

# Come, Follow Me: Advent

Grace in the Life of a Disciple



Sermon  
Series



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## Grace in the Life of a Disciple

A project of the  
South Carolina Annual Conference  
of The United Methodist Church

### Introduction to the Sermon Series

"[Come Follow Me](#)" began as a series of sermons concerning the growth of Peter as a disciple as a way to help church participants begin to change their thinking from being a member of a church to being a disciple of Christ. Groups discussed and studied the actions of Peter and began to look at their own understanding of following Christ as a disciple. The response to that series called for a second group of sermons, which followed Jesus during the season of Lent.

This series uses the Wesleyan perspective on grace to focus on the lectionary texts used during Advent and Christmas.

John Wesley preached and taught about the movements of God's grace as prevenient (or preparing) grace, justifying grace and sanctifying grace. For Wesley, prevenient grace awakens us to God and prepares us to accept God's acceptance. Justification is what God has done for us in the life and death of Jesus. Sanctification is what God is doing in us through the Holy Spirit. Grace is grace: the presence and power of God at work in the world, and the presence and power of God at work in, with and for us. As we study and proclaim the texts of Advent and Christmas, we will see the ways of grace. When you study these texts, identify the dynamic of grace at work.

We want to remind people that God's grace is singular. Grace is grace, and grace is God's unconditional acceptance and love. We acknowledge that grace as prevenient, justifying and sanctifying based upon where we are in our lives and our relationship with God in Christ. Grace is the presence and power of God at work in the world, and the presence and power of God in, with and for us. God wants and needs us to participate in and cooperate with this grace to heal and form us into the persons God created us to be – as children in God's household and citizens of God's kingdom.

The sermons are for the four Sundays of Advent, Christmas Eve, and the two Sundays of Christmas. Each session contains these sections:

- Note to the Pastor – Pastoral background
- Exegesis – A light introduction (you will do more digging)
- Sermon Outline – The big ideas of the sermon



- Sermon – That which was preached
- Other Illustrations – For use within contemporary and traditional setting
- Hymn and Song Suggestions – Traditional and contemporary suggestions
- Bibliography – A working list of resources

A separate [Adult Discussion Guide](#) is also available. The Adult Discussion Guide offers suggestions for conversations in small groups – whether in person or via Zoom or other connection. Each session in the Adult Discussion Guide includes suggestions to help participants and/or the entire congregation grow spiritually through different spiritual disciplines.

## Contributors



The **Rev. Jim Arant**, the director of this project, is an ordained deacon in ministry with the South Carolina Annual Conference since 1989. While working as a [congregational specialist](#) with many different congregations, he also led or directed Job Function Workshops, Leader Training, Church Structure Training, Lay Visitation, and Stewardship training. He is a trainer for the [Forward Focus](#) process and helped develop the first two editions of “Come Follow Me” – “Moving from Membership to Discipleship” and “A Disciple’s Journey Through Lent.”



The **Rev. Brian Arant** is an ordained elder in the South Carolina Annual Conference and serves as pastor of [Main Street UMC](#) in Abbeville. Rev. Arant also is a [United Methodist Endorsing Agency](#)-endorsed chaplain serving the [United States Navy Reserve](#), currently assigned to the [United States Marine Corps Forces Reserve](#).



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The **Rev. George Donigian**, developer-editor of this project, is a retired elder in the South Carolina Annual Conference who now uses his writing and editing gifts. Married to the Rev. Mary Teasley, he is the author of several books, including "[Three Prayers You'll Want to Pray.](#)" He is a graduate of [Berry College](#) and the [Candler School of Theology at Emory University](#).



## First Sunday of Advent “While We Wait, We Work”

Writer: Rev. Brian Arant

Scripture: Isaiah 64:1-9 and Mark 13:24-37

### Note to the Pastor

This is the first sermon in the Advent-Christmas sermon series. This sermon deals with the themes of waiting and preparation within the context of Isaiah’s prophetic word and Jesus’ teaching in Mark. Isaiah reminds and declares that we ought to worship God and continuously praise God while waiting for his coming. In Mark, through the parable of the fig tree and a parable about watchful servants, Jesus reminds us, his modern servants, to be prepared and ready for the return of the master.

It seems to me that in preparation for Jesus’ return, Jesus would want his church to be found – like the servants – watchful, ready and awake! This is clearly an eschatological reference to Jesus’ return – the second coming. Much has been written and preached on the second coming of Christ. I have no doubt that in your time as pastor, the topic of when Jesus will return has come up in questions, Bible studies and general conversation from church folks. And we have all lived through the “Left Behind” series of books and movies. These may have shaped or misshaped so much of people’s theology and understanding surrounding Jesus’ triumphant second coming. I believe it is important to engage these scriptural texts, which remind us that being prepared for the return of the Christ means doing the work of Christ while we wait. The “time or hour” is simply not important! There is much we can do as the visible expression of God’s Kingdom on Earth – the church. So, “while we wait, we work.” God’s richest blessings to you on this Advent journey.

### Exegesis

**Isaiah 64:1-9** – Isaiah 64 is found in the third “book” of Isaiah, which scholars describe as Trito-Isaiah (Chapters 56-66). This section was written after the Israelites’ return from exile. The first half of Isaiah presumes judgment for Israel, while the latter half presumes judgment already has occurred and looks forward to a great restoration. This difference in perspective is important to understand, because the feeling of impending restoration at the hands of God is clearly seen in the anxious words of the author. The rhythm of this passage contains this pattern: the vastness of God’s goodness and knowledge is proclaimed (vv.1-3), a reminder of the need for righteousness (v.4) and the necessity of repentance (vv.5-6), and finally a plea for God not to be exceedingly angry (v.9).

