

A vertical photograph of a night sky. A bright, multi-pointed star is located in the upper left quadrant. A thin, vertical line of light extends downwards from the star. The sky is a deep blue with many small, faint stars. At the bottom of the image, the dark silhouettes of evergreen trees are visible against the sky.

Hope

First Sunday of Advent

November 29, 2020

Prelude: **The Angel Gabriel from Heaven Came** **Craig Thomas**

Let Us Rejoice as We Worship:

There is something that stirs deep within us ...
 A longing, a hope,
 A thirst for joy,
 A hunger for peace,
 A yearning for blessing.
 We know deep within
 That our hopes and fears
 Will be met by angel songs and baby sighs.

It is Advent ...
 A season of waiting, hoping, yearning.

Advent ...
 Come, Lord Jesus, come.

Opening Hymn: “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel”

1 O come, O come, Immanuel, and ransom captive Israel
that mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear.

Refrain:

Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel shall come to you, O Israel.

2 O come, O Wisdom from on high, who ordered all things mightily;
to us the path of knowledge show and teach us in its ways to go.

3 O come, O come, great Lord of might, who to your tribes on Sinai's height
in ancient times did give the law in cloud and majesty and awe.

4 O come, O Branch of Jesse's stem, unto your own and rescue them!
From depths of hell your people save, and give them victory o'er the grave.

A Time of Prayer:

Merciful God, you sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation. Give us the grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins, that we might celebrate aright the commemoration of the nativity, and may await with joy the coming in glory of Jesus Christ our

Redeemer; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, One God, forever and ever. Amen.

The Lighting of the the Candle of Hope:

We gather around the Advent wreath in anticipation of the coming of the Christ child. Let us open our hearts to this time of holy waiting. Today we light the first candle, the Candle of Hope. In our times of deepest darkness and despair, Christ came that we might have hope.

In the Holy Scriptures the apostle Paul writes to the Romans: “And again Isaiah says, ‘The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the nations; in him the Gentiles shall hope.’ May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

Let us open our hearts to Christ, in whom all things are possible, as we light the flame of hope.

Let us pray: O God, we confess it is too easy to be a naysayer rather than a beacon of hope. We regret the times when we have joined a chorus of negativity and despair rather than a chorus lifting up words of comfort and hope. In this time of looking forward, grant us the grace to look forward with hope. May this Candle of Hope be lit in our hearts that we might bring hope to those who are living through dark times. We ask this in the name of the child who is to come giving hope to all. Amen.

Hymn: “Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus”

Come, Thou long expected Jesus born to set Thy people free;
From our fears and sins release us, let us find our rest in Thee.
Israel’s strength and consolation, hope of all the earth Thou art;
Dear desire of every nation, joy of every longing heart.

Born Thy people to deliver, born a child and yet a King,
Born to reign in us forever, now Thy gracious kingdom bring.
By Thine own eternal spirit rule in all our hearts alone;
by thine all sufficient merit, raise us to thy glorious throne.

A Reading from the Scriptures:

Isaiah 64:1-9 (NIV)

64 O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,
so that the mountains would quake at your presence—
2 as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil—
to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might
tremble at your presence!

- 3 When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect,
you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.
- 4 From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived,
no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him.
- 5 You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways.
But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed.
- 6 We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are
like a filthy cloth.
We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.
- 7 There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you;
for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of
our iniquity.
- 8 Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter;
we are all the work of your hand.
- 9 Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord, and do not remember iniquity for ever.
Now consider, we are all your people.

Musical Interlude:

Variation I, II, III on “As With Gladness Men of Old” Austin C. Lovelace

The Message:

“It’s Time for a Visit”

In early May 2020, Lillian Yu-Feng Hsu, 87, died in an assisted-living facility in White Plains, New York. Han Chinese, she lived through WWII in China when she was a kid, but later studied medicine in Taiwan. Her next step was a major move to the United States to complete a medical internship. “I knew I had to become educated so I could be totally independent,” she would say later in her memoirs.

In time, she became not only a doctor, but a geneticist in New York for many years. Her research was published in such journals as the American Journal of Medical Genetics and The Journal of Pediatrics. She was often the only foreigner and/or the only woman in her class, office or lab, and she later told her grandchildren about the difficulties of dealing with inconsiderate men while working to the top of her field. She set up the first lab in New York City that performed amniocentesis, setting the international standard for prenatal diagnostic testing.

When she died, none of her family members could be with her. They were able to chat with her via Zoom for a two-week period before she passed, thanks to the help of nurses and aides. At her burial, only 10 people were allowed, and they had to maintain “social distance.”

One of her children, a daughter, was unable to join other family members to grieve and share. She was in Shanghai, the city of her mother’s birth. Her full name is Carol Wen-Jen Lin, but her friends just call her Carol. Carol teaches in the elementary school of a prominent international school there. Her husband, the Rev. John P. Willison, is the lead pastor of a large international congregation there.

