

Service of the Word: November 28, 2021  
First Sunday in Advent

**Prelude**

**Call to Worship**

***Homesick... for Hope***

Can one be homesick for something you've never known?

**We are homesick for a just world,  
for peace like rivers, for the end of suffering.**

Yes, we are homesick—

**for joy that is contagious, for nations that feel like  
neighbors, and for hospitals that run empty.**

We are homesick for the world God promises.

**We are homesick, but we are on our way.**

God is here. God is still creating.

**Let us worship Holy God.**

Leader: Friends, let us worship God  
with praise, prayer, and singing!

**Lighting of the Advent Wreath: Hope**

*Introit*            O Come, O Come, Emmanuel v. 1

(Readers are Henry and Greta Pryor)

A: We hope for a world where all are fed.

**B: We hope for a world with more bridges than walls.**

A: We hope for a world with wide open doors.

**B: We hope for a world with contagious laughter.**

A: We hope for a world where trees grow tall and creeks run clean.

**B: We hope for a world where all people feel at home—in their bodies, in the church, in their physical homes.**

A: We hope for that world.

**B: We long for that world.**

A: We are homesick for that world.

**B: So today we light the candle of hope, because hope keeps our hearts alive as we wait.**

(light candle)

A: May this light be a reminder that the wait is always worth it.

**B: We are close to home. May we carry hope with us. Amen.**

Choir Anthem

“We Wait in Hope”

-Joel Rainey

## **Scripture Reading**     Luke 21:25-36

“There will be signs in the sun, moon, and stars. On the earth, there will be dismay among nations in their confusion over the roaring of the sea and surging waves. The planets and other heavenly bodies will be shaken, causing people to faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world. Then they will see the Human One coming on a cloud with power and great splendor. Now when these things begin to happen, stand up straight and raise your heads, because your redemption is near.”

Jesus told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees. When they sprout leaves, you can see for yourselves and know that summer is near. In the same way, when you see these things happening, you know that God’s kingdom is near. I assure you that this generation won’t pass away until everything has happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will certainly not pass away.

“Take care that your hearts aren’t dulled by drinking parties, drunkenness, and the anxieties of day-to-day life. Don’t let that day fall upon you unexpectedly, like a trap. It will come upon everyone who lives on the face of the whole earth. Stay alert at all times, praying that you are strong enough to escape everything that is about to happen and to stand before the Human One.”

## Message

Our usual family tradition is to begin the Christmas decorating on the day after Thanksgiving. We try to enjoy the process slowly over a couple of weeks, bit-by-bit adding to the lights and decorations throughout the house, beginning with the tree on Saturday. But one important thing we always look forward to on Friday night, is pulling out and reading through the stack of Christmas stories we've collected bit by bit over the years.

Not surprisingly, one of those books is Chris Van Allsburg's *The Polar Express*. It's the story of a little boy who rides a magical train to the North Pole and gets to meet Santa Claus. The high point of the story seems to be the moment when the main character is selected to receive the first present of Christmas directly from Santa. More than anything else on the sleigh, he wants one of the silver bells from the reindeers' harnesses.

Santa gives him the bell and immediately sets off to deliver presents, cheered on by the gathered elves. But on the way home, the boy is heartbroken to discover that his treasured bell has been lost through a hole in his pocket.

The real climax of the story takes place the next morning, when the bell mysteriously re-appears, wrapped for him under the Christmas tree. But the most important detail — when the magic of the whole story is revealed — is in the parents' reaction to this present. "I shook the bell," the boy narrates. "It made the most beautiful sound my sister and I had ever heard. But my mother said, 'Oh, that's too bad.'" "Yes," my father said. "It's broken." When I'd shaken the bell, my parents had not heard a sound."

The opening and defining theme of Advent season every year is *Wait. Watch. Listen.* Keep awake — stay alert — something important is happening. The world is about to change.

In today's Gospel reading from Luke, Jesus promises that this new world will come about before the generation of his age has passed away — in other words, it has already happened! The Human One, the Son of God, the Messiah, has already come and transformed the world. So where are the signs of this transformation that is supposed to have "come upon everyone who lives on the face of the whole earth?"

It's fascinating to look more closely at Jesus' advice for staying alert. He doesn't mean that we should literally stop sleeping, stop everything, just to be ready for his appearance. He doesn't ask us to **stop** living our lives; but he does tell us to live them differently. "Take care," he says, "that your **hearts aren't dulled** by drinking parties, drunkenness, and the anxieties of day-to-day life."

In other words, don't let yourselves become so numb to what's happening around you, that you can't hear the call of Christ in your heart. What incredibly modern, relevant advice from such an ancient source! Don't be like the parents in *The Polar Express*: so grown-up that you no longer have the capacity to wonder or imagine — that the sound of magic is silenced for you.

