 1:46b-55 Luke 1:26-38
Color: Purple, Blue

PLANNING NOTES

I like to call the last Sunday of Advent “Mary Sunday.” After years of going all out on Gaudete Sunday, it felt like Advent 4 was this lull in energy between Advent 3 and Christmas Eve, and it broke my heart because two out of the three years in the Lectionary (Year B and Year C) list the Annunciation and the Magnificat in Luke 1 as the Gospel and Psalm reading, respectively. And in all three years, the lectionary for Advent 4 ushers us into the final chapter of waiting—gestation. And while nine months feels like a lifetime for anyone who has ever been pregnant, forty weeks is just a drop in the bucket compared to the centuries between the Old Testament prophecies of a Messiah and the birth of Jesus. Even the Advent wreath gives us this sense of almost-fulfillment. What began as a wreath with one lone, lit candle is now a circle of light, almost complete but not quite.

Of course, this particular Mary Sunday comes with the additional struggle of being the same day as Christmas Eve. Do you have service in person/hybrid twice (or more) today? Do you have an online morning service and an in-person/hybrid evening service(s)? Do you combine Advent 4 and Christmas Eve into one service? Honestly, there is no one right answer for every context. Who your people are, how many people are going out of town versus welcoming guests to their homes, the logistics of having a morning and evening service, the weather...there are many factors to weigh. That said, we decided to offer specific resourcing for those who would like to have an online service in the morning and an in-person/hybrid service in the evening. That way, congregants can worship from home in the morning as they finish their Christmas preparations while still joining together in the evening for the Christmas Eve service. Thus, under Liturgical Resources, you will find our usual worship materials as well as a guide for a pre-recorded online-only Advent 4 worship service.

Whether you choose to have an in-person, online, or hybrid worship service, consider how you will lean into the transformative love that pervades the texts for this day. Like the previous three weeks, Advent 4 invites us to shake up our understandings of love, to dig in on this transformative love that we receive and give and wait for. What does this love do in us? How will we know it is here?

Perhaps today is a day for testimony, for telling the story of how God’s love has transformed a life, a family, a neighborhood. Or maybe the testimony is not about transformation that has already happened, but transformation in process, the challenge of following God’s love wherever it takes us. I can think of no better way to follow Mary’s example than to tell the story of saying yes to God and what it means to wait as that yes comes to fruition.

Today is also certainly a day for song. I know you may have sung your hearts out last week, but Mary Sunday just isn’t complete without singing the Magnificat, or, for that matter, saying or moving or meditating on this beautiful hymn of transformative love that Mary sings to Elizabeth. And yes, I said moving. Wouldn’t it be beautiful to have our kids or kids-at-heart lead us in creating motions for some or all of Luke 1:47-55? To get this song that reminds us of God’s love deep in our bones? So, if possible,

don't miss out on singing the Magnificat. There are several hymns based on Mary's song available, including "My Soul Gives Glory to My God" (*United Methodist Hymnal*, 198), "Tell Out, My Soul" (*United Methodist Hymnal*, 200), "Canticle of the Turning" (https://hymnary.org/text/my_soul_cries_out_with_a_joyful_shout), and "My Soul Proclaims with Wonder" (<https://hymnary.org/hymn/VT2020/222>).

Knowing this Sunday may feel particularly full and hurried for worship leaders and congregants, let this time of worship, no matter how long or short, be set apart for this final stage of preparation. Make it simple, make it genuine, proclaim the truth about the love of God growing in Mary's womb and living in our hearts today. This is, ultimately, everything we need as we transition from the end of Advent in the morning to welcoming the Christ child in the evening.

PREACHING NOTES

A two-for day! This day is both the fourth Sunday of Advent and Christmas Eve. What could be better, right, preacher? Well, choices will have to be made, I suspect. But we want to provide help that you can then use to fit your setting. Not only that, but we also get two Gospel readings for Advent 4. One takes the place of the psalm, but it is Gospel, nonetheless.