**Mark 13:24-37** – The entirety of Mark 13 is an apocalyptic discourse and parallels passages in the other synoptic Gospels (Matthew 24 and Luke 21) in its warning against false prophets and the predictions and encouragement to be ready – to stay awake! Fred Craddock described Mark’s apocalyptic discourse as a drama played out in three acts:

- The beginning of the birth pangs
- The desolating sacrilege and great suffering
- Cosmic signs and the coming of the Son of Man



A few further thoughts:

- We know from contextual and historical study of the first century that apocalyptic fervor was in the air. In fact, many of the early church commentators interpreted the biblical texts from the expectation of the imminent return. Yet Jesus repeatedly warns against false prophets (v.29) and predictions concerning the time when the return will occur (vv.32-34). Instead, Jesus uses the language of the slave or servant to describe the work Christians ought to be doing while waiting (v.33).
- The phrase “Son of Man” (v.26) appears in this passage as it does in other places in Mark and also Matthew, Luke and John. Much can be written about the phrase. Remember that it is a reference to God the Son, who will be the one coming at the end whom we identify in Jesus of Nazareth.
- Indeed there are signs (v.29) but there have been signs for a long time. Even if you know that the time is near, Jesus encourages us to wait and prepare.

## The Sermon Outline

- 1) Introduction
  - a) The prediction of the return of Christ on October 22, 1844.
  - b) Details of the prediction.
  - c) Aftermath of the failed prediction.
  - d) Transition – The Millerites’ very narrow lens of interpretation of apocalyptic texts left them waiting for sure, but that is not the kind of waiting we are called to do this Advent season.
- 2) Retelling the scriptures – Isaiah 64:1-9
  - a) Isaiah calls for soaring praise to God for God’s mighty works, yet the goodness of God in this passage is reserved for those who wait.
  - b) It is a faithful response to God’s goodness and mercy to worship and praise him while we wait.
- 3) Mark 13:24-37
  - a) Parable of the fig tree
  - b) Parable of the watchful servants.
  - c) Transition: Especially important is the declaration, “But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” (v.32) This is the key verse. Like the master who leaves the servants in his stead with work to do while he is absent so we, the Church, have been left with much work to do. While we wait, we work!
- 4) Active waiting is not passive waiting: stay awake!
  - a) What work can we do for the Kingdom of God?
  - b) Advent is a time to repent and prepare; let us all repent and prepare.
- 5) Conclusion: Grace comes with an urgent warning
  - a) While waiting for the Lord’s return, be ready. Stay Awake!
  - b) Isaiah reminds us to wait and Jesus reminds us to be prepared.
  - c) When? We do not know. But we will wait and we’ll work.



## The Sermon

### “While We Wait, We Work”

Scripture – Isaiah 64:1-9 and Mark 13:24-37

Imagine with me for a moment. The year is 1844. The crisp air of autumn signals the change of seasons soon coming. But you and your friends are certain of a different “coming” this October day. Standing in a field in upstate New York along with hundreds of other worshippers, you wait for the second coming of Jesus Christ. Some have hands raised to the sky in praise, others softly singing hymns. You are convinced Jesus is coming back – today! At any minute, the trumpet will sound and Christ will appear – taking you and all the faithful with him! Your pastor, the Baptist layman William Miller, scrupulously studied the scriptures for decades and pinpointed today’s date, October 22, 1844, as the day of Jesus’ triumphant return. Ironically, he calls it *The Advent*.

Miller put together an extensive timeline of biblical history from Genesis through Revelation, with special attention paid to the apocalyptic visions of Daniel 8 and a specific interpretation of parables in Matthew’s gospel. Miller’s timeline culminates with the return of Christ, which you and tens of thousands of “Millerites” across the United States, Canada and England are awaiting this very day. The fact that you have sold all your possessions and given all your money away doesn’t faze you in the least, since you will soon be with Jesus. You haven’t even eaten today because, well, why would you?

But as the hours of the day go by, October 22 ends like any other October day. “OK,” you say to yourself, “Maybe it will be tomorrow.” But that day also comes and goes without Christ’s return. Finally, emotionally drained from the experience and weak from no food for two days, you are assisted into your rented room where you collapse and sleep for two days, “without pain, but sick with disappointment.”

What I just asked you to imagine is the real-life eyewitness account of devoted Millerite Henry Emmons. Of course, Christ did not return as predicted that October day in 1844, just as Christ did not as previously predicted in April 1844 and twice in 1843.

William Miller’s very narrow lens of interpretation left many people waiting for sure, but that is not the kind of waiting we are called to do this Advent season. And while it is easy to poke fun at the Millerites for their miscalculations, the return of Christ has occupied a lot of bandwidth in the Christian conscience – well, since there have been Christians! There have been nine major predictions of the return of Christ since 2000 alone! Each had thousands of followers and certain “exact” calculations. Some garnered national media attention. All experienced the same hefty disappointment felt by Henry Emmons 180 years ago. The fervor of the Millerites is noteworthy in its desire to know and understand apocalyptic vision in the Bible, but misplaced in attempting to decode the when.

