

Worship - Sunday 29th November 2020

Advent 1

On the Road to Bethlehem

Opening music: Sleepers awake (Wachet Auf)

Good morning everyone, and welcome to today's worship with the churches of Fleet URC and Beacon Hill URC.

Let's take a moment to set aside the busyness of our day and settle ourselves ready for worship this morning. Let us pray.

God of time and space,
We are glad to be here on this first Sunday in Advent.
This time is for you so let us stop.
Let us still our buzzing heads, relax our weary bodies and breathe deeply.

Pause

In this moment, in this welcoming stillness, we acknowledge our need of your waiting time. We will be still and wait, and we will praise you. Amen

Advent Candle Meditation: introduced by Karen with Tom & Christine lighting today's candle

Call to worship

Glorious God, your splendour is beyond
our experience and our understanding;
Yet we come, to offer you our worship and praise.
O God, you are mighty in power and blessing.

Compassionate God, your loving care is beyond
our experience and our understanding;
Yet we come, to offer you our worship and praise.
O God, whose tenderness is beyond any measuring.

Radiant God, the light of your glory is beyond
our experience and our understanding;
Yet we come to praise and bless your holy name,
O God, as you offer us your blessing and saving grace. Amen.

Prayers of Approach and confession

Lord God, made known in Jesus and present through your Spirit,
this Advent tide we might look for you by scanning the horizon,
or hoping for a visitor at the door, or by waiting for a notification to
pop up on a screen.....

Alternatively, we might notice you already beside us
as we labour over a mountain of Christmas cards
– and rekindle friendships and re-affirm our love.
In stretching our minds and our finances to offer suitable gifts,
might we remember that our Christmas giving is triggered by your
gift of yourself to us?

As we hear again familiar stories
from far away and long ago,
may our giving and our loving
be refreshed by our knowing once again
that you are here for us, then and now and forever.

Ian Fosten: Amidst the chores and hassle URC Prayer Handbook 2020

God of the past, who has called us to be your people,
who has gifted us with so much,
who came to us in the unexpected,
we seek your coming to call the world back to your path.
**Heaven and earth may pass away, but your words will not
pass away.**

God of the present, who blesses us with insight,
Who calls us to community,
Who commands us to love and to heal,
We seek your coming to redress wrongs, to set the world back on
your track where justice and love are paramount.

Heaven and earth may pass away, but your words will not pass away.

God of new beginnings, who offers forgiveness
if we are ready for truth and ready to change;
who always let's us begin again,
we seek your coming to be able to live life in all its fulness.

Heaven and earth may pass away, but your words will not pass away.

You call us to be alert, for we do not know the time of your coming.
Wake us up to the signs of change – to live NOW as you call us to live,
to be prepared for your coming.

Heaven and earth may pass away, but your words will not pass away.

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Together we pray as you taught your disciples to 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 trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen

Hymn: O Come, O Come Emmanuel (selected verses)

O come, O come, Emmanuel,
And ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appear.

Refrain

Rejoice! Rejoice!

Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.

O come, O come, Thou Lord of might
Who to Thy tribes, on Sinai's height
In ancient times didst give the law
In cloud, and majesty and awe *Refrain*

O come, Thou Rod of Jesse, free
Thine own from Satan's tyranny;
From depths of hell Thy people save,
And give them victory over the grave. *Refrain*

Author: John M. Neale

Readings: from the Good News Bible

Psalm 80: 1 – 7 & 17 -19 read by Elizabeth English

1 Listen to us, O Shepherd of Israel; hear us, leader of your flock.
Seated on your throne above the winged creatures, **2** reveal
yourself to the tribes of Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh. Show
us your strength; come and save us! **3** Bring us back, O God!
Show us your mercy, and we will be saved! **4** How much longer,
Lord God Almighty, will you be angry with your people's prayers?
5 You have given us sorrow to eat, a large cup of tears to drink.
6 You let the surrounding nations fight over our land; our enemies
insult us. **7** Bring us back, Almighty God! Show us your mercy, and
we will be saved!
17 Preserve and protect the people you have chosen, the nation
you made so strong. **18** We will never turn away from you again;
keep us alive, and we will praise you. **19** Bring us back, Lord God
Almighty. Show us your mercy, and we will be saved.

