



Hope

Peace

Joy

Love

Fourth Sunday of Advent

December 20, 2020

Prelude:

O Come O Come Emanuel

Molly Henderson

Let Us Rejoice as We Worship:

We are walking toward a silent night,
Drawn by the chords of love.
We are moving to the sound of an angelic chorus,
Lured by a deep and holy melody.
We are growing in the likeness of Christ,
Supported by the nudges of the Spirit.
We are living in awareness of a divine love that fills the universe,
Pulling us to love and serve, to pray and worship.

Opening Hymn: “Angels from the Realms of Glory”

Angels from the realms of glory, wing your flight o’er all the earth;
ye who sang creation’s story now proclaim Messiah’s birth:

Refrain

Come and worship, come and worship,
worship Christ, the newborn king.

Shepherds, in the field abiding, watching o’er your flocks by night,
God with us is now residing; yonder shines the infant light:

Sages, leave your contemplations, brighter visions beam afar;
seek the great Desire of nations; ye have seen his natal star:

A Time of Prayer:

Oh, beautiful Advent season, how we love thee. This time of waiting and anticipation stirs such hope in our hearts. God, we recognize this season as a gift from you, a reminder of your promised Messiah come to save us. As we enter into worship today, fill us with exceeding great joy. Holy Spirit, guide our words, our songs and our actions. Allow each song that is sung, each Scripture that is read, and each prayer offered to point us to you. We give you this time because it is for you and about you. May your name be made great. Amen.

The Lighting of the the Candle of Love:

Love is what gives meaning to the Advent season: God’s love for us and our love for God and one another. Without love all the gifts and get-togethers, all the busyness and trappings of Advent become meaningless. But, love makes us alive to the Spirit of God and to the spirit of the season. Because God comes to us in love, we long to share that love

with others. We light the fourth Advent candle, the Love Candle, because God is love.

Hear this promise from John's gospel: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him" (3:16-17).

God is love and in him there is no darkness at all. We walk in the light of Christ, loving as he first loved us, as we light the Candle of Love.

Let us pray; Holy God, in Jesus Christ your love took on flesh and walked among us. Through his teachings, his life, his death and resurrection, we witnessed divine love in action -- love that heals and redeems, restores and saves, reconciles and renews. As your disciples we are called to follow you in the way of love. Grant us courage and faith, Lord, to embody your love for the world to all people, at all times, in all places and circumstances. We pray in the name of Love Incarnate. Amen.

A Reading from the Scriptures:

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16 (NIV)

7 Now when the king was settled in his house, and the Lord had given him rest from all his enemies around him, 2 the king said to the prophet Nathan, 'See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent.' 3 Nathan said to the king, 'Go, do all that you have in mind; for the Lord is with you.'

4 But that same night the word of the Lord came to Nathan: 5 Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the Lord: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? 6 I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. 7 Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, 'Why have you not built me a house of cedar?' 8 Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: Thus says the Lord of hosts: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel; 9 and I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. 10 And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more, as formerly, 11 from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover, the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house.

16 Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever before me; your throne shall be established for ever.

Musical Interlude:

In the Bleak Midwinter

The Message:

"Building a House"

Juanita Ramirez (not her real name) lives in the Portland, Oregon, area. She has a 2-year-old daughter. And now she's shopping for place to live — a place with some space, some land. Because she has a problem. Her mother.

The mother is not a bothersome problem, but she's a concern. Ramirez now thinks it is time for mom to be closer to them. She wants to find a lot that will allow her to build her mom a small cottage. If she can do this, she will be able to take care of both her daughter and her aging mother as well.

She found a house with a nice, single-car garage on the lot. She's going to convert that garage into a little cottage for mom.

She's not the only one thinking of building a house for a parent. In fact, there's a movement in this direction fueled in part by the high cost of care in an assisted living facility. These backyard homes, often called "granny pods," are an alternative to putting an aging relative in a care home. Some are full of medical technology, and are specifically designed for senior citizens. For example, many granny pods have safety features that come standard with the construction, such as hand railings, defibrillators and first aid supplies. Some have lighted floorboards and floors made of soft, porous material covered in thick carpeting, thus minimizing damage from falls.