With similar conviction, the words of the prophet Isaiah capture the dizzying praise of God’s mighty deeds and the impatient yearning of God’s people for God’s return. “*O that you would tear open the heavens and come down...*” (v.1) Yes, come, Lord! “*When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect...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.” (v.4) With Isaiah, we are right to praise God for God’s work in our midst throughout all time and space! Notice the word at the end, though: Wait. “...no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him.” Read it again. Wait.*

The ecstatic vision of Isaiah continues to lift high the only God whose works are worthy of such adoration. The passage confesses our sinfulness and acknowledges our transience. The sense of yearning present at the beginning of the passage is echoed at the end: *“Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord, and do not remember iniquity forever.” (vv.8-9)* With fervor, we want God to come with immediacy!

But God speaks the word *wait* through the prophet. And so we wait. And in our waiting, we prepare through cycle after cycle of repentance and praise. Isaiah 64 is a beautiful liturgy of the yearnings of God’s people tempered with the praise of God’s glory. We are called to wait. But how? Will we be found praising God and declaring the extraordinary deeds of God? Will we be found having confessed our sins? Our iniquities cleansed? So we wait. Impatiently. Urgently. With praise on our lips. We wait.

The message to wait continues into the New Testament words of Mark with the added urgency of preparation. Jesus quotes from Isaiah 13:10, and it sounds like many of the Old Testament prophecies in Ezekiel, Joel and Amos. This is the first Sunday of Advent, but Jesus’ words may sound more like the solemnity of Ash Wednesday! The message is foreboding and intense. Yet, there is a promise that fulfills the pleas of the Isaiah passage. The promise is that Jesus will collect the faithful no matter where they are. The parable of the fig tree illustrates the quoted prophecy. There will be obvious signs that will show the season of the Messiah’s returning is close! You know the metaphor well. We see the change of seasons all around us. That crisp fall day in 1844 was full of the signs of the season soon to give way to the stark austerity of winter. Those signs are like the blooming of trees in the spring, Jesus says. So we wait. We prepare and wait.

But there is a warning. Do not fall asleep while doing all of this waiting! Stay awake! Especially important is the declaration, *“But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” (v.32)* This is the key verse. Like the master who leaves the servants in his stead with work to do while he is absent, so we, the church, have been left with much work to do. We work because the master told us what to do when he was last with us and also because we know he is returning and we want to be found faithful!

This, friends, is the lesson of the Advent season in which we find ourselves. We are in between Christ’s comings. We celebrate the first coming of Christ amongst us as a child while also anticipating Christ’s return as Lord! Advent, then, is very much an in-between time – a bridge between the realities of two Kingdoms! Advent is anxiously awkward! Our waiting, then, cannot be static. The warning of Jesus’ words here is that our waiting must be a time of active preparation.

The congregation I serve is familiar with a phrase I use often: While we wait, we work! I have used it in various contexts over the years, but its original usage was from this scripture passage. While we wait, we work. While we wait on the master to return, we work at the tasks the master has given us to do.



While we wait *on* the Kingdom of God, we work *for* the Kingdom of God. When exactly Christ returns simply does not matter because there is work to be completed. There are hungry and poor people – widows, orphans, aliens. There are injustices to be called out and righted. (Wait 'til you hear what Isaiah has to say about that in the coming weeks!) There is Good News to share with a world that, like the Millerites, is fervent in its activity but often misguided in its energy. We are grounded by the promise of Christ to return, and we are encouraged by the signs of the season we are in. But we must wait. And we must work. While we wait, we work.

This active waiting (While we wait, we work) highlights one of the major themes of this sermon series. Just like we are actively waiting, so is God. In fact, God has been providing the example for waiting while working! The portents foretold in Isaiah have not happened yet, because God is merciful and gracious. God was waiting while working before the prophet ever uttered the words and before the Father sent the Son. We Wesleyans call that prevenient grace: the grace which comes before.

But that grace comes with an urgent warning: While waiting for the Lord's return, be ready. Stay awake! That, friends, is the uneasy lesson of this first week of Advent. Isaiah reminds us to wait and Jesus tells us to be prepared. When will this take place? We do not know. But we will wait and we'll work.

Amen.

## Other Illustrations

Much historical material illustrates when people have gotten it wrong about the second coming of Christ. I am captivated by narrative history, and the Millerite accounts from the middle of the 19th century fascinate me. Another more contemporary example that one could build this same sermon around is the Y2K fear from 1999. Fundamentalist Christians interpreted the new millennium as the beginning of Christ's reign on Earth, which would, of course, be heralded by his second coming. Another example of misinterpretation is Edgar Whisenant's booklet, "[88 Reasons Why The Rapture Will Be In 1988](#)." I know the COVID-19 pandemic is "low-hanging fruit," but to me it feels like too recent an example. The disease continues to impact all lives and it feels disingenuous to speak of this virus as an apocalyptic sign. This is also why I chose an event from so long ago!

If you want to take an entirely different approach than the illustration I chose, think of some grand event that took years to conceive and plan and execute, which turned into a hugely deflating failure. Some that come to mind are NASA's early attempts to launch rockets into orbit or SpaceX's current bid to send people to the moon and, eventually, to Mars. Both of those missions were fraught with failure and required several attempts. In most accidents there is almost always determined to have been some error in preparation or an assumption that was incorrect. Whatever illustration you choose, the theme of the scripture is a warning against guessing when and how and a reminder to always be prepared.



