

Worship at home
November 29, 2020

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT: Hope



<http://clipart-library.com/clipart/1298896.htm>

Notes: If you are using this liturgy at home and haven't already done so, you may wish to light a candle to symbolize the hope Jesus' birth and life brings to the world. Feel free to use battery-operated candles if more appropriate.

Lighting the Advent candles:

The season of Advent begins,
and we celebrate the hope we find in the good news of the Gospel.

Through the birth of a tiny and helpless child,
God comes to save the world.

While we watch and wait for Jesus,
we join God's mission by bringing grace and mercy
to those who need it most.

We engage the poor and the poor in spirit,
letting Christ's light shine through us.

We speak words of comfort and love to a world in need of hope and healing,
as we share our stories of God's transforming Spirit.

Together, we are a sign of God's hope for the world.

Light the candle of Hope.

Let us pray:

God of surprising grace,
when we least expect it, you bring fresh new life;
and where we feel that all is lost, you bring redemption.
Give us courage as we share all you have done,
 all you are doing,
 and all you will accomplish
through Jesus Christ.
Amen.

The Word of God read and interpreted:

For this season of Advent and Christmas, we will read the story of the birth of Jesus as told in the first two chapters of the Gospel of Luke.

READ LUKE 1:1-24.



1. Every morning, before the workday began, the priest entered the sanctuary of the temple while the people gathered outside. As he approached the altar, positioned in front of the veiled door to the holiest of chambers, the people knelt in praise of the God who lived among them, whose presence was symbolized by the mercy seat above the ark of the covenant safely housed in the holy chamber. The priest placed the incense on the altar and as the fragrant smoke filled the air, the prayers of the people were lifted towards God. Having said his own prayer, the priest left to return after the evening sacrifice.

Every day since Moses built the movable tabernacle in the wilderness the ritual had been repeated. Morning and evening for approximately 1,400 years the fragrant smoke became the prayers of a nation to a God who lived among his people and looked

forward to the day when all people would see his kingdom and know his mercy and steadfast love.

And then, one day, it was Zechariah's turn.

Zechariah was a priest of the order of Abijah. There were 24 orders (or, sections) of priests that took turns serving in the temple. Two nonconsecutive weeks for each order in addition to the festivals. Because there were far more priests than tasks, jobs were assigned by lottery. A priest might serve his entire life and never have the chance to enter the sanctuary and cast his incense on the coals. Yet, still he served.

One year the lot fell to Zechariah. And while the people waited outside, having finished their prayers, Zechariah was visited by an angel. One of only two angels named in Scripture: Gabriel.

2. In our liturgical tradition, today is the first Sunday of the Advent season. The word refers to something that is coming. In this season we look towards the coming of Jesus in his birth; the continual coming of Jesus in his word, the sacraments, and prayers of the community; and in his coming again. And, like Zechariah and the hundreds of priests before him, we await these comings by going to the temple, lighting the candles, and waiting.

Except this year.

This year, for us the temple is inaccessible, and for many others, the temple has drastically changed. I am alone in the temple this year. In fact, this is the only sermon I'll offer from the sanctuary this year because this is not the Advent for which we are accustomed. And Christmas will not be the Christmas for which we are accustomed.

3. It's worth noting that in Luke's telling, this is the last time the temple and its traditions will be mentioned in Luke's telling until after the arrival of the Christ child.

Gabriel delivered his news. Zechariah took off his priestly garments, walked out of the temple and went to his home. The rest of the story takes place in an insignificant town, in private homes, in open fields, and in a feed trough affixed to the side of a shelter for displaced travelers.

The story begins in the temple, yet just as the smoke leaves the embers on the altar and disperses throughout the sanctuary, the gospel leaves the established center and spreads the joy and gladness of Jesus and his kingdom to all parts of the world.

The opening scene of Luke's gospel evokes feelings of expectancy and of waiting. The pace is slow. The narrative is detailed. We are transported into a culture in which hundreds of generations have been going to the temple morning by morning and evening by evening expecting something. Expecting to encounter Yahweh and waiting for His grace and His mercy. And this particular year, for Zechariah, for Israel, indeed for all of humanity their expectations were unexpectedly met and exceeded. Zechariah couldn't believe it and was rendered speechless!

What are you expecting in the season of Advent and Christmas?

For what are you waiting?

Christmas carols and pageants?

Incense and candlelight?