We also have a teaser from the Hebrew Scriptures. Second Samuel 7 tells us that God is going to take charge of making a home. David wants to build God a house, and Nathan at first says, sure; go ahead. But then God shows up and tells Nathan to tell David to hold off. I'll take care of it when it is time, God says. Now, the natural implication here is that it wasn't David's task, but Solomon's. But when you lay these words alongside the Annunciation in Luke, we hear something completely different. We hear God wanting to take up residence a little more intimately than in a grand temple on a hill in Jerusalem. God wants to move a little closer than that. Are you ready for that new neighbor?

Advent is all about getting ready. No, forget that; Advent is all about being ready. But we're not. Are we? No, no way. Ready for what? Um, now that's a poser. What exactly are we supposed to be ready for? Because most of the things that are rolling in my direction this holiday season aren't things that I would have chosen to be ready for. Frankly, most things that are rolling in most people's direction aren't things they would have chosen. Am I right? We've all had plans, we've all had dreams, and suddenly things take a turn.

You've been on those curves, haven't you? The road bends in unexpected directions. As if there were a detour, road construction, bridge out. Right? What could be worse than an interruption on your journey? A roadblock to your destination? Well, how about a disturbance that comes to meet you where you live? How about an angel in your living room? Huh? How about that? Right, Mary?

One biblical commentator wondered in how many living rooms did Gabriel have to make an appearance before he found one who said "yes"? Never thought of it that way before. I mean we assume God knew who was going to say "yes." That it was all worked out, a no-brainer, a slam-dunk, God had it in the bag before Gabriel ever set out. But if that's true, then Mary's response is somewhat diminished, isn't it? If there wasn't at least the possibility that she would say "no," then her "yes" doesn't count for much. And, for centuries, the church has celebrated Mary's "yes."

Mary is the model for what it means to be a follower. She shows us what surrendering to God is all about. She is the quintessential disciple of the one to whom she is about to give birth if that doesn't mess with your head a little bit. But it wasn't an easy "yes." It wasn't just a "sure, whatever you say" kind of thing. It was startling; it was an angel in the living room, for heaven's sake!

Luke, in his usual understated style, says that she was "much perplexed." Not just perplexed, but much perplexed. I'm not all that sure that perplexed would cover it if I had such an annunciation. Perplexed is what happens when you don't know what your next move in chess ought to be. Not when an angel is standing in your living room asking to take over your life. Mary was *much* perplexed.

She may have wondered at what sort of greeting this might be. Perhaps she looked over her shoulder in case the angel was talking to her mom or something. Surely, this word wasn't for her. "Greetings, favored one!" She couldn't be favored. She was just ... Mary. A kid. A young woman giddy at her engagement. "The Lord is with you." Really? With me? The Lord doesn't have more important things to do? More important places to go? More important people to see? What sort of greeting was it? Was it for her or someone else? Well, yes.

It was for Mary and for someone else. Or, rather, it was for the someone else she was being called to be. See, that's what sort of greeting this was, a life-changing one. A "nothing will ever be the same again" kind of greeting. This was a love that transforms. She was asked to give birth to the Kingdom through her own flesh and blood, through her own sweat and tears. She was invited to have faith in something beyond her understanding. She wasn't given a whole lot of information. Oh, she asked, "How can this be? I'm not qualified, I don't have the credentials, I don't have the experience, I don't know what in the world I am doing. How can this be?" And you can't help but feel that Gabriel was embarrassed by the question. His answer is specific but lacking in detail. It is a declaration of faith and not a gynecological arrangement. He basically says, "God's got it covered. You can trust that." Nothing, and when I say nothing, I mean to include such outlandish things as this rather messy incarnation business, but nothing is impossible with God.

Which apparently is enough. Because the next thing that happens is Mary says "yes." Without any more to go on than that, she says "yes." Without a blueprint or signed contract, without an escape clause or planned compensation, she says "yes." To the inconvenience of making God real enough to touch. To the imposition of surrendering her peace of mind; her quiet, cozy and hard but comfortable life. To the disruption of her plans and preferences, the way she had imagined her life might go. To the transforming love that is so profound to as to be incomprehensible, she said "yes." And the angel left.