## Hymn and Song Suggestions

Traditional hymns:

All the traditional hymns for Advent 1B apply. I would suggest:

- "[Have Thine Own Way Lord](#)" (UMH 382)
- "[Savior of the Nations, Come](#)" (UMH 214)
- "[In the Bleak Midwinter](#)" (UMH 221)

Other songs:

- "[While I'm Waiting](#)" (John Waller) (Track 12 on "While I'm Waiting" CD, Reunion, 2009)

If you want to venture outside traditional hymns and contemporary Christian music, I would suggest two songs by the band Imagine Dragons from their 2017 album, "Evolve." Neither of these songs lends itself to congregational singing (chanting, perhaps?), but both are effective at creating the imagery and atmosphere which the scriptures evoke:

- "[Believer](#)" (Track 3 on Evolve CD, Interscope Records, 2017)
- "[Thunder](#)" (Track 9 on Evolve CD, Interscope Records, 2017)

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## Second Sunday of Advent “The Voice in a Spiritual Wilderness”

Writer: Rev. Karen Lail Jones

Scripture: Isaiah 40:1-11 and Mark 1:1-8

### Note to the Pastor

This sermon follows up on the theme of the first sermon in this series - “While We Wait, We Work” – by helping the congregation understand at least one way we can work while we wait for the coming of the Lord. This sermon speaks to the needs of people who are living in a “spiritual wilderness” and are longing for a real and present experience with Christ today. When we attend to someone’s spiritual wilderness experience, we participate in God’s prevenient grace and usher the coming of the Lord into their hearts.

The theme of spiritual wilderness can be applied in a variety of ways, based on your context, current events and the needs of your congregation. Perhaps the church needs to hear about spiritual wilderness based on an interpretation of Isaiah that focuses on the exile experience. What examples of exile will register with your congregation? You could bring in examples about the African diaspora, migrant workers from South America, or even the exile some have felt during the lockdown phases of the COVID-19 pandemic. Vulnerable populations were asked to shelter in place and stay away from crowded gatherings such as worship for the sake of their own health.

The loneliness, hopelessness and brokenness of the Israelites in Babylonian exile may resonate with those unable to attend worship, embrace family members, and be in community with one another. Our homebound members have perhaps felt this long before the pandemic. Exploring these connections will help you develop discipleship practices to address those specific feelings and needs of your congregation that you can include in your sermon.

### Exegesis

**Isaiah 40:1-11** – The desert wilderness is an important theme in the Hebrew narrative, and upon hearing those words in Mark’s gospel, the Jewish audience would recall the stories and experiences of their ancestors that happened in the wilderness. They would remember Abraham being called out of Ur, Jacob wrestling God, the liberation of the Hebrew slaves and the desert wandering, and the Babylonian exile. They would remember the ways in which God showed up in the harsh wilderness and brought them to safety. When Jesus referred to this passage in Mark, the people heard Isaiah 40:3 and knew that the God that guided their ancestors through the wilderness of the past was guiding them through this wilderness to an encounter with Christ.

The wilderness in Isaiah 40 represents a geographic desert spanning hundreds of miles between the Babylonian exiles living in captivity and their home in Israel, but it also represents a spiritual reality. It was a common belief at the time that God lived in the temple, and to be separated from the Jerusalem temple meant that people were separated from Godself. There was also a belief that they were being punished for their unfaithfulness to God and, because the punishment was so bad, they must be



beyond God's forgiveness and redemption (Isaiah 40:27)<sup>1</sup>. Despite the depth of their despair, the prophet Isaiah proclaims an even deeper compassion and strength of God who desires to redeem them. God commands a highway to be made in the desert, to lift up every valley and to make every mountain low, so that the way for God to come will be made clear.

**Mark 1:1-8** – John the Baptist lives and works in the desert wilderness. He wears rough clothes made of camel hair and eats unrefined food (locusts and wild honey). The Bible does not explain why these details matter. According to William Barclay, John lived in the desert so that he could hear the voice of God; his lifestyle demonstrated an authenticity that drew people to him. These details could also be a literary device to show that John the Baptist personifies the wilderness and wilderness experience, which is rough and unrefined. Or, these details may be interpreted through a social-historic lens, in that his ministry was in the desert wilderness because it was a safer place to be, away from the attention of religious and civil governing bodies. John's ministry drew crowds and attention, which proved to be dangerous since his ministry ended in imprisonment and death.

Although the wilderness is an important theme in both of these texts, Eugene Boring reminds us in his commentary on Mark not to ignore the importance of the way that is in the wilderness. He points out that it is the way – and not necessarily the voice or the messenger – that is in the wilderness based on Mark's use of the Septuagint translation of Isaiah 40. Out of the 16 times the word way (*hodos* in Greek) is used in Mark's gospel, there are only two instances in which it did not have a theological connotation. Most often, it is used to describe the path of discipleship through Jesus Christ. Christ is the way and shows us the way through the wilderness.

## The Sermon Outline

- 1) Advent is a time of working and waiting in preparation for the Lord.
  - a) We wait for the coming of the Lord in the past and future.
  - b) We wait for the coming of the Lord in the present as a real experience today.
    - i) There are people today who are hopeless and need healing.
    - ii) A spiritual wilderness distances people from God, leaving them hopeless.
- 2) Isaiah and Mark speak to the preparations needed to make way for God through the wilderness.
  - a) Isaiah speaks to the Israelite exiles in Babylonian captivity who have a geographic and spiritual wilderness that separates them from God.
  - b) We may have emotional experiences similar to the exiles', where a spiritual wilderness separates us from God.
- 3) God wants to traverse that wilderness and draw us closer to him.
  - a) God tells the heavenly council to cry out, "Comfort, oh comfort."
    - i) Comfort is not a word of hospitality or relaxation
    - ii) "Comfort" translated from the Hebrew *nachamu* is better translated to "encourage" or "strengthen."
  - b) God relies on people to prepare the way in the wilderness for the sake of the broken people.