A key figure in the granny pod movement is a preacher, the Rev. Kenneth Dupin, a Methodist minister from Salem, Virginia. One day, Dupin visited a parishioner in a nursing home. The woman was depressed. And when Dupin left her room, he was depressed, too. He was convinced that America's aging and ailing senior citizens deserved better. And he went to work on some ideas.

Partnering with Virginia Tech Research Center in Blacksburg, Virginia, he founded N2Care, and together they designed the MEDCottage, now known as the granny pod.

The "Granny Pod Revolution" is happening all across America. Children are building or buying houses for their parents. The overwhelming percentage of these homes are fairly small, perhaps under 1,000 square feet. They're not mansions. But they do have features likely to attract adult children who want to keep their needy and aged parents close by: "Interactive video and devices that monitor vital signs, like blood pressure and blood glucose, and transmit real-time readings to caregivers and physicians. Floor-level cameras and sensors alert caregivers to a fall, the toilet seat records weight and temperature, a hammock-like chair lift transports a resident from bed-to-bathroom, and a computer reminds residents when it is time to take medications" (Hager).

With the cost of residential care skyrocketing, it makes sense for many couples to pull their aging parents closer, build or buy a small cottage and reap some equity benefits at the same time. This arrangement is good for parents, too, who often resist moving into an institutional facility.

Children building homes for parents. It's almost as common as parents building, buying or helping to finance homes for their children when the kids — with freshly minted university diplomas or newly married — are just starting out on the adult journey of life.

King David wants to build a house

Something similar is happening in today's text for the Fourth Sunday of Advent.

King David — who has many wars and battles yet ahead of him, who has yet to commit adultery with Bathsheba, who has yet to engineer the death of Bathsheba's husband, who has yet to do anything to avenge the rape of his daughter Tamar by Amnon his son, who has yet to deal with the rebellion of another son Absalom — is thinking of building a house, a house for the Lord, for his heavenly parent.

It would seem to be a sweet gesture. But as with many parents who resist or resent their children telling them what to do, and don't like it when they connive to reduce their independence, God pushes back, and basically tells David to forget it. God doesn't want to

live in a house in David's backyard.

The context for this kerfuffle is that the king had just moved the ark of the covenant. The previous chapter tells the story of this move, which includes two well-known "made for television" events. The first is the death of Uzzah, who had touched the ark to steady it when he thought it was about to topple over. David was so upset by God's behavior that he called a halt to the move, and moved God into the house of Obed-Edom the Gittite (6:10). The ark was there for three months during which Obed-Edom and his family prospered.

When David saw this, he decided that the Lord was no longer angry, and so he took steps to move the ark to the "City of David" — that part of the Jebusite city of Jerusalem he claimed as his own. And now, the second noteworthy event occurs: his wife Michal, the daughter of Saul, mocks his dancing skills, his vulgarity and his general public demeanor. But David doesn't care. The ark is now close to home.

David meanwhile has built himself a house of cedar (v. 2) and thinks that it is not enough that he has brought the ark of the covenant from Baale-judah, where it had resided in the house of Abinadab (6.1). He says to his prophet pal, Nathan: "See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent" (v. 2). The inference is clear: He lives in a sumptuous and stable structure in relative ease, while God has been shunted to a flimsy, impermanent warehouse of canvas and twine.

The situation would make any self-respecting child a bit guilty — treating his parent this way. Yet, why did David really want to build a house or temple for the Lord?

It's hard to know the king's motives. One can speculate, however. Perhaps there's a quid pro quo idea lurking in David's heart. If he does something for God, God will do something for him. Such an attitude is hardly uncommon. People have always bargained with God.

- Abraham bargained with God about Sodom and his nephew Lot (Genesis 18).
- Jacob bargained during his wrestling match (Genesis 22).
- Moses struck a deal with God to save the Israelites in the aftermath of the Golden Calf incident (Exodus 32).
- Jephthah made a bargain that cost his daughter's life (Judges 11).
- Hannah bargained for a son (1 Samuel 1).
- When he was on his deathbed, Hezekiah argued for 15 more years (2 Kings 20).