And she had to wonder, did she imagine it all? Was it really going to happen? So, she ran to cousin Elizabeth's house. That's what happens next. She hightails it out of town. But not to run away from her "yes." At least not completely. She went to see the other one who had an angel, although Elizabeth's angel was a secondhand angel. Still, it was unsettling enough. That's what they do, these angels in the living room. They're like a force of nature, beautiful and awesome, but they leave a mess behind them.

It's such a complicated idea, running against every natural impulse within us, that it takes something dramatic to make us grasp the concept. Or maybe not even grasp the concept, not even understand, but to say "yes" to this life of faith that brings hope to a whole world, through ordinary people like Mary, like us. It takes a power that comes from beyond us. It takes a faith given to us like a gift at Christmas. It takes nothing less than an angel in our living room. An angel that leads us to sing, "My soul magnifies

the Lord!” Because as Mary’s song suggests, the transformation that this love brings is not just to individual hearts, but to the whole world. The world will be turned upside down – or rather right side up – by the power of this love that is coming, that has come, into the world. With her, we give thanks, and our spirits rejoice in God, our Savior.

Christmas Eve – Our Wondrous Light
December 24, 2023
Isaiah 9:2-7 Luke 2:1-14, (15-20)
Color: White

PLANNING NOTES

Have you noticed the references to light and darkness throughout this series? In the scriptures, certainly, but also in the planning and preaching notes, the prayers, even the songs? Does the play of light and dark bother you, or is it so customary you don't notice any more? Until a few years ago, I bought the whole "dark is bad, light is good" narrative hook, line, and sinker. And then, one day, I was reading an article that talked about how necessary darkness is for human health. We actually *need* darkness to regulate our physical, emotional, and mental health. Wild, I know. And then, I started thinking about how some of my favorite moments in worship happen in the dark. Especially Christmas Eve.

Throughout this series, we have dug deep on shocking hope, just peace, fierce joy, and transformative love to help us learn how to wait. Wait through Advent, yes, but also wait beyond Advent, beyond the birth of Jesus, beyond the Epiphany. We are *still waiting* for the complete fulfillment of God's kin-dom. But tonight, we celebrate the beginning *and* the end of the fulfillment we wait for—Christ's birth. The arrival of our wondrous Light.

You certainly have your traditions for Christmas Eve in your community, and this is a time to joyfully live into them. Light the final candle on the Advent wreath. Tell the story of Christ's birth. Act it out, even! Make sure every age group from youngest to oldest hears the story in a way that is meaningful to them. Sing the carols your congregation holds dear lustily and with a good courage. (Thank you, John Wesley.¹)

As you go about your community's traditions, don't forget to turn off the lights. No, seriously. We need the darkness to notice the light. And yes, we can talk about how darkness is used as a metaphor for sin and how the history of that metaphor has been harmful to people of diverse races, ethnicities, and abilities. But that's not quite what I'm getting at. Turning off the lights, sitting in darkness together, can settle and refocus our attention. Outside the walls of the church, we have been so busy turning up the brightness of the lights, the volume of the music, and the pace of our lives in this season that we need help making room to welcome the Christ child. We need help noticing the birth of the Light.

So, turn off the lights and light some candles. Balance joyful carols with gentle lullabies. Marry warm fellowship with space for prayer. Help your people embrace the complex tapestry of our lives that we bring with us to the manger. Give permission for the hard but natural emotions that we often identify as "darkness" to have a place alongside the merriment and joy to inhabit the space. The Light that is born this night is a Light that stays with us in all things, in all places, and in all circumstances. Turn off the lights, and welcome our wondrous Light, God with us.

¹ *The United Methodist Hymnal*, (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), vii.