Mark 13: 24 -37 read by Stephen English

24 "In the days after that time of trouble the sun will grow dark, the moon will no longer shine, **25** the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers in space will be driven from their courses. **26** Then the Son of Man will appear, coming in the clouds with great power and glory. **27** He will send the angels out to the four corners of the earth to gather God's chosen people from one end of the world to the other. **28** "Let the fig tree teach you a lesson. When its branches become green and tender and it starts putting out leaves, you know that summer is near. **29** In the same way, when you see these things happening, you will know that the time is near, ready to begin. **30** Remember that all these things will happen before the people now living have all died.

31 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away. **32** "No one knows, however, when that day or hour will come - neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son; only the Father knows. **33** Be on watch, be alert, for you do not know when the time will come. **34** It will be like a man who goes away from home on a trip and leaves his servants in charge, after giving to each one his own work to do and after telling the doorkeeper to keep watch. **35** Watch, then, because you do not know when the master of the house is coming - it might be in the evening or at midnight or before dawn or at sunrise. **36** If he comes suddenly, he must not find you asleep. **37** What I say to you, then, I say to all: Watch!"

Reflection

Advent. Perhaps the most beautiful of all the church seasons (or perhaps I say that because it's my favourite). Advent certainly brings out the poet not only in the psalmist but in the commentators as well. Leonard Beechy calls Advent "Twilight time," drawing on the beautiful Celtic tradition with its sense of "the time between the times," like the thin places where we feel even for a moment the presence of the holy. I was taught that we live our lives in the "already-but-not-yet" of God's reign, and Beechy connects that beautifully to this season: "The church exists to remind us that we live in the time between the times, between what is dying and what

is being born, between the 'already' of Christ's reign and the 'not yet' of Advent." At the beginning of another church year, it reminds us of the power of the story we will hear again and again on the road to Bethlehem that draws us more deeply into remembered traditions and events of our personal history.

We tend to think of the month of December as the Christmas season, and the secular world ironically reinforces that premature celebration, if only to entice us to early and excessive spending. I've already seen Christmas trees glowing with lights in front windows and the media have talked of how people are decorating for Christmas really early this year to cheer them and give them a focus in the lockdown period.

But it makes me want to remind them that Advent is a different kind of time than Christmas itself. We are travelling on a road that takes us to Bethlehem. We are not there yet! The reading from Mark's Gospel directs us to be alert and watch while we wait. So if we think about this as a time of waiting, then perhaps we need to stop in the busyness of preparing for 25th December and be on watch and be alert to how and where we as church see the kingdom of heaven in the here and now.

If we were to stop during this Advent, not Christmas, season, and look in on ourselves as others do, what does church look like to them at the moment, in the middle of a pandemic lockdown? In this time when we are restricted in our activities and the way we worship by the impact of the pandemic & government restrictions, do those looking in see a church that is awake and alert to God's kingdom? Or do we look asleep? What should we be doing in this time between the times while we wait to open our doors and be an obviously active presence once more in our communities?

There's a wonderful scene in the story of *The Secret Garden*, by Frances Hodgson Burnett, which has recently been released again as a film, when Dickon and his friend Mary explore a most wonderful hidden garden. It appears that many branches of the

trees and the rose bushes are dead – the word "gray" is repeated again and again. But Dickon takes out a knife and cuts into a branch, where he finds "a shoot which looked brownish green instead of hard, dry gray," and he assures Mary that, deep inside, the tree is as "wick," as full of life and promise and hope as these two young people themselves.

A church that lives and breathes God's justice and God's righteousness – not *self*-righteousness, but *God's* righteousness – is a "wick" shoot, green and new on the inside, holding life and hope and promise no matter what things may look like on the outside. In the midst of loneliness and despair, poverty and pandemic, in the face of communal depression and personal heartache, such a church throws open their metaphoric doors and their hearts to all of God's precious children.