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<sup>1</sup> Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary Year B: Advent/Christmas/Epiphany



- 4) John the Baptist is an example of one who prepares the way of the Lord.
  - a) John personifies the wilderness and is a voice in the wilderness.
  - b) John knows his role is not the Messiah but one who comes before the Messiah.
    - i) A pavior is someone who paves a road and makes paths straight.
    - ii) There is one Savior but there is need for many paviers.
- 5) We are called to be paviers, coming before the Lord and making the path straight.
  - a) To come before the Lord and prepare his way is to be an agent of God's prevenient grace.
  - b) We are called to participate in and cooperate with God's prevenient grace.
- 6) Not one of us has come to know Christ on our own, but someone came before us to pave the way.
  - a) Use a personal example of someone who paved the way for you to know Christ.
  - b) Many ministers have similar call stories where someone took the time to mentor them as a teen, which paved a way for Christ to place a calling on their lives.
    - i) Adolescence is like a wilderness.
    - ii) Being present, listening, and nurturing to a teenager in that adolescent wilderness paved a path for Christ.
- 7) Pave a pathway in someone's spiritual wilderness and prepare the coming of the Lord.
  - a) Venture into the wilderness, as John the Baptist did, so that you can be a voice in the wilderness.
  - b) Cry out the words comfort, courage, and strength.
  - c) You are the pavior, so pave a way for Christ to come and point to the Savior who comes in glory.

## The Sermon

### **"The Voice in a Spiritual Wilderness"**

**Scripture** – Isaiah 40:1-11 and Mark 1:1-8

We have arrived in the second week of Advent, the season of preparation and waiting upon the Lord. Although we can often get caught up in the material preparations of the season – putting up decorations, purchasing Christmas presents, lighting advent candles – today's Bible passages remind us that there is another kind of preparation that has little to do with our homes or hearths, but with preparing pathways through the wilderness to our hearts.

Throughout Advent, we participate in rituals and traditions to prepare for the coming of the Lord as a newborn baby on Christmas. Our preparations involve intentional remembrance and celebration of the past, and they are so familiar that even those in the secular world know them well. In this season, we prepare not only for the past incarnation of the Lord but for the future second coming, as well. This future coming is mysterious and, although many people have attempted (and failed) to predict Christ's return, we still prepare for it. But there is a moment, between the past incarnation and the future second coming, and it is this moment when we can prepare for a real and present experience



with Christ today. And it is with eagerness and expectation that we work and wait for the coming of the Lord, because his arrival will bring hope to the hopeless and healing for the broken.

There is hope in the newborn baby Christ, and there is hope for the redemption that Christ will bring in end times, but hope is also needed for today. There are some people today who are eager for a present experience with Christ to draw them out from a spiritual wilderness, and the scriptures from Isaiah and Mark speak to the preparations necessary to make way for God to come. In both scriptures, a voice cries out in the wilderness, "*Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight!*" The wilderness that distances people from God must be overcome, and indeed can be overcome.

The people who are receiving the word from Isaiah are exiles living in Babylonian captivity. There is a vast wilderness – hundreds of miles long between Jerusalem and Babylon – that separates the exiles from their home and families, their traditions and their temple. The distance is not only a measurement of footsteps from home, but it is a measurement of how far the people felt from God. It was believed that God resided, and remained, in the Jerusalem Temple, and since the exiles were separated from this place of worship, they felt separated from God. That geographical wilderness they walked felt like a spiritual wilderness that grew in their hearts. It was wide, wild and insurmountable. Long they waited for God to rescue and redeem them, but as time passed, they felt abandoned and forgotten by God. That distance seemed to be a chasm that could not be bridged, a wilderness too wild and dangerous to be traversed.

*This next paragraph is a good place to incorporate the experiences of your congregation and context.*

We may not know what it is like to be an exile living in the diaspora, but we may know what it feels like to feel apart from God, like there is an insurmountable wilderness that stands between us and God. Separated, lost, broken and forgotten. Perhaps it is grief – you may have lost someone very dear to you and were not able to say goodbye or embrace one last time and you blame God. Perhaps it is addiction – a consuming darkness that pushes any meaningful relationship from you. Perhaps it is the pandemic that keeps you from your family, community and place of worship. Whatever the cause, you may feel that you are in a spiritual wilderness overgrown with grief, with deep valleys of sorrow and crooked pathways of bitterness. And that wilderness can make the distance between self and God even more overwhelming with feelings of loneliness, isolation, hopelessness and abandonment.

God is not oblivious to those feelings of brokenness but is deeply moved by them! God yearns to go where broken and lost people are, to bridge the gap, to go the distance to meet the lost and hold them in comfort. The prophet Isaiah overhears God command the heavenly council, "Cry out to them! In their wilderness cry out: 'Comfort! Oh, Comfort!'"

But do not mistake this "comfort" for the poor translation we receive here. This comfort is not to be understood simply as casual coziness and relaxation. This kind of comfort is not a word of hospitality, like you may hear in someone's house: "Welcome to our home, make yourself comfortable!" Nor is it a word to ease a person's pain, like you may hear in a hotel or hospital: "Is there anything I can do to make you more comfortable?" No, in Hebrew, God says to cry out *nachamu*, which is "more like the



1611 King James' English: *come fort*. To strengthen. To encourage. It instills a sense of security."<sup>2</sup> The word that comes to the prophet Isaiah to the broken, lost and hopeless people in captivity, a wilderness away from God, is strength and courage. The broken people are to be built up again like a mighty fortress, and what shall fortify them but God who is mighty and sovereign, who comes with power! And with the same strong and mighty arm that rules, God tenderly gathers the lambs and carries them close to his heart. Comfort! Be strong! God is coming and is coming to rescue you. God will gather you from the harsh and lonely wilderness and carry you within God's very arms.