Soldiers offer up foxhole prayers during a firestorm that often have something to do with never fornicating again or going into the priesthood. Many people with a terminal illness understandably try to strike a deal with God — perhaps offering to tithe faithfully if God will heal them. People in financial distress often make desperate promises to God.

All of these situations are sort of like pagan attempts to appeal to a wrathful deity. People around the world, in jungles, on the desert or in the mountains, pray to their gods, bringing offerings of fruit and slain beasts. They burn incense, light candles and ask their patron deity to help them pass examinations, heal a dying mother, increase their prosperity and give them health and long life. Perhaps David, too, is seeking a little quid pro pro.

Or maybe his motive is more benign. Perhaps he simply wanted to express his gratitude. God's hand had been on him since Samuel anointed him in the presence of his brothers and his father Jesse (1 Samuel 16). In fact, in our text today, God reminds David of this very thing: "I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel; and I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you" (vv. 8-9).

Expressing gratitude to God is a good thing. Like most parents, God tries to teach his

children to say “please” and “thank you.” Later, David himself will write: “Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him, bless his name” (Psalm 100:4). Yes, it is a good thing to say “thank you.”

But perhaps God senses that David is attempting more than a thank-you note. Maybe he’s also trying to pay God back, to settle a debt. Powerful men like David don’t like being indebted to anyone, not even to their God. Is this what is happening here?

Do we ever think that — given our years of selfless service in ministry — that we’re sort of square with God? We’ve preached 1,235 sermons over the course of our careers, made 647 hospital visits, innumerable house calls, baptized babies and buried the elderly. We’ve paid our dues. We’ve done our service. Certainly God could not expect more.

We tend to think this way. If we’ve done no harm, been faithful to our spouse, volunteered for various nonprofits, been generous with our financial resources, never once kicked the cat, never once evaded the IRS, never once used profanity — well, what could God possibly say? It’s like we present an invoice to God and say, “I think we’re good. We’re done here.” Now we can walk away.

God doesn’t want a house

Whatever David’s motives, God doesn’t see it this way. God doesn’t want a house. At least, God doesn’t want David’s house. God makes it clear: He never asked for a house. He doesn’t want a house. “I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, ‘Why have you not built me a house of cedar?’” (vv. 6-7).

David was treating God as a client. The one who builds the house is greater than the tenant of the house. God sees through David. There’s David, the man of action and mighty deeds. He’s going to make decisions for God. He’s going to keep God in his place. He is going to take care of God. He is going to put God somewhere so that he’ll always know where God is and what God is doing. He is going to manage God. He is going to please God as any child wishes to please a parent by showing the parent that he has outstripped the parent, has advanced and gone beyond the parent.

God will have none of it, and brings the housebuilding plans to an abrupt halt. And although God will later approve plans for a temple built by David’s sons, right now he has a lesson or two to teach the king.

God doesn’t need to be sheltered. Perhaps this is why the tabernacle never had a roof. To put a roof on the structure would suggest that God needs protection, that God is not much more than an idol made of wood or stone. No, we don’t need to protect God in any way, shape or form. We are not going to cage God.

God doesn’t need to be assisted with his living arrangements. God reminds David that he has never uttered a complaint about the tabernacle. God has never expressed dissatisfaction with his “house.” God doesn’t need his children telling him what to do. He is fine, thank you very much. God will not permit David the satisfaction of feeling like he’s helping God, giving God a hand, lending assistance for someone who can no longer help himself. God reminds David that he, God, is firmly in control of his powers and faculties.

God proposes to build a house

Now, God turns the tables. God tells David that although David cannot and will not

build a house of God, God will build a house for him: “Moreover, the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house” (v. 11).

The house that God will build for David is not a house of cedar, marble and precious stones. Such a house, no matter how well-built, is still subject to decay and destruction. No, God is going to build a dynasty! It’s a house that will last eternally. Notice that God uses the word “forever” three times when describing this new “house” (2 Samuel 7:13, 16). God says, “Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever” (v. 16).