Carol was not with her mother before she died, and she was not at her mother’s funeral, although she desperately wanted to be. She might have been able to leave Shanghai to be with her mother and attend her funeral, but she would not have been able to return to Shanghai, since at that time China had barred entry to foreigners.

She was stuck. Separated from her dying mother if she stays; separated from her husband if she goes, and risking the loss of her teaching position as well.

Carol’s experience was not unlike thousands of others at the height of the

pandemic that swept across the globe in the first half of 2020. Some spouses were separated by quarantine rules, canceled flights and entry rules — like Yang Zhang and her husband, who said goodbye to each other in Hong Kong on February 2 and still, as of this writing, have not been reunited. Some spouses were separated when one caught the virus and had to be isolated for the safety of other family members. In extreme cases, children were separated from parents. Others were isolated on cruise ships. Some Americans had difficulty returning home. They were stuck in Europe somewhere, and could not find flights to get back. Babies were born, and grandparents sometimes had to wait months before visiting.

And we were stuck, too, under “stay at home” orders. No restaurants. No church. No sporting activities. No nothing. And perhaps we’re still stuck. We all went through this. We know the angst, the pain, the silent suffering, the fear and the loss of hope. We missed our loved ones and friends.

If only the door would open and our husband, wife, child or parents would come bursting through! Yes, we could Zoom, FaceTime, Google Meet or Teams, but we missed touching a face, hugging, laughing and crying together. We lost something and we wanted it back. We wanted a return, a restoration of relationships — for things to be like they used to be.

This is the emotional, psychological and spiritual context of the Isaiah text before us. The glory of Israel had long faded. Hundreds of years earlier, the northern kingdom had disappeared. And now, the memory of life in Judea and temple worship was a faint memory. Carried into captivity, the ancient Hebrews have been exiles in a foreign land.

Their recent history when still in their homeland had been scandalous:

- They neglected religious observance.
- They lived in open rebellion against God.
- Their rulers had set up false idols and corruption.
- Disregard for the poor and disposed was rampant.
- They refused to listen to the prophets.

So, it was a long time since they had experienced prosperity or enjoyed blessings from the hand of God. In fact, God for years now had seemed far away, as though God had abandoned them: “You have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity” (v. 7b).

In captivity, in a strange land, the Hebrews now recalled the glory of their past. They remembered now how God had intervened on their behalf. They longed to know and experience the presence of God. And so the prophet opens today’s reading with the anguished words: “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down.”

God loves to visit

Had these Hebrews forgotten that God loves to visit? God is a visiting God. The Bible begins with the Creator God not only bringing creation into being, but visiting our first parents in the garden of Eden. In fact, according to Genesis 3, the Lord God came walking into the neighborhood where Adam and Eve lived: “The Lord God called to the man, and said to him, ‘Where are you?’” (v. 9).

That is the question, isn’t it? Where exactly are we? God wants to visit us, so what are we doing? The southern kingdom of Judah clearly was not paying attention to God. They had other things to do than worship the Lord God.

Yet God loves to visit us. From the very beginning, this has been amply demonstrated:

- God visited Abraham in the guise of angels who sat down for a meal.

- God visited Jacob, wrestling with him in the night.
- God visited Moses in the burning bush, on Mount Sinai and elsewhere.
- God's presence went with the Israelites through the wilderness in the form of fire and cloud.
- God visited Samuel as a boy, calling him in his sleeping hours.
- God visited Elijah in a still small voice.

Now, the prophet cries, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down." The prophet knows that it is in God's nature to visit us. "When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down" (v. 3). The prophet says, in effect, "Hey, you used to visit us a lot. What gives? Why aren't you coming around anymore? Please come for a visit — soon!"

Yes, it is in God's nature to visit. And this is still true. Want a visit from God? God is surely willing and eager to visit, and even to stay a while!

Quarantine

The prophet feels as though they're in some sort of quarantine. They must be infected, or something. There's some reason God is staying away. Knowing that God is a just God, he suspects that something is wrong: "You meet those who gladly do right," he says. (v. 5). He also knows that God works for those who "wait for him" (v. 4, echoing Lamentations 3:25).

Recognizing that it has been a long time since they've had a visit from their "Father" (v. 8), he complains that God has left them, committing his own people to an unwelcome quarantine.

- No visits from God.
- No meals left at the door.
- No face to face encounters.
- No Zoom.
- No nothing.

They have infected the relationship with their sin and idolatry. Now "you hid yourself" (v. 5c). Now, even though they attempt "to take hold of you ... you have hidden your face from us" (v. 7).

Reopening

God comes for a visit

Now, some of the Hebrews have returned, but their homeland is in turmoil. They need the Lord to visit them. The temple needs to be rebuilt. The walls need to be erected for the safety of the people. The city of Jerusalem is in ruins. Will God visit again?

How lonely sits the city

that once was full of people!

How like a widow she has become,

she that was great among the nations!

She that was a princess among the provinces

has become a vassal. (Lamentations 1:1)

This is the first Sunday of Advent. We know there's going to be a reopening. We know God is coming for a visit!

Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel which means, 'God is with us.' (Matthew 1:23).

Yes, the heavens were torn open.

Though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form. (Philippians 2:6-7)

What kind of visit will it be? How will we receive him? How do we receive him now? We are still a people in a strange land — exiles as it were. We long for our heavenly home. We, too, would like a visit. Yet, this is precisely the promise of Christmas: Immanuel! God is with us.

- God is with us throughout shelter-in-place and stay-at-home orders.
- God is with us throughout quarantine.
- God is with us throughout social distancing — God is going to come close.

Carol Willison mourns the passing of her mother, Lillian, and yet at the same time, she only recently welcomed into the world her first grandchild, a boy. In a sense, Lillian continues to live now. There is a baby in the family now, and babies are such miracles of wonder and awe. There is no visitation quite like the arrival of a baby.

Think of Mary and Joseph on that night long ago. We may not know the details of this divine visitation, but it was a wonderful event in which the heavens were rent, and God himself in the person of a small baby paid humankind the most important visit of all.

Because of this, God continues to visit us today. May Advent be a time when we not only prepare for the visit, but experience the fullness of God's presence every day!

Musical Interlude:

Variation IV, V on “As With Gladness Men of Old”

Austin C. Lovelace

A Time of Prayer – *let us remember all of our brothers and sisters on the prayer list, especially those who are having a difficult time during this period of social distancing. Please share your prayer concerns so that they may be added to the prayer list by emailing your concern to Pastor Dave at dbhanks92@comcast.net or by calling him direct at 978-821-9571. He is available every evening and on weekends. During this time we suggest that you create a prayer partner with whom you can pair up until we are able to worship together at the church.*

During this holy season of waiting, O God, grace us with the presence of mind to be attuned to what this season is all about, and just what it is we are celebrating. Let us walk slowly into Advent and wait as Mary did, and ponder this wondrous birth. Instead of racing to the store and becoming engulfed in mall madness, let us walk slowly into Advent, and watch for the holy happenings that come to us as we journey to Bethlehem. In the midst of December darkness, open our eyes to the gift of light in our lives ... the smile of a child ... the hug of a friend ... our family gathered here, in this place ... the delight of music ... the aroma of good things baking and the wind in our faces as we walk toward the warmth of home. Let us walk slowly into Advent that we might take note “whenever and wherever God comes ... even to a godforsaken place like a stable.” Let us watch where we are going as we walk slowly into Advent so that we might kneel and greet the babe with ready and restful hearts. We offer our prayers in the name of the one for whom we wait, who walks with us even in our darkest times, Jesus the Christ who taught us to say when we pray “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.”

Closing Hymn: “Blessed Be the God of Israel”

sung to Forest Green

Blessed be the God of Israel, who comes to set us free,
who visits and redeems us, and grants us liberty.
The prophets spoke of mercy, of freedom and release;
God shall fulfill the promise to bring our people peace.

Now from the house of David a child of grace is given;
a Savior comes among us to raise us up to heaven.
Before him goes the herald, forerunner in the way,
the prophet of salvation, the harbinger of day.

On prisoners of darkness the sun begins to rise,
the dawning of forgiveness upon the sinner’s eyes,
to guide the feet of pilgrims along the paths of peace;
O bless our God and Savior with songs that never cease!

Benediction:

We have waited, but soon we will wait no longer. The celebration of the birth of Christ is almost upon us. May your time with friends and family be sweet, may the memories you make be unforgettable. These are the moments when we see Christ. Do not miss him. Do not forget him. Welcome him into your homes and lives as you eat and drink and give gifts. As you leave here today, go in joy. Go in hope. Go in peace. Amen.

Postlude:

Improvisation on Veni Veni Emanuel

PRAYER LIST

Amy Belli
Carolyn Barney
Jack Brigham
Becky Colwell
David Dufour
Diana Escarbie
Cathy Fontaine
Chuck Funk
Bob and Pat Goguen
Jerilyn Hoffman
Linda Hurd

Mary Jackson
Tom Kazanjian
Sarah Kee
Bob and Doris Lane
Diane Lane Cormier
Linda Long
Lorraine Michaud
Audrey Painchaud
Maria Piazza
Emma Pollice
Melanie Pouliot
Jackie Reiss
Martha Quinn
Del Sampson
Elwin Shepard
Ron Smith
Arlene Sirois
Diane Staples
Carole Ann Sumner and Henry
Donna Thorne
Daniel Tousignant
Marilyn Wales
Mary Wayman

All who are experiencing difficult times and situations

All who are lonely or depressed

All who are personally dealing with the affects of the COVID-19 Virus

All medical personnel – doctors, nurses, testing staff, first responders

Our Church and all of its members and friends

All members of our armed force who have committed themselves
to the protection of liberty

Rollstone Congregational Church

United Church of Christ

199 Main Street, Fitchburg, MA

Pastor: Rev. David B. Hanks 978-821-9571

Moderator: Paul Stansel 978-337-1608

Church Organist and Musician: Gavin Klein