And what shall give one this comfort of strength and courage? It is the coming of the Lord! The Lord sees the broken and lost people and is coming with justice and redemption, love and compassion. The Lord comes! But we do not wait idly in our despair. We work while we wait. We can actually participate in the coming of the Lord by preparing the way for him, ushering his arrival. Yes, there is a wilderness of brokenness, grief and despair that distances us from God, but that wilderness can be overcome! With God's strength it can be overcome, so that the Lord may come!

Hasten the day the Lord comes by clearing the rocks, the stumbling blocks, the bramble. "*Clear the Lord's way in the desert! Make a level highway in the wilderness for our God! Every valley will be raised up, and every mountain and hill will be flattened. Uneven ground will become level, and rough terrain a valley plain. The Lord's glory will appear and all humanity will see it together!*"<sup>3</sup> How amazing it is that God's arrival relies on us, that God asks us to do the important work of clearing pathways for God's arrival. And God has always partnered with people to clear paths for him, most notably through prophets like John the Baptist.

John the Baptist personified the wilderness, wearing camel hair clothes and eating locusts and wild honey. He embodied the words of Isaiah 40, as one in the wilderness preparing the way of the Lord. He preached repentance and baptized sinners, which prepared the hearts of people so that they would be ready to receive Jesus Christ. He knew his role and purpose as one who comes before Christ, preparing for his arrival, saying in Mark 1:7: "*The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me.*" John is busy at work while he waits for the Lord, and behold he looks up and sees Jesus coming!

John 1:29-33 captures John the very moment when that preparing work meets the coming of the Lord. It says, "*The next day (John the Baptist) saw Jesus coming toward him and (he) declared, 'Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world! This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.' I myself did not know him; but came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed in Israel.'*" John knows that he himself is not the Messiah, but he also knows just how important his work is as one who prepares for the coming of the Messiah. What we are witnessing in this narrative is a voice in the wilderness (John the Baptist) making a pathway in the desert for Christ to come. Through his ministering, baptizing and preaching, John paves the way.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://zondervanacademic.com/blog/isaiah-40-1>

<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 40:3-5, Common English Bible Translation



A great description for John's work is found in the Interpreter's Bible Commentary: it uses an old English word "pavior," which means someone who paves a road, thus making the path straight and easy to traverse. It says, "The world needs a Savior (but) it also needs paviers...Christ needs preparers of his way."<sup>4</sup> John knew he wasn't the Savior but was essential in paving the way for Christ to come.

That is what we are all called to do today. We are called to be paviers, making straight the way for the Savior to come. God needs us to be partners in this important work, and when we participate in preparing pathways for Christ, we become agents of God's prevenient grace. Prevenient grace is a divine love that God has for us, that comes even before we realize we need such love. It awakens in us our desire for God, stirs our hearts, and prompts us to respond to God in faith. Prevenient grace prepares a highway in the spiritual wilderness in a person's heart to accept God's healing, redemption and salvation. And when we speak words of comfort, courage and strength in a person's time of spiritual wilderness, we cooperate with this grace, preparing the way of the Lord.

Think about how you came to know Christ. Not one of us has come to Christ on our own. Someone had to come before us to pave the way for Christ to come into our lives. Who was it that paved a path for you? Was it a parent who faithfully brought you to church every Sunday? Or was it a teacher who was particularly patient and kind toward you? Or maybe a mentor who was lovingly hard on you?

*This is a space for you, the preacher, to include a personal story about the person(s) who paved the way for you to know and accept Christ.*

There are many ministers who have similar call stories, and those stories begin in adolescence. Being a teenager is a frightening wilderness in itself – they are desperately trying to figure out their own identity; they face school, parental and peer pressures; and there is drastic growth in physical and mental development. It is easy to feel lost, unloved and overlooked as a teenager. And then there is one pastor or one lay leader who sees them, is patient with them, and takes time to nurture them in discipleship. And the time these adults spent just by being present, listening, noticing and nurturing, left an indelible mark on these youth. And though these youth didn't hear a calling to ordained ministry for years, the way was made straight for them in the scary wilderness of adolescence, so that Christ could come and place a calling in their heart. A path was paved.

So how do we partner with God's prevenient grace and pave pathways in a person's heart? How do we make the mountains low and fill in the valleys? How do we cry out in the wilderness, "Comfort, oh comfort, be courageous, your Lord comes"?

Look again at John the Baptist, whose work was in the desert wilderness. William Barclay writes in his commentary on Mark that John lived in the desert so that he could not only hear the voice of God but be the voice that calls out on God's behalf in the wilderness. If we are to pave pathways in the desert of someone's spiritual wilderness, we also must venture into that wilderness to be with them. Seek out the people who are grieving, who are broken, who are lost, and be present with them. By listening and receiving the wilderness experience of others and through invitational prayer, you can make a

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<sup>4</sup> Interpreters Bible Commentary: Matthew and Mark, 649



highway in the desert for Christ to come. You do not need to take away their grief. You do not need to mend what is broken. You do not need to be the savior. That is Christ's work. But you can be a pavior – pave the way and point to the one who comes and say, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!" "Here is your God! See, the Lord God comes with might!"

