

WORSHIP FOR SUNDAY, DECEMBER 3, 2023

Pacific Presbyterian Church and First Presbyterian Church of Union, Missouri

**'SECOND SUNDAY of ADVENT'**

**GATHERING**

**PRELUDE**

**CALL TO WORSHIP** *(based on Isaiah 40)*

One: Comfort, O comfort my people!  
All: **We welcome God's tender words to us today.**  
One: Prepare the way for your God!  
Lift up every valley; lower every mountain.  
All: **We gather for worship to prepare ourselves for the coming of the Lord Almighty.**  
One: Christ is coming! The glory of God will be revealed!  
All: **Thanks be to God for this good news!**

**\*OPENING HYMN** "Comfort My People" *[Tune 268]*

1. **Comfort my people now;  
speak tender love and grace  
to those who fear God's ruling might  
or doubt God's strong embrace.  
Prepare the way for Christ  
to make God's pardon known.  
In desert places, high and low,  
God's glory will be shown.**
2. **Look for the word of God  
that constant will remain,  
when grasses wither, flowers fade,  
and some deny God's reign.  
Cry out God's promises,  
good tidings to proclaim;  
lift up your voices to announce  
forgiveness in Christ's name.**

*(continued...)*

3. **Come, Holy Spirit, come;  
baptize your church with power  
to stand against all evil ways  
that injure and devour  
your children, great and small,  
both innocent and strong.  
Come, feed your flock and gather us  
to sing your Advent song.**

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### **UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION**

**Faithful God, we confess that we have not led lives of holiness,  
nor served and followed you.**

**We make 'our god' in our own image  
and for our own convenience.**

**We fail to acknowledge your sovereignty over our every move,  
and fail to claim your tender care for our every moment.**

**We cherish our way of life  
rather than preparing for yours.**

**Forgive our waywardness and foolishness.**

**Heal and forgive us  
so we can welcome you and your way  
with pure and genuine hearts,  
and walk in righteousness  
to the glory of your name. Amen.**

### **SILENT CONFESSION**

#### **ASSURANCE OF PARDON** *(based on Psalm 85)*

**One:** The steadfast love and faithfulness of God meet us in the coming of Christ.

**All:** **The righteousness and peace of God embrace us in arms of grace.**

**One:** In the Child born in Bethlehem we know pardon for our waywardness and healing for our brokenness.

**All:** **In Christ we are forgiven and restored. Thanks be to God!**

### **THE PEACE**

**One:** The peace of Christ be with you.

**All:** **And also with you.**

*(From your seat, a brief sign of peace may be shared: a wave of the hand, a nod of the head, etc.)*

## THE WORD

### LIGHTING OF THE ADVENT WREATH: The Candle of Peace

**One:** We say we want peace. We sing of peace. We yearn for peace. We pray for peace. But do we know what peace is?

**All:** **Peace is living in right relationship with God, with creation, with other people, and even with ourselves. Peace involves confession and forgiveness, mercy and compassion, humility and love. Peace is living a Christ-like life, reflecting his light.**

**One:** So "let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me" ... and you and you and all of us. As we light the candle, let us seek to be God's faithful people, living in God's peace. "And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:7)

Let us pray.

**Unison:** **We thank you, God, for your gift to us of the Prince of Peace. May we truly know your peace as Christ dwells in our hearts. Teach us how to live in peace with others, sharing the love and mercy and understanding that we know in the babe born in Bethlehem. Amen.**

**Sing:** **It came upon the midnight clear,  
that glorious song of old,  
from angels bending near the earth,  
to touch their harps of gold:  
"Peace on the earth, good will to all,  
from heaven's all-gracious King":  
the world in solemn stillness lay,  
to hear the angels sing.**

*"It Came Upon the Midnight Clear"*  
Words: Edmund Hamilton Sears, 1849, alt.  
Tune: CAROL, Richard Storrs Willis, 1850  
*Public Domain.*