This brings us to Advent. We’re only a few days from the day we celebrate advent of the final ruler, the last and eternal sovereign, the Anointed One, the Messiah, the One who is of the royal house of David. The angel Gabriel says to Mary: “You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end” (Luke 1:31-33).

And now, God, who rejected David’s plan’s for a house, settles into a “house” of an entirely different order, a house of flesh and bone. The writer of Hebrews puts it this way: “Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me” (10:5).

Here in the manger, God is in his house. This human house, this child — all for us. Everything in the name of this child suggests that God has amazing and saving plans for us: Wonderful Counselor, the Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace, Jesus, Savior, Messiah.

And, as God tells David in our text, this throne is now established forever.

O come let us adore him.

O come let us adore him,

O come let us adore him,

Christ, the Lord.

Amen.

Musical Interlude:

Nöel Nouvelet

Mark Montgomery

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.*

Compassionate God, in this time of darkness, we wait for the One who will come and redeem us. As we revel in the merriment of the season and the sparkle of decorations, we need to remember there are also many for whom the holiday season isn’t one of joy and good cheer.

We pray for those who cannot see the light in the darkness, that they would find hope not in the commercial side of Christmas but in the promise of the Christ child.

We pray for those who grieve this Advent season, fearing the first Christmas after losing a beloved one, that they would know your comfort and find hope in the promise of the resurrection.

We pray for those who struggle to feel joy because they're mired in mounting bills and in despair for lack of employment, that they would have faith that you will provide.

We pray for our military families who are separated by great distance from their loved ones serving in Iraq, Afghanistan or elsewhere, whose tables have an empty seat this Christmas, that they would rely on you for strength and protection.

We pray for those whose family dynamics make holidays not a time of festive joy but of stress and anger. We pray that through your grace, hearts can be softened, old hurts can be released and a door might be opened to reconciliation.

We lift our joys and give over our concerns, those we have spoken and those in our hearts, to your tender care.

These, O God, are our prayers as we now recall those words in which Christ 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: "O Come, All Ye Faithful"

O come, all ye faithful joyful and triumphant,
O come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem.
Come and behold Him, born the King of Angels!

Refrain

O come, let us adore Him, O come, let us adore Him,
O come, let us adore Him, Christ the Lord.

God of God, Light of Light eternal,
Lo! he abhors not the Virgin's womb;
Son of the Father, begotten, not created,

Sing, choirs of angels, sing in exultation,
O Sing, all ye citizens of heav'n above:
"Glory to God, all glory in the highest!"

Yea, Lord, we greet thee, born this happy morning;
Jesus, to thee be all glory giv'n;
Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing;

Benediction:

Christmas is coming quickly now. Emmanuel is nearly here again. In this week to come, take a moment to stop, to listen, to hear beyond the carols, beyond the commercials, beyond your mind saying, "I must hurry now, there is much to

do.” Take a moment each day to listen for the word of God spoken in your life, to you and for you, this week. It may come from the Bible, it may come out of the mouth of a child. If we listen we will hear God speaking.

May your souls be filled with the Light of Life, with the Sparkle of Christ, and may the joy of love bless you each day and every night until we meet on Christmas Eve. May the blessing of God, the giver of Emmanuel, live lively in your life. Amen.

Postlude:

People Look East

Molly Henderson

PRAYER LIST

Amy Belli	Lorraine Michaud
Carolyn Barney	Audrey Painchaud
Jack Brigham	Maria Piazza
Becky Colwell	Emma Pollice
David Dufour	Melanie Pouliot
Diana Escarbie	Jackie Reiss
Cathy Fontaine	Martha Quinn
Chuck Funk	Del Sampson
Bob and Pat Goguen	Elwin Shepard
Jerilyn Hoffman	Ron Smith
Linda Hurd	Arlene Sirois
Mary Jackson	Diane Staples
Tom Kazanjian	Carole Ann Sumner and Henry
Sarah Kee	Donna Thorne
Bob and Doris Lane	Daniel Tousignant
Diane Lane Cormier	Marilyn Wales
Linda Long	Mary Wayman
Family of Carol Maki	

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 forced who have committed themselves
to the protection of liberty**

Rollstone Congregational Church

United Church of Christ

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