

Immanuel United Church

2nd Advent Service, Dec 6th, 2020

Welcome

Description of Peace: (Ruth Campbell)

Where did you find peace in the past during difficult times and where do you find peace now?

Today, we light the candle named Peace.

May its light help us find our way.

Hymn: VU 7 *Hope is a Star* (V. 1 & 2)

**Hope is a star that shines in the night,
leading us on till the morning is bright.**

Refrain: **When God is a child there's joy in our song.**

The last shall be first and the weak shall be strong, and none shall be afraid.

**Peace is a ribbon that circles the earth,
giving a promise of safety and worth. (Refrain)**

Call to Worship: (Pat Schulz)

This year, we continue our Advent journey in the wilderness.

**We feel that we are in strange territory
where it is unclear where we are heading.**

We long for the familiar – for the way we have always done things.

Some of the familiar is still there – Our God is with us.

As Mary and Joseph set out for Bethlehem,

we will journey with them keeping our eyes on the light in the distance.

Let us go forward in peace.

Let us worship together.

Prayer: (Ted Dodd)

In this present-day exile, so many face despair and deprivation.

During this current COVID captivity, we are isolated with illness and economic woes.

In this holiday season, creation continues to witness
oppression and hardship,
discrimination and brutality,
pain and prejudice.

(Silence)

Speak again, O God, your words of compassion: Comfort, comfort.

Remind us that we are your people.

Give voice, once more, to your cry of tenderness.

We call out for your divine, faithful hope.

In the wilderness, prepare us to live in your way.

**May deserts of displacement and sadness
be traversed with highways of grace and goodness.**

**May low valleys of fear and indifference
be lifted with vision and creativity.**

**May the uneven ground of inequality and racism
be leveled with reconciliation and right relationship.**

**May the rough places of pain and poverty
be made plain with abundance and blessing.**

Prepare us to be your people, as we worship together.

Amen.

5 Murals and Gospel reading: Walk the Journey through the Advent to Christmas
(Artists: Eileen Metcalfe, Luba Olesky, Jennifer Antymis; the reader: Lynne Strome)

Matthew 2:1-6

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise ones from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising,* and have come to pay him homage.' ³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

⁶ "And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel." '

Hymn: VU 9 ***People, Look East***



Scripture: Isaiah 40: 1-5

Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.

Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to the city

That its warfare is ended,
That its iniquity is pardoned
that it has received from God's hand
double for all its sins.

A voice cries out:

"In the wilderness prepare the way of our God,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.
Then the glory of God shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of God has spoken.”

Choir Anthem: *Air for Advent*

Message: Advent as Threshold; Advent as Homecoming
(Advent 2: Exile)

“Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.”

Today is the second Advent Sunday; it is also the anniversary of the United Nations instituting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on December 10th, 1948. After today’s service, everyone is invited to stay and watch a few videos from Amnesty International Write for Rights 2020. Let’s help release those who do justice and are imprisoned by oppressive governments. Let’s help end the global complicity in silencing the cries of the poor, the oppressed, and the Indigenous land defenders in our world. Immanuel United Church is a participant in letter-writing to advocate for the rights of political prisoners; we have contributed to helping release them for many years. The original document from 1948 declares that everyone has the right to own property; that everyone has the right to rest and leisure and periodic holidays with pay; that no one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention, or exile; that everyone has the right to education, and to a standard of living adequate for their health and well-being; that everyone has the right to form and to join trade unions; and that everyone has the right to seek asylum from persecution.

There’s a Sunday School song, widely sung in Canada and also in Korea, “Jesus (or God’s) Got the Whole World in God’s Hands.” I never liked it because I saw colonialism and missionary expansion and religious conversion in its words, but when I encountered the song title and the verses again in this Advent season, I took a moment to think about it. Our suffering is deep with

Covid-19; we have every reason to worry and raise concerns about the human right to health care and well-being, especially the rights of those who are the most vulnerable in our own city, in Canada and the United States... Jesus is born today for all of us - the whole world - in God's care.