**SCRIPTURE READINGS** Isaiah 40:1-11  
Mark 1:1-8  
II Peter 3:8-15a

ISAIAH 40:1-11 (New Revised Standard Version+)

- <sup>1</sup> *Comfort, O comfort my people,  
says your God.*
- <sup>2</sup> *Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,  
and cry to her  
that she has served her term,  
that her penalty is paid,  
that she has received from the Lord's hand  
double for all her sins.*
- <sup>3</sup> *A voice cries out:  
"In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,  
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.*
- <sup>4</sup> *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.*
- <sup>5</sup> *Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,  
and all people shall see it together,  
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."*
- <sup>6</sup> *A voice says, "Cry out!"  
And I said, "What shall I cry?"  
All people are grass,  
their constancy is like the flower of the field.*
- <sup>7</sup> *The grass withers, the flower fades,  
when the breath of the Lord blows upon it;  
surely the people are grass.*
- <sup>8</sup> *The grass withers, the flower fades;  
but the word of our God will stand forever.*
- <sup>9</sup> *Get you up to a high mountain,  
O Zion, herald of good tidings;  
lift up your voice with strength,  
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,  
lift it up, do not fear;  
say to the cities of Judah,  
"Here is your God!"*
- <sup>10</sup> *See, the Lord God comes with might,  
and God's arm rules;  
accompanied by God's own reward and recompense.*
- <sup>11</sup> *God will feed the flock like a shepherd;  
will gather the lambs in God's arms,  
and carry them in God's bosom,  
and gently lead the mother sheep.*

MARK 1:1-8 (New Revised Standard Version)

<sup>1</sup> *The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*

<sup>2</sup> *As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,*

*“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way;*

<sup>3</sup> *the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:*

*‘Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make straight the paths of the Lord.’”*

<sup>4</sup> *John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup> And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. <sup>6</sup> Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup> He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. <sup>8</sup> I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”*

II PETER 3:8-15a (New Revised Standard Version)

<sup>8</sup> *But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. <sup>9</sup> The Lord is not slow about the promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. <sup>10</sup> But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.*

<sup>11</sup> *Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, <sup>12</sup> waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire? <sup>13</sup> But, in accordance with the promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.*

<sup>14</sup> *Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by the Lord at peace, without spot or blemish; <sup>15</sup> and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.*

## PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON “Envision. Prepare. Embody.” by Pastor Bill Vincent

“Jesus is the reason for the season.”

We hear it. Perhaps so often that it is (or is becoming) a cliché.

“Jesus is the reason for the season.”

Yes.

But which Jesus?

“Jesus is the reason for the season.’ So buy your gifts at our store.”

“Jesus is the reason for the season.’ So give to our favorite charity.”

“Jesus is the reason for the season.’ So speak about him as we do.”

“Jesus is the reason for the season.’ So” – dare I say it? – “so support my political candidate.”

Which Jesus?

For it makes a difference how we prepare – and how we wait – which God, which Lord, which Jesus.

The people had lived – survived – for a long while in the land of exile, far away from their home. Far away – it seemed – from their God.

Then this prophet shows up and speaks of comfort – we like the sound of that – and proclaims with confidence, “*Here is your God!*”

Which God? What God?

They lived in a time when different tribes and cultures and empires and nations each had their own god.

“Ours is the god of the sky, who can look down and see all.”

“Ours is the god of the water, who nourishes the earth when pleased by us and who causes the river to rise and wash away our livelihood when disappointed by us.”

“Ours is the god of the mountain, who stands firm and immovable.”

“Ours is the god of the storm and fury, who hurls the lightning bolt and blows the vicious wind.”

“Ours is the god of empire, who obviously is more powerful than your god, for we have won, and taken and enslaved you.”

*“Here is your God!”*

Which God? What God?

And what has this God to do with us?

For in the midst of their down-and-out situation, the people wonder if God is capable of doing anything: “There are all these other gods around who seem to be doing pretty well, for their people are doing better than we are. So what about our God? Is God capable of helping, capable of saving us from our miserable lot and our hopeless circumstance?”