PREACHING NOTES

It's Christmas Eve, and everyone is already tired, even though they are also excited. At least the littlest ones are excited. It has been a full day. Advent in the morning and Christmas Eve in the evening. Is it too much? Do we have room for all of this celebration? However, you choose to observe this event, preacher, suggest that we need to make room for the light. Light, we think, doesn't take up much room, though. So, it should be easy. Except this light seems to need room, lots of room, all the room we can spare. This light asks a lot of us. Asks for a shocking hope and a just peace. We are asked to express a fierce joy and to embrace the love that transforms. It asks a lot, this light, as wondrous as it is. It wants to take over our whole life, our lives as the community of faith, the body of Christ. Our problem, this Christmas Eve is that we've gotten too used to the darkness.

The people who lived in darkness have seen a great light. We have? Where? On them has the light shined. Really? It has? For unto them a son is given. A what? Unto them a child is born. A child? Wait, I don't know about this. And the government shall be upon his shoulders. Ah, this is a government plot. Count me out! And they missed it. Announcements came and went; proclaimers proclaimed; heralds heralded. And they missed it. It was too long coming. It was too obscure. Not enough press, not enough bright lights. Sure, there was the star thing, but we see stars all the time. Angels? Well, everybody and Charlie has angels. No big deal. Foreigners showing up? Keep them out, too risky. They missed it.

We miss it. Sometimes we miss it because it is old news. God with us? Yeah, I have a bumper sticker. I'm good. It's old news. We forget to be amazed. We forget to be humbled. We forget to be grateful. What have you done for us lately? A baby over 2,000 years ago? OK, got it, thanks. Next?

Except that baby grew up to say "I will be with you always. Even to the end of the age." Always. All ways. Today. Yesterday. Tomorrow. On your best days, he's there celebrating with you, being proud of you, clapping you on the shoulder, giving high fives and atta boys, atta girls. On your worst days when even your mother is disappointed in you, when even you are disappointed in you, and you want to dig a hole and crawl in, pulling it over you, he's there. The days of emptiness and brokenness, the days of fullness and joy. The days of love overflowing and the days of loneliness that suck at your soul. "I am with you always." This baby didn't stay a baby. But he stayed. Stayed God with you. God with me. God with us.

We have to lean into the light. We have to make room. In our busy lives, we have to make room. Because this baby, this Savior is polite; he has the manners his mom taught him. He'll wait. He won't force himself on you, won't horn his way into your busyness and demand attention. He'll wait. Until you turn. Until you stop running. And turn and give a hint. That's all, just a hint. Just an opening. Just a tear shed or a smile offered. Just a hand held out, hoping, wishing, wanting someone to take it and hold on for dear life. And then he'll come. He'll fill you. He'll want you. He'll remind you that you are one of the special ones, one of the chosen ones. He'll lift you up until you think you can fly. He'll bandage your wounds until you forget that you even had them; even the scars will be forgotten. He'll turn you around until your head is spinning, and you find your feet on the path you wanted all along, even if you didn't know it.

We have to make room. For the story, for the song. For hope and fulfillment. For the here and the not yet. For the dreams you still dream and the longings of your heart, even as you claim contentment with what already is. For the love you have and the love you need. We have to make room. For a child, that's

all. Just a tiny baby. Like all babies, this one seems so small, so helpless, so simple – feed me, clean me, love me – yet, who takes up more room than you thought possible.

We had room, my wife and I, 30 some years ago; we had room, and we had no idea how much room our son needed. And a few years later, we still had room. And, once more, we were surprised at the room our daughter had taken over. More room than we thought we had, more room that we didn't know we had. Jesus comes to fill the emptiness that you don't even know you have because you've filled it with so much else. But none of that really fills the emptiness like you thought it would. Until Him. Until God with us. Until the Firstborn. The Word made flesh.

And Luke takes that flesh and turns it back into Word. And we love the story he tells. Love it enough not to worry about the detail, about the timing. I mean Quirinius was not governor when Herod was on the throne; the dates don't match. But who cares? It's the story that matters. And Luke gets that right. We have to make room, he says.

We have to make room. No, wait. We get to make room. So ... make room. This blessed Christmas season, make room.