We need to think of how we can offer a place, a community, where the quiet little flames of hope can be fanned into the fires of justice and peace, fanned into the warmth of spiritual homes for those who thought that there was no hope at all - that they would never find a place of such beauty and kindness, such tenderness and fierce hope - a welcome home in which to grow their faith by participating in the dream of God. These are churches that love worship and learning, churches that are open and generous, full of feeling, beautiful and just, churches that long for, and draw their strength from the dream of God. And we must think about how we can continue to show that in these strange times so others know it.

In so many ways, the world around us may appear, well, broken: relationships within families and communities, political parties and governmental processes, nations and economies and social systems have been damaged almost beyond repair. Even the earth itself cries out in weather systems that bring destruction. We wonder, too, if we'll ever be able to clean up the mess we have made in our rivers and oceans, the air and the ground itself.

If we look around us, justice and righteousness do not appear to be the order of the day. Too many people wake up each day not in safety and security but in fear; too many awaken to another day of hunger and anxiety, another day of suffering and pain. While we may be annoyed at having to wear masks, keep social distance and not go shopping, many others struggle just to provide shelter for their children, and mothers watch their children starve while our leaders discuss whether to cut a country's debt.

While we wait in these times of restriction, the reality is that we can use this time productively to show love and hope to others, that we are "wick". We can show that by looking at our church buildings & operations with new eyes, prepare our church community and individuals to be ready to reach out to the marginalised, those struggling to put food on the table and who are just not like us – make it clear that we are as alive and alert as we can be. We are not asleep! And when we open our doors to worship together once again what a bonus that fellowship will be!

We are called, no we are compelled, to look up and around us and to see the suffering of our community and nation in this Advent season like no other and bring hope within and without of our church community. When we live in love and act in hope, when we gather like this to remember what Jesus did and to know that Jesus is with us once again, when we actively take the opportunity to revitalise how we are church, we will be God's people travelling on the road to Bethlehem, not because it's tradition and gives us a warm glow, but because we are alert and awake; we are "wick", holding out hope and promise to all.

Unison Prayer

God and Father of Christ our Saviour, help us as we wait for the coming again of the baby Jesus. Keep us alert, awake and aware of the times in our lives when we know your salvation. Even more, help us to share that good news of salvation with others. Amen.

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Prayers of Intercession

Lord, prepare us for your Advent coming. In our prayers today we try to come to you, sure that you will come to meet with us.

Lord, prepare us for your coming – in the world.

Come, drive away despair from our politics; revive our dreams of justice; restore our passion for what is good, right and true.

Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Lord, prepare us for your coming – in our own communities.

Help us never forget the supremacy of love when problems arise in our communities.

Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Lord, prepare us for your coming – for those in need.

Give us eyes to search the face of the stranger and there to see the face of our Saviour. Give us sensitivity to hear the doubt and hesitation, and there, with that person, share the confusion.

Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Lord, prepare us for your coming – for those who are ill.

There are those we know who are ill now, struggling this morning to handle the pain. Let us pray for them.

Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Advent Lord, come ever nearer. Come to rejuvenate our faith.

Come to fortify our social conscience. Come to open our eyes wide with wonder. So when the Saviour comes, he may see our hearts and find them ready. Come, Lord Jesus. **Amen**

Closing prayer

Advent God, we journey with you, to Bethlehem's stable and a new-born King,

ears attuned to the song of angels,

eyes alert for Bethlehem's star.

Forgive us if on our journey we are distracted by the tempting offers of this world.

Keep our hearts aflame with the hope of Christmas, and the promise of a Saviour. Amen

Blessing

We are looking for God in our world.

May we see what God wants us to see.

We are looking for God in our lives.

May we be who God wants us to be.

And may God our Shepherd, Protector, Awakener and Holy Spirit, Bless us through these Advent days. Amen

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Closing music: The Advent of our God

Hymn, opening & closing music from <https://www.smallchurchmusic.com/>

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