And look at the ways Jesus predicts this will happen: drunkenness, and anxiety. Two almost polar opposites, in a way. We numb ourselves to

wonder by trying to forget what is happening around us: maybe through drinking, drug use; or just as likely today through compulsive shopping, TV watching, video-game playing, overeating — anything to dull the overwhelming burdens of our lives. Or we let that overwhelm take over us — through anxiety, workaholism, overcommitting, even exercising too much, watching too much news, thinking that somehow we will find the way to fix everything if we just try harder. Yet, in this state, too, the bell always seems “broken” to us — we’re too busy or distracted to hear the sound of beauty, to hear the call of peace. As the Christmas hymn says, “Love has come, a light in the darkness” — but so easy to miss if we are too tired or numb to awaken to this quiet, gentle wonder.

A year after I graduated from seminary, Adam and I moved to Berkeley, California where he began his Ph.D. program. We were completely unprepared when we arrived, for how difficult that time would be. In summer 2008, the Great Recession was reaching its peak, and nowhere in the country were unemployment rates higher than in the Bay Area. It took me months to find a part-time job as we struggled to get by on student loans in one of the most expensive cities in the US, while gas and grocery prices continued to soar. A kind staff person from the UCC’s Northern California Nevada Conference meet with me one afternoon to gently explain that she did not expect any openings for any congregations in the Conference in the coming 2-3 years, and I should find something else to do for a while. We were in a new place, a new culture, a new marriage; and I was without friends, without a purpose, without a calling. I missed my mother. I just wanted to go home.

But where was home? My parents had moved during my senior year in high school to a town about 10 miles from where I grew up. In the meanwhile, I had lived in 3 different countries and 4 different States in less than 10 years; and anyway, wasn't I supposed to be making a *new* home now, with my husband? I longed for work, for a sense of meaning; but also just for the familiar. For security. For a life that didn't feel like such a struggle in every single way. My heart was dulled, just as Jesus described, by the anxieties of everyday life.

As part of a program at one of the local graduate schools, I began meeting with a spiritual director through the church we were attending. The sessions were free while she completed her clinical hours and coursework. We talked about my sense of vocation and my longing for home; and she asked me, "What would home look like? How would you know if you found it? And what could you do right now, to experience some of that sense of 'home' right here in Berkeley? Or, is it already happening, and you just haven't noticed?"

I remember leaving our session that day feeling pretty unchanged, and maybe even a little bit irritated. It felt like, in an already over-burdened life, I had just been given yet another assignment that I was likely to fail. But in the days and weeks to come, her questions kept coming back. I felt like I was waking up a little bit at a time. I started to see the ways I could find home in a new place — and the ways it was already happening. The new friendships we were building. The work opportunities that were coming together. The community taking shape around us.

I can't emphasize enough, that our entire time in Berkeley was extremely challenging. This is not a sermon about how faith, or even spiritual direction, is a magical solution to life's challenges. Every time it seemed like we had found our footing, something would change — with our jobs, our health, our family, even with student loan policies. It was a constant struggle. I was probably suffering from untreated intermittent depression. The Great Recession went on; and my work with some congregations outside the UCC had some extremely toxic elements. Everything wasn't suddenly sunshine and roses.

But somehow, slowly, it became less terrible. Less completely overwhelming. And there were moments of indescribable joy, like the birth of our first child. In some ways, the challenges we faced together then probably made our marriage stronger than ever. No matter what we have struggled with since — finances, parenting, job environments — we know we can make it through somehow. We nurture "home spaces" with meals together and bedtime routines, with summers in Michigan and holiday traditions that create the peace and rest we need to go on living and staying awake to hope in a turbulent world.

The myth of Christmas is that, overnight, our problems disappear. From now on, our troubles will be out of sight... right? But that's Judy Garland, not the Gospel. What changes with the birth of Jesus isn't that the darkness ceases to exist. It's that we remember how to light the way when we are lost.

Advent is a season that invites us to bring more light into the troubled, anxious, or numb places of our hearts. To create a cozy, glowing place of home even where we feel like strangers or outsiders. Instead of listening to the market's call to "do more, spend more, get more," it's a time to do less. Savor silence. Practice listening.

Maybe that looks like deleting your Facebook App or turning off the TV for the next 4 weeks. Maybe it means not cleaning your house or raking leaves next Saturday, so you can stuff bags for McKinney-Vento instead. Maybe it means getting pizza or takeout just to have a friend over for dinner, instead of feeling like you have to prepare a fancy meal. Maybe it's doing something fun that you remember from your childhood, no matter how silly it seems.

The promise of Advent is the reminder that, when we feel homesick for joy or justice, we can go home any time we choose. In a world short on love, we can choose with God's help to be more loving. In a culture short on forgiveness, we can seek to forgive. In a social marketplace that thrives on conflict, drama, and anger, we can practice peace in every setting of our lives. Christ isn't coming into the world this Advent season. Christ is already here: in our hearts, in our lives, in our actions, in our generosity. Will we hear Jesus calling us once more to redemption and new life? We will, whenever we pause the noise of our lives long enough, to listen with our whole heart. Amen.

## **Prayers & Lord's Prayer**

We are united in prayer throughout the week, especially as we pray for those on our prayer list by name. We give thanks for those who celebrate: especially for Gauge Philpott and Fern Topham as they celebrate birthdays in the coming week. We pray for healing and strength for Joe Latas; and for Karen and Nancy as they watch over him. We pray for others in our community who are dealing with illness and grief, especially Nancy.