And the prophet says, “Here is your God! Who comes in might, whose arm rules. Who, yes, is capable, and then some.”

And the people wonder, “Yes, but does God care? Does God care enough to do something? Does God care for us? Does God care for me?”

And the prophet says, “Here is your God! Who guides the sheep and tends the flock and holds the lambs close.”

A vision of God to give them hope, and help them carry on and help them carry each other, and help them embrace life the best they know how with what they have and where they are.

The Almighty God who is the tender Shepherd.

Now, let's be honest: Is any of this actually new?

No.

You will hear echoes and see reflections of these very same affirmations of God: that God is the Lord Almighty, creator of heaven and earth; and that the Lord is our shepherd.

But there are times in our lives when we need to be reminded of who our God is: the picture, the image, the vision of who God is needs to be held up again, for us to hear and know and claim.

And perhaps also to have that picture – that vision – refined as well.

So we read, *“The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”*

And the gospel writer goes on to speak of one shouting, *“Prepare the way of the Lord.”*

Which Lord?

And do we detect an echo, “Here is your God”?

The one preparing the way for this Lord speaks of repentance: *“a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”*

Repentance: turning around, changing direction, changing one's heart and mind and ways.

Repentance. If nothing else, reminding us that all too often we are preparing for the wrong Lord or preparing in the wrong way.

For if all our effort is going towards the gifts we will buy and the money we will spend, then our Lord is the almighty dollar, and we're preparing in the wrong way.

And if all the frenzy is used for pleasing others and trying to earn their love – or even just their liking – then we're preparing for the wrong god.

And if all our time and energy, attention and resources, is done for “my country, right or wrong,” then we are following the wrong banner.

The God we envision shapes the way we prepare – and live.

But also, the way we prepare – and live – reflects the God we envision.

So which God will it be? What God?

Mark will go on to tell the story of one who comes in the flesh to walk amidst the people – that close to them, close enough to touch – who comes to care for their lot, to speak tenderly to them, to act powerfully for them, and to give all for them.

And the community receiving this letter wonders when this One, this Lord, this God will come again: will return, in power and might, in tenderness and compassion, as a shepherd watches over their flock by night.

And the way they wait, and the way they prepare, is shaped by the God for whom they wait, the God they anticipate, the God they envision and know and lift up and hold before their eyes and their mind's eye, and their heart.

And so the letter speaks of godliness (shaped by the image of God and the way of God) and of righteousness (the rightness of God's way and relationship with God) and of peace.

For Yes, he is the Prince of Peace.

And I like to think, Yes, he is the Prince of Peace for the beleaguered Jews.

But is he not also the Prince of Peace for the homeland-less Palestinians?

And Yes, he is the Lord Almighty.

And I like to think, Yes, he is the Lord Almighty for – and over – the movers and shakers of the world.

But is he not also the Lord Almighty for the down-on-your-life, and the down-and-out...and forgotten?

And Yes, the Lord is our Shepherd.

And I like to think, Yes, the Lord is the Shepherd of those confident and certain in their life's direction.

But is he not also the Shepherd Lord of those questioning and uncertain, unsure...and even lost?

And I seem to hear in these words a call to embody this one they call Lord.

Not that they – or we – can become Jesus Christ, or replace or duplicate him. I mean, if that is what we think, then there is yet another image of Jesus for which we need to repent, another vision that will lead us astray and direct us awry.

But think of 'embody' as in 'embodying his way': his way of life, his way of choosing; his way of giving, his way of loving; his way of helping, his way of caring.

So we seek to embody the rightness of his way and his peace.

We seek to embody his embrace of others and his serving of others.

And we prepare his way by living his way and reflecting his way so that others can envision a world of peace and hope, a way of mercy and fairness, and a life of strength and care; and know the God who embodies all of that and shares all of that and is all of that for us and for the world and everyone in it.