If grace is how we experience God's love, venturing into someone's wilderness (perhaps when no one else will) to speak words of courage and strength is an expression of God's love that you can give. So go, therefore, and be a voice in the wilderness, speak life into someone's exile, and make a pathway for Christ to come into a person's heart. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

## Other Illustrations

- John Wesley wrote the sermon "[The Wilderness State](#)," and although this sermon does not focus on the texts in Isaiah and Mark, Wesley describes the wilderness state in a way very similar to how I describe a spiritual wilderness. He goes into more detail about the nature, cause and cure for the wilderness state and his sermon revolves more around sin and temptation. If you want to explore the Mark texts further and interpret the spiritual wilderness caused by sin, excerpts from John Wesley's sermon may provide some helpful illustrations.
- "Trailblazer" is a word that is often used to describe a professional pursuit, but the original meaning of one who places blazes (markers) on hiking trails can be a helpful term for a sermon illustration. A trailblazer is someone who comes before the hikers, clearing trails and marking paths. It is difficult work, but it is done for the purpose of making the path easier to navigate for those who will come after them. The article "[Trail University: 9 Facts about trail blazing you never knew](#)" at OutdoorFest.com lists some considerations a trailblazer makes and highlights the intentionality needed for the task.

## Hymn and Song Suggestions

Traditional hymns:

- "[Prepare the Way of the Lord](#)" (UMH 207)
- "[Come Out the Wilderness](#)" (UMH 416)
- "[Blessed be the God of Israel](#)" (UMH 209)
- "[Comfort, Comfort Ye My People](#)" (Johann Olearius)
- "[On Jordan's Bank the Baptist's Cry](#)" (Charles Coffin)

Other songs:

- "[Mercy in the Wilderness](#)" (Steve Camp)
- "[In the Wilderness](#)" (Timo Scharnowski)
- "[Wilderness](#)" (Anna Byrd)



## Video Resource

- Hear the [story and inspiration](#) behind Anna Byrd's song "Wilderness"

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## Third Sunday of Advent “Preaching Good News in Bad Times”

Writer: Rev. Dr. Reggie Lee

Scripture: Isaiah 64:1-4,8-11

### Note to the Pastor

On the Third Sunday of Advent, normally we celebrate the gift of joy. This text on the surface seems so sublime, so fair in all its possibilities. Yet, from a pastoral point of view, it may be a thicket that could create the ticket for us to end up on the bishop’s move list. Brother or sister pastor, if we take this text seriously, it may disrupt the joyous liturgical masterpiece that you and I had imagined. This Sunday, the Spirit of the Lord is requesting to pilot our sermonic offering. Either the Spirit is in control, or you and I are in control.

The prophetic preaching of Third Isaiah calls into question the status quo rhythms of our normal feel-good worship experiences. Here the word of God spoken by this prophet takes on a certain risky particularity. It is a word of hope, but the question is for whom is this word Good News? By the time you preach this message, COVID-19 will have claimed more than two hundred thousand American lives with hundreds of thousands more dead across the world. The brutal death captured on video of George Floyd at the hands of police will have called into question the validity of policing as we know it and will, I hope, draw us closer to a day of reconciliation and reform.

This Sunday represents both opportunity and opposition. The text gives us the opportunity to declare the Gospel, the Good News in tough times. We get to announce a prophetic hopeful word that cuts through the present darkness of our broken world. We have the privilege to announce restoration to the broken economic and political systems of our day that require a perpetual pool of poor folks. The opposition will come from those who wield power who sit in our pews. This text may make the rich uncomfortable in their privilege and may cause opposition in your ministry down the road. Remember, they did it to Jesus first, when he preached this text.<sup>5</sup>

However, prophetic preaching of this magnitude will help people find their moral center. Preaching that un-masks the true meaning of the text straight, with only a chaser of grace, will be exciting and hopeful for those who are trying to hold on to the church’s teaching while beating back their fears of social gatherings in the age of Covid-19.

In many churches, the sermon is almost a distraction from the work of the liturgy; i.e., “the work of the people.”<sup>6</sup> This text will require us, and the laity we are in ministry with, to redefine why we gather in worship and what we are to do after having a divine human encounter with God. However, I believe the foundation of lasting joy is found in the proclamation of Good News to the poor. The main text we will look at is: “*The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me because he has anointed me; has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners.*”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Luke 4:17-19, 28-29

<sup>6</sup> Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, Edward Yarnold, SJ. editors, *The Study of Liturgy*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 1978), 38

<sup>7</sup> Isaiah 61:1



## Exegesis

**Isaiah 64:1-4, 8-11** – The Book of Isaiah is first and foremost about the saving activity of God. It is full of high drama, human and corporate failure, and the unwavering *hesed* of the Lord. (The Hebrew word *hesed* comes to mean the consistent, ever-faithful, relentless, lavish, unrestrained and furious love of God.) It is the story of Judah and Jerusalem's falling away from the will of God. Peppered through this one-sided love affair are prophecies of deliverance and prophecies of doom. The prophet Isaiah's name means "Yahweh is salvation."<sup>8</sup>

Isaiah can be broken down into three distinct parts. Chapters 1-39, 40-55 and 56-66. This is what we can call the Tri-Isaiah approach to this dynamic book. Each section approaches theology with a slightly different lens; it is clear that there are some unifying themes that hold the book together in dynamic tension. "Prior to these observations concerning literary and historical linkages among the 'Isaiahs,' interpreters had noted key theological concepts and terminology that bound together (then held to be) discredited sections of the book, including an emphasis on Zion, God as 'the Holy One of Israel,' and themes of sin and forgiveness."<sup>9</sup>