The "Captivity of Israel" for which we lament and pray for our emancipation is not only Covid-19 Captivity: there are many, especially when the meaning of Advent - waiting for the end of suffering and the groaning of both human and creation -- is seen and interpreted through the lens of the most oppressed. We do not seek to compare different human sufferings and inappropriately attempt to rank the hierarchy of sufferings and list whose liberation should come first. Rather, 'marking the captivity' means to truly prepare ourselves for entering the "threshold" of Advent, before the quiet night of the birth of Christ. John O'Donohue, the late Celtic Irish poet and philosopher, and author of *Anam Cara* and *To Bless the Space Between Us*, said during an interview that the origin of 'threshold' comes from "threshing" which means separating the grain from the husk. "So the threshold, in a way, is a place where you move into more critical and challenging and worthy fullness."

O'Donohue continues: "There are huge thresholds in every life. You know that, for instance, if you are in the middle of your life in a busy evening, fifty things to do and you get a phone call that somebody you love is suddenly dying, it takes ten seconds to communicate that information. But when you put the phone down, you are already standing in a different world. Suddenly everything that seems to be important before is all gone and now you are thinking of this. ... A threshold is a line which separates two territories of spirit, and very often how we cross is the key thing."

Perhaps, holding the many moments and places of "Advents" in the whole world (prayerfully and carefully recasting the word Advent in plural) that are happening now, or that are struggling to find their way, becomes a threshold to enter Advent, or, is the Advent. Advent as Threshold becomes a place for us to move into, as a community and as an individual self, more critical and challenging and worthy of the fullness of our attention.

Advent becomes a door, a table, a geography, a highway for everyone's homecoming. In today's reading, Isaiah 40, Israel had been stripped of everything that had become an obstacle to their relationship with God. And by the time of Isaiah 40, the exiles were poised to return home and to serve God. "Comfort, O Comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to the city that its warfare is ended; That its iniquity is pardoned; That it has received from God's hand double for all its sins." The whole of the book of Isaiah is the prophet's emotion-

filled meditation and outpouring of prophecy upon the destiny of Jerusalem. The Book of Isaiah has four main parts. The book begins by harshly anticipating YHWH's judgement upon Jerusalem for its idolizing power and wealth, exploitation, injustice and false allegiance. Before Isaiah 40, it is about the prophecy of inescapable judgement on the destiny of Jerusalem: the destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonians and the ensuing deportation and exile. The prophet does not diminish or soften the judgement to come: the expulsion of the leaders and people of Israel to the foreign land of Babylon, the new empire. However, ultimately, the Book of Isaiah declares that judgement is not the last word for God's city. The prophet painstakingly makes an effort to announce to the people of Advent the hope beyond judgement.

"Comfort O Comfort my people, Says your God."

The situation bears some resemblance to our own. There is hope, perhaps dimly seen, on the horizon - the power of Babylon is now fading - but the current situation is still one of displacement, anxiety and suffering. (Just like thanks to the heroic efforts of scientists, there are effective vaccines in the works, but it will be several months before they are widely available!)

Still, we see all of this isolation, dismay, grief, separation, pain and death, but God will bring shalom (peace) to Jerusalem (saalem = peace); There will be renewal and restoration. Those who remained or survived, ultimately, all of Israel (those who died will resurrect bodily — says the fourth part of the Book of Isaiah!), will return home, out of exile into new well-being! Today's reading of Isaiah 40 professes that it is a "herald"; It is the glad news that the reality of loss and suffering is shifting to a new hope and possibility. "Your God reigns". God is doing a new thing - a restoration of peace, Jerusalem (shalom for Jerusalem) after the "former things of destruction and deportation."

Then, after these glad tidings, the prophet still speaks; the remainder of the book tells the hearers that we, Israel, still have work before us even after the exile is ended: How and whether we will struggle to reshape Jerusalem as God intends; to make it the land of prosperity for everyone. Israel at that time had the same task as we who are going through the year of the pandemic: How will we reorganize our lives after this pandemic to make sure the post-pandemic of Covid-19 will be the "homecoming" for everyone?

- What "hope" will we sing as the new reality to come after our own inescapable judgement?

- In your song-writing, who will the song of hope be speaking to? Who are the people God speaks of with the words, “Comfort, O Comfort my people?”
- If the post-exile of our time means that we never again fill up shopping malls with crowds of people, what would it mean for us to “create space” spiritually, in the same way we keep our physical distance to save lives? What are the examples of creating space to save lives?
- What has been a “threshold” moment for you in this Advent? What do you hope to be a “homecoming” moment for you after this exile?