December 25, 2023 - Christmas Day

Isaiah 52:7-10 John 1:1-14

First Sunday after Christmas Day – Watchnight

December 31, 2023

Isaiah 61:10-62:3

Galatians 4:4-7

Luke 2:22-40

Color: White

PLANNING NOTES

This year, the calendar gives us the opportunity to gather for Sunday worship on New Year's Eve. Though some communities, particularly those in the Black church tradition, gather for New Year's Eve every year, many other communities do not, even though historically New Year's Eve has held great significance for Methodists. Thus, this Sunday offers an excellent opportunity for churches that are not used to gathering on New Year's Eve to live into a piece of our heritage.

Beginning in 1755, John Wesley encouraged gathering for worship on New Year's Eve for a Covenant Renewal Service. Central features of this service are remembering the past year—something of a communal examen—as well as recommitting to following Christ, often using the Wesleyan Covenant Prayer (*United Methodist Hymnal*, 607), and participating in Holy Communion. If you plan to use some or all elements of a Covenant Renewal Service, be particularly attentive to the balance of reflection and hope in all areas of the liturgy.

In the Black church, Watch Night was first observed on December 31, 1862, as enslaved and free African Americans gathered to worship, pray, sing, and wait for January 1, 1863, the day the Emancipation Proclamation became law. Also called Freedom's Eve, this first Watch Night led to a yearly worship gathering to mark the turning of the old year into the new. Today, Watch Night services may include remembering the story of slavery and freedom, reflections on faith, the celebration of the community, confession and pardon, and covenant renewal.

For those communities that do not have a Watch Night tradition, particularly in the United States, this New Year's Eve Sunday offers a significant opportunity to name the troubling history of slavery and the ongoing reality of racism in U.S. society. What might it look like to include this history in our confessions, to repent, and to recommit ourselves to the work of antiracism? What about committing ourselves to be like Simeon, to listen to the Spirit and to our neighbors whose suffering calls us to act with mercy and justice for the least, the last, and the lost? What if Covenant Renewal or Watch Night also meant returning to the questions we answer in our baptism as we renew our covenant with God and one another to reject evil, resist injustice and oppression, put our whole trust in Christ's grace, and nurture one another by teaching and example? However you choose to approach this service, may it be a time of coming together in communal commitment to following where God leads, supporting one another in love, and serving the community so that all can know and live in God's abundance.

To learn more about Watch Night and the Covenant Renewal Service and see examples of liturgies, visit:

- "The Historical Legacy of Watch Night," Smithsonian,
<https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/historical-legacy-watch-night>
- "Watch Night of Freedom," Discipleship Ministries,
<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/watch-night-of-freedom>

- “Watch Night Vespers and Vigil,” Discipleship Ministries, <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/watch-night-vespers-and-vigil>
- “Watch Night Owl Service,” Discipleship Ministries, <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/watch-night-owlah-service>

PREACHING NOTES

Do you hear what I hear? Did you sing that this Christmas season? You should have; you still have time. And here on the threshold of a new year, it might be the best time to be a listener. To tune into the music that is playing around us all the time, the music of the spheres, the music of heaven or of creation itself. Do you hear it?

I was given the gift of appreciation of musical ability. Yeah, that means I can’t play any instrument. But I can listen. But I can appreciate those who can. One I used to listen to was my little brother. He could play piano, like it was a part of him. I know he would say he hasn’t kept up with it and isn’t as good as he was, and I wouldn’t argue with him. I know it takes practice to be good. But I never saw him practice. I just saw him play. I mean, it never seemed like it was hard, like he was straining or struggling or working at it, though I know he was. But it never looked like it, and rarely sounded like it. He just played. He practiced playing, and I practiced listening.

Listening doesn’t get you many admirers, not like playing does. Yet it is essential for the life or the Spirit. This Sunday after Christmas, or Watchnight service, we get to hear the story of a professional listener. A man who dedicated his life to listening. And then when the time came, he played. He sang the song he’d been listening for. He sat down to play the tune he learned by ear.