Gifts and feasting?

Family and friends?

This year is different.

4. This year we won't be preparing for the Lord in the temple. Family gatherings will be cancelled or moved online. Friends coming to call will be significantly restricted. Christmas Eve will be spent watching the blizzard not from the sanctuary but from our living rooms.

This year we'll prepare for the Lord in our homes, in our hearts, and in our minds.

And this presents us with an opportunity we haven't had in recent memory: *For each disciple of Jesus to truly awaken to the presence and power of the Lord already within and among us. Jesus has already been born. He has already been crucified and resurrected. He is already enthroned as the King of heaven and earth. The Holy Spirit already indwells each Christian. We have the opportunity in this scaled down season to truly awaken to the power and the presence of the Lord and to embrace the vision of his coming again at the wedding feast of heaven and earth.*

Without the temple, without the community, what are you expecting?

I doubt that Zechariah expected to have such a personal encounter when he entered the sanctuary and placed the incense on the coals. That entire ritual should have taken only a few minutes: go in, cast your incense, and get out. I wonder how often, after hundreds of years of celebrating Advent and Christmas (Christmas is one of the last Christian festivals to be recognized as such by the church), that becomes our attitude to this season, to prayer, and to reading scripture? Go in, get what we need, get out and get on with the next thing.

Nevertheless, through his messenger Gabriel, the Lord came to Zechariah. In the wonder of pregnancy, the Lord shone his favour on Elizabeth. Through Gabriel and the Holy Spirit, the Lord visited Mary. And, through Mary, in the child Jesus, by the Holy Spirit revealed in the written words of Scripture, the Lord comes to every soul who believes, receives his grace, and who with integrity seeks to continually realign their life in repentance, in trust, and in obedience.

Zechariah might not have expected an encounter at that moment, yet he never doubted the possibility. Indeed, his way of living had prepared him for such possibility. Luke wrote that both he and Elizabeth “were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord.”

As you prepare your minds and hearts this Advent season, expect to encounter the Living Lord as you praise out loud and in the privacy of your mind, as you affirm his presence with a simple: “Lord, you are here”, as you pray “thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” and as you read his Word. (If you want some suggestions for daily readings throughout Advent, visit the virtual living room and click on the manger scene, accessible through the Sunday School and Family Ministries page of our website (<https://pccweb.ca/moorepc/sunday-school-resources/>).)

The good news of this season is that the darkness may be a reality, and so is the Light. Jesus is born. Jesus will come again. Jesus is present to us here and now.

*...you know what time it is,
how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep.
For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers;
the night is far gone,
the day is near.*

*Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light.*¹

For the glory of God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

Prayers of Thanksgiving and Intercession²

Merciful God, the signs of our times are worrisome.
We gather in your presence,
aware that the earth groans in pain and many people are suspicious of each other.
We thank you for your comforting presence in times of suffering and uncertainty,
and for your promise of life beyond death, and hope beyond fear.
As the longest night of this year draws nearer,
comfort those who dread the darkness and direct those who have lost their way.
Wherever people are overwhelmed by the demands of this season
and the complications of COVID-19,
let them hear your still small voice within all the clamour and confusion,
and catch a glimpse of your light shining in the night.

God of all our days and nights,
we remember that the days leading up to Christmas are difficult for many,
especially this year.
We pray for those who are hungry and cold.
Alert us to the ways that we can set a feast
for those in our community and beyond whose cupboards are bare.
Warm them with your love.
We pray for those who are grieving.
Make us patient and compassionate companions to those in mourning,
even when we're not sure what to say.
Fill emptiness with your comfort.

We remember those who are feeling very isolated this year.
Inspire our hearts with ideas of how to reach out in friendship.
Bring hope to the lonely with your friendship.

We pray for those who feel like the world is ending;
whose lives have been uprooted by fire, flood, or storm,
illness, job loss or death.
Steady us amid the upheavals of this year of pandemic
and remind us that you alone are constant.
Your steadfast love will see us through.
Heaven and earth may pass away,

¹ Romans 13:11-12.

² <https://presbyterian.ca/worship> worship resource for November 29, 2020

but you are the source of everlasting life and undiminished hope.
Help us trust in you, no matter what is happening.

Hymn #110 “Come, thou long-expected Jesus”
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vRAFQCOKjgE>

Blessing:

The blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, be among us, and remain with us always. Amen.