If you or someone you know would like to be added to the prayer list, please do call or email Wendy or your Care Team contact person so we can make sure to update the list. Are there any other joys or concerns to share while we are gathered this morning?

(some prayers shared in community; Kim Rix announced that The Beam will be installed this week — prayers of joy and for safety!)

With the prayers we have shared in the space, and the prayers we carry on our hearts, let us be united as one body in the Holy Spirit as we turn to God for comfort and courage.

Loving God, light of the world: sometimes we feel like we are far from home; or even far from you. Family visits at Thanksgiving become reminders of all the ways in which we are not welcome. Christmas traditions become burdensome routines when they add to our financial strain, or remind us of lost loved ones who won't be joining in this year.

Whether we're trying to shut it all out or let it all in, the demands of this world can slowly or suddenly be too much to bear.

Emmanuel, God-with-us: help us to remember that your door is always open. You are the refuge where all are welcome; you are the home where there is enough room for everyone. You are hope when all seems hopeless. When we lose our way, guide us back to you. In our pain and sadness, give us your strength, and help us rest. Break through the noise of greed and vanity; of addiction and exhaustion; of trauma and anxiety. Help us find our way home to you as we listen, awake and alert, in quiet moments where your holy chorus of hope can still be heard despite the world's dissonant cries. We lift up this prayers in the name of Jesus, who taught us to pray together, saying: 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 and ever. Amen.

**Hymn**                      Awake, Awake, and Greet the New Morn

### **Announcements and Offering Invitation**

- Congregational meeting in 2 weeks — announced in communicator
- McKinney-Vento donations & bag day this Saturday at 10am
- Operation Holiday, from HumanKind Ministries: applications for help due Tuesday
- Advent study on Sunday afternoons
- Volunteers needed for worship leadership
- Hank Jennings shared a note about Christmas events at the Old Cowtown Museum

## Service of Commitment for New Members

### *Opening words*

Blessed are those who yearn for deepening more than escape; who are not afraid to grow in spirit.

**Blessed are those who take seriously the bonds of community; who regularly join in celebration and learning; who come as much to minister as to be ministered to.**

Blessed are those who understand that the church is often imperfect, yet rather than harbor feelings of anger or disappointment, bring their concerns and needs to the church family.

**Blessed are those who support the church and its work through their giving, and who give of themselves as well as their material goods.**

Blessed are those who when asked to serve, do so gladly.

**Blessed are those who know that the work of the church is the transformation of individual and society; who have a vision of the Beloved Community transcending the present, and who do not shrink from controversy, sacrifice, or change. They are blessed indeed.**

### *Questions for Candidates*

Do you desire to affirm your baptism (or covenant) into the faith and family of Jesus Christ?

**I do.**

Do you promise, by the grace of God, to be Christ's disciple, to resist oppression and evil, to show love and justice, and to witness to the work and word of Jesus Christ as best you are able?

**I promise, with the help of God.**

Do you promise, according to the grace given you, to grow in the

Christian faith and to be a faithful member of the church of Jesus Christ, celebrating Christ's presence and furthering Christ's mission in all the \ world?

**I promise, with the help of God.**

Do you promise to participate in the life and mission of this family of God's people, sharing regularly in the worship of God and enlisting in the work of this local church as it serves this community and the world?

**I promise, with the help of God.**

### *Church Covenant*

As followers of Jesus Christ, we promise to respect each other at all times in the following ways:

**We will approach all things in prayer.**

**We will speak from personal experience, from "I," not "We," or "They." We accept disagreement as normal and natural to community processes. We will speak face-to-face, honestly and without rancor, avoiding triangulation and hearsay.**

**We will listen with an open and non-judgmental mind, and try as hard to understand as to be understood.**

**We are committed to being inconvenienced for the Gospel.**

**If we are unable to effectively communicate with each other, we will ask a third-party to be present to assist us. We will support the final outcome of the decision-making process. As forgiven people, we will choose to forgive one another.**

### ***Welcome***

On behalf of the members of Wichita United Church of Christ, we express our welcome and affirm our mutual ministry in Christ.

**We welcome you with joy in the common life of this church. We promise you our friendship and prayers as we share the hopes and labors of the church of Jesus Christ. By the power of the Holy Spirit may we continue to grow together in God's knowledge and love and be witnesses of the risen Christ.**

*Let the congregation acknowledge their assent and welcome by participating in a round of applause.*

### **Benediction**

Leader: This is our church

**People: We make it what it is.**

Leader: Others will feel welcome

**People: If I am welcoming.**

Leader: It will do great work

**People: If I work.**

Leader: It will exemplify a life of abundant generosity

**People: If I give generously of my time, talents, and treasure.**

Leader: It will be a rallying place for social justice and peace

**People: If I advocate for marginalized communities and practice peace in every setting of my life.**

Leader: Now we go out to participate in the reconciling ministry of Jesus as an inclusive, justice-seeking community,

**People: And I dedicate myself to being who I want our church to be. AMEN.**

### **Postlude**