I appreciate Advent as a time to find our inner landscape meeting the Biblical landscapes in the stories of the past. Memories of Israel are played on such unforgettable geographical landscapes: Exodus, return from Exile, Apocalyptic Christmas (as the New Heaven and New Earth) and Incarnation (redirecting our attention to the most neglected or misunderstood part of here and now). I hope that we think about Advent as the work of 'creating space' just like Mary and Joseph said yes to the angel Gabriel to welcome a baby and made room for God’s incarnation (for us, deeper conversation, finding an inner landscape of beauty, holding sacred intimacy with those who live in our household, caring for community with a phone call or Winnipeg Harvest) — in such an unprecedented time as now, when physical distancing has become our bondage and captivity (the dilemma) as well as the way to save lives (the gift).

1st Advent: Exodus

2nd Advent: Exile

3rd Advent: Apocalyptic Christmas

4th Advent: Incarnation

Advent Communion:

God be with you. **And with all the weary world!**

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them up to the One who speaks a holy word of hope!

Let us give thanks to our gracious God.

Blessed be the one by whose goodness we live.

We praise you, wise and gentle God,
Heart of Love, Spirit of Mystery,
Speaker and Keeper of Sacred Promises,
**for, even in the gathering gloom,
you are plotting and planning a wondrous thing.**

Silently, O Holy One, we live into this season of expectant darkness.

**In the quiet, we strain our ears to hear the still, small voice conveying to us a message of
comfort and joy, challenge and hope.**

In the shadows, we strain our eyes to read the writing on the wall.

For we trust that in this time of worry and of doubt, you still are speaking.

And so we sit awhile around this table,

waiting for word from you, hoping to get the message.

As it makes its way into the world this Advent season,

may the word of life go to work on *our* lives,

that we, too, may become its messengers.

As we wait at the table, we remember that on the night he was betrayed,

Jesus sat with his friends at the table.

He took bread, gave thanks to you, broke it, and gave it to them, saying,

“Take, eat, this is my body which is broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”

Like them, we will eat the bread, and remember.

Then he took a cup of wine, and when he had given thanks, he said,

“Drink of this, all of you. For this is the cup of the renewed covenant.

Whenever you drink it, do this in remembrance of me.”

Like them, we will share the cup, and remember.

Just as this bread once was sown as seed, and scattered to the winds,

then was gathered together and made one,

**So gather us all together, O God, from the ends of the earth,
and bring us all along the road that leads to the realm of your peace.**

And now we pray to you, O God, in the words of Jesus, your child: **Our father...**

We break this bread, **that it might be for us the bread of life.**

We fill this cup, **that it might be for us the cup of peace.**

The Distribution

Communion Music: *I believe in the Sun*

Post-Communion Prayer

Bread of life, strengthen us.

Cup of peace, nurture us.

Word of life, transform us.

Hearten us.

Enliven us.

Make us your messengers,

proclaiming hope to a world of sorrow. Amen.

Benediction: Sung Refrain from *Hearth and Fire*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=baD9MRrwPOo>

Hearth and fire be yours tonight and all the dark outside;

Fair the night and kind on you wherever you may bide.

And God be the sun upon your head, the wind about your face;

God's love upon the path you tread,

and upon your wand'rings, peace.

Amnesty International Write for Rights 2020: Videos

Chile

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HE82ZmA2zvQ>

Algeria

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O_APv9HAmDA

Turkey

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qzGVvAHokx0>

Myanmar

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pYysrkyeD78>

Amazon

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cqEVdcTY7oI>

South Africa

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zjpygYrQIsI&list=PLEUy65qr-mLUftyz8Vimfj5wqQWvYTCxK>

Pakistan

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cEvd7nrh35Y&list=PLEUy65qr-mLUftyz8Vimfj5wqQWvYTCxK&index=8>

Saudi Arabia

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6sw6el7ZX4Y&list=PLEUy65qr-mLUftyz8Vimfj5wqQWvYTCxK&index=4>

Canada's reaction to Saudi Arabia

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UAl0R87bAMk&list=PLEUy65qr-mLUftyz8Vimfj5wqQWvYTCxK&index=9>

These are PDF Links for the 2 cases that do not have Videos

Burundi

<https://www.amnesty.ca/sites/default/files/Burundi%20Case.pdf>

Malta

<https://writeathon.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Malta-Case-Card-compressed.pdf>

if you have any questions please contact me. Thanks, Karen Turk 204-803-6600