Long story, but read it all the way though. Don’t skip on Simeon’s story. And don’t leave out Anna. We need them. We needed to listen for a while. We need to catch the tune, to follow the rhythms. Simeon learned how to listen. His name means “heard,” believe it or not. It was what he was born to do. So, he did. He listened; day and night he listened. He was listening for the future. He was listening for hope, the consolation of Israel, Luke tells us. He was listening for that which would bring peace, that which would bring light. He listened. Day after day, he went to the temple to listen. He heard the cries of the people. He heard the songs of the loud, happy, celebratory prayers that seemed so brash but goodhearted anyway. He heard the ritual prayers, spoken sometimes as though they had lost their meaning, and sometimes as though the meaning was so deep it resonated through the souls of those who prayed. He heard the wordless prayers that were wept from swollen and reddened eyes, wrung out of twisted scraps of cloth between hands gnarled with pain and fear. He heard the proud and grateful prayers of people who knew how blessed they were. He heard them and wept and laughed with them. He heard them all.

But he heard more because he listened deeper. He heard the responses. He heard the sighs of the Spirit as it flowed like wisps of comfort into the hearts of the hopeless and broken. He heard the soothing song of blessing as it played on hearts less in tune than his, but aware, nonetheless, somehow. He heard the invitation of the God he loved: to follow, to obey, to keep close and stay awake, to watch and listen. He heard the commandment not as a hammer on a cymbal, but as a finger plucking a string. He heard; somehow, he heard. Then, that day, he heard the music shift into a higher key, a note of anticipation

fulfilled, a baton pointed, a new singer taking the stage. And he followed the Director's gaze. And welcomed the One who comes.

Then Simeon, who lived a life of listening, became a teacher of the song he knew. He sang into the hearts of those who came carrying more than they knew. His song was a gift to the church. Called the "Nunc Dimittis" from the first words of the song in Latin, "Now let" your servant depart in peace. We've always thought that he was saying it was time to die. Because Luke told us that Simeon was promised that he wouldn't die until he heard what he was listening for. But maybe he is simply saying, "I'm done listening. I've heard all I need to hear. I've heard the voice of the one who sings a song of salvation, who chants the chorus of redemption. My ears are full."

He may be done listening, but he isn't done singing. He has to teach the song to those who will sing it. And his colleague, Anna, teaches it to all who are around them, running from one to another to make sure they sing. You can't stand silent in this worship service; you can't have closed lips for this hymn. Doesn't matter whether you think you can sing or not. We need to learn the tune. The falling and the rising, the major and the minor key, that which makes us smile and that which evokes a tear. We need to sing. Might as well, our inner thoughts are revealed anyway. Simeon says so. And he ought to know. He's been listening to those inner thoughts his whole life. And now he sings the song he learned by ear.

It takes time to learn to listen, but it is worth the effort. The Spirit rested on Simeon, Luke says, rested. Not stirred up, not agitated or poked or prodded, but rested. Maybe if we listen more to the Spirit, the voice of God, we might know rest like Jesus promised. But we can also learn to sing, to play by ear.

Paul learned that song, and he sang it every chance he got. He sang it in the fourth chapter of Galatians. He sang about God sending the Son, about redemption and adoption. He sang to us as children, with the Spirit in our hearts crying "Abba." He sang to us as those set free, as heirs of the promise. It was one his favorites, a greatest hit he sang again and again.

Isaiah sang the song, too. His song is a fashion song, garments of salvation and robes of righteousness. We look as if we're going to a wedding. We look like a garden in full bloom. We look like a chorus of praise singing in the heavenly choir, serenading the whole world. When Isaiah says "sing," we can't keep silent. Sing until everyone notices, sing until everyone hears. And what they need to hear is not us, not our song, but the composer, the conductor, the source of our music. The beauty of the proclamation of our lives is a pointer to the ongoing presence of the God for whom we sing.

Will we sing into a new year? Will we commit to being the sign of God's presence at work in our world? "I am no longer my own, but yours," we pray with Wesley's Covenant prayer. We ask God to assign our parts, to rehearse us, to direct us so that we can be the choir that is needed in the cacophonous time. And, maybe, some of us will be assigned as listeners, like Simeon. Our proclamation will be the tear of joy that rolls down our face when we hear the music of the One who comes. Praise be to God, now and forever. Amen.