For this is a God we can serve and follow, rely on and trust.

This is a God who has the power to love and hold, and the will to do just that.

*"Here is your God!"*

And here is God's way: in a child born in Bethlehem, in a preacher serving amongst the people, in a Master who serves his students, in a healer who himself is wounded, in an outcast nailed to a cross who lives yet again – even now, even here.

*"Here is your God!"*

Prepare God's way by living God's way.

Know this God of might and love. And shape your life accordingly.



**\*HYMN “On Jordan’s Bank the Baptist’s Cry” GtG 96**

- 1. On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry  
announces that the Lord is nigh;  
awake and hearken, for he brings  
glad tidings of the King of kings!**
- 2. Then cleansed be every life from sin;  
make straight the way for God within,  
and let us all our hearts prepare  
for Christ to come and enter there.**
- 3. We hail you as our Savior, Lord,  
our refuge and our great reward;  
without your grace we waste away  
like flowers that wither and decay.**
- 4. Stretch forth your hand; our health restore,  
and make us rise to fall no more.  
O let your face upon us shine  
and fill the world with love divine.**

Words: Charles Coffin, 1736; trans. John Chandler, 1837, alt.  
Tune: WINCHESTER NEW, *Musikalisches Handbuch*, 1690;  
harm. William Henry Monk, 1847, alt.  
*Public Domain.*

**\*AFFIRMATION OF FAITH**

**In life and in death we belong to God.  
Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
the love of God,  
and the communion of the Holy Spirit,  
we trust in the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel,  
whom alone we worship and serve.**

**In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit,  
we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks  
and to live holy and joyful lives,  
even as we watch for God's new heaven and new earth,  
praying, "Come, Lord Jesus!"**

(from *A Brief Statement of Faith*, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Book of Confessions)

## **PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE**

One: Coming, Present God...  
All: ...hear us as we pray for...

## **THE LORD'S PRAYER (Traditional)**

Our Father, who art in heaven,  
hallowed be thy name,  
thy kingdom come,  
thy will be done,  
on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread;  
and forgive us our debts,  
as we forgive our debtors;  
and lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from evil.  
For thine is the kingdom,  
and the power, and the glory,  
forever. Amen.

## **OFFERING**

*Invitation*

*Reflection*

*\*Unison Prayer of Dedication*

**Gracious God,**  
we give you thanks that in the coming of Christ  
your steadfast love and faithfulness meet us  
and your righteousness and peace embrace us.  
May the gifts we offer this day  
bring joy to those most in need  
of Christ's mission and ministry...and coming. Amen.

## **SENDING**

**\*CLOSING HYMN** "Prepare the Way, O Zion" GtG 106

1. Prepare the way, O Zion,  
your Christ is drawing near!  
Let every hill and valley  
a level way appear.  
Greet One who comes in glory,  
foretold in sacred story.

*(continued...)*

**O blest is Christ who came  
in God's most holy name.**

**2. He brings God's rule, O Zion;  
he comes from heaven above.  
His rule is peace and freedom,  
and justice, truth, and love.  
Lift high your praise resounding,  
for grace and joy abounding.  
O blest is Christ who came  
in God's most holy name.**

**3. Fling wide your gates, O Zion;  
your Savior's rule embrace,  
and tidings of salvation  
proclaim in every place.  
All lands will bow rejoicing,  
their adoration voicing.  
O blest is Christ who came  
in God's most holy name.**

Words by Frans Mikael Franzen, 1812; rev. 1819; trans. Augustus Nelson, 1958; adapt. Charles P. Price, 1980, alt.

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Tune: BEREDEN VAG FOR HERRAN, *Then Svenska Psalmboken*, 1697; arr. *American Lutheran Hymnal*, 1930. *Public Domain.*

#### **\*CHARGE AND BLESSING**

**One:** ...And let the gathered people of God say...

**All:** ...Amen.

#### **POSTLUDE**

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