The prophecies of Isaiah cover the period that began roughly in 742 BCE (the year King Uzziah died, 2 Chronicles 26:21-23). The prophet's preaching was directed to the Southern Kingdom of Judah and often to Jerusalem. His ministry spanned the reigns of Ahaz and Hezekiah, ending soon after the Sennacherib's siege of Jerusalem in 701 BCE or at the death of Hezekiah in 688 BCE.<sup>10</sup>

Our text falls in the Third Isaiah section found in Chapters 56-66. This portion of the prophet's work is hard to date. However, many biblical scholars believe this section, especially Chapters 62-66, fall in the post-exilic period. "The originating context of the lection, however, comes from the aftermath of exile 586-538 (BCE) and the historically modest beginning of Israel's restoration in the land."<sup>11</sup> This is the story of a prophetic utterance to those weary from exile, weary from the daunting task of rebuilding their city, culture and religious life. It is to this task that the Third Isaiah is called to preach!

## The Sermon Outline

- 1) The Third Isaiah preaches from a prevenient perspective.
  - a) He plays peek-a-boo with human history.
  - b) He has a divine perspective: a glimpse of the eternal.
- 2) He speaks life to people leaving exile and on a long trip to Zion
  - a) His preaching is of divine reversal.
  - b) And "The Grand Perhaps" of God.
  - c) His preaching forewarns that calamity isn't the exile's final destination.
  - d) He announces divine reversals and the repentance of the deity.
- 3) "Year of the Lord's Favor" – As a Historical Course Correction

<sup>8</sup> George Arthur Buttrick editor, *The New Interpreter's Dictionary*, 18th Printing (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), Vol. 2, p.731

<sup>9</sup> Christopher R. Seitz, *Interpretation* "A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching Isaiah 1-39, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993, First Edition) p.3

<sup>10</sup> Joel B. Green, William H. Willimon, General Editors, *Wesley Study Bible*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011) p.854

<sup>11</sup> David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors, *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Feasting on the Word, Year B. Volume 1.* (Louisville, John Knox Press, 2008), p.51



- 4) The anointing is for a divine transfer of grace and favor.
  - a) The people are weary from exile.
  - b) They are now receiving divine grace and reversal of fortunes.
  - c) The preacher has received oil to preach a message from the dark room of the suffering of God's people.
  - d) Remember the martyrs.
- 5) This same text was quoted by Jesus at the beginning of his ministry.
  - a) It caused upheaval for those who maintained the advantage of the status quo.
  - b) This message of the Lord's favor is just as subversive today.

## The Sermon

### "Preaching Good News in Bad Times"

Scripture – Isaiah 61:1-4,8-11

There should be some good news in every sermon, some glimmer of hope that pierces the darkness like a ray of light. In the days of Third Isaiah, God was calling a people just out of Babylonian captivity to a future with hope. But who would call them? Who would have the audacity to declare such a liberating word to a people who still had the ridiculous request of a master who required them to "*sing the Lord's song in a strange land?*" It is to this audacious and bodacious task that our preacher of the hour must rise. This same question that the First Isaiah had to answer in Isaiah 6:8 – "*Who will go for us and whom shall we send?*"<sup>12</sup> – is the daunting question of our day, as well.

In the midst of COVID-19, civil unrest, record unemployment, political polarization and economic uncertainty, this same question rings true. The First Isaiah answers the question who when he says: "*Here I am; send me.*" The First Isaiah answers the who; the Third Isaiah answers the how.

He says: "*The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me.*"<sup>13</sup> Here, the prophet, shrouded in historical anonymity, explains how the preacher must go. We must always be drawn back to the central questions of who and how. But we are called to preach, and that would be all of us based on our baptism, according to St. Jerome in the 4th century. Jerome declared, "Baptism is the ordination of the laity."<sup>14</sup> It is not just the role of the ordained to preach good news. No, all of us – each who has received the sacrament, the sign of God's grace – are called to preach, pronounce and proclaim to a sin-filled world the Good News of God's saving work. And this Isaiah, last of the three, tells us how we are to do the work of sharing faith. He simply says, don't try this preaching thing unless the Spirit of the Lord God is upon you.

He didn't say, "Don't you try it if you haven't been licensed. Don't try it if you haven't been commissioned." He doesn't even say, "Don't try it if you haven't been ordained." This preaches to me and yes, to you, to saint and sinner, "Don't you try to preach without the Spirit of God." Yes, that same Spirit that hovered over chaos' formless void. Yes, that same Spirit that carried out the creative will of

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<sup>12</sup> Isaiah 6:8 CEB Version

<sup>13</sup> Isaiah 61:1

<sup>14</sup> William B. McClain, Lecture Introduction to Preaching 1997, Wesley Theological Seminary, Washington, D.C.



God. This preacher says to all of us educated folks, to all of us who can trace our Methodist roots back four generations (all that is cool!), but if you are going to declare a word to the weary, if you are going to proclaim Good News against a brassy sky, you better go in the power of God's creative Spirit.

How are we going to preach with the power of God while COVID-19 continues to cast its long shadow of death? How are we going to preach in a nation divided by race and class, and yes, political affiliation? We have tried all the other things: the human conventions, the learned arts and the passed-down vernaculars of days long gone. But the preacher-prophet says we ought to preach with the creative energy of the Lord God. If we are to faithfully confront the chaos of our day, we need the Spirit of the Lord to rise and rest upon us.

This text suggests some guidance for our preaching. First, let us not accept any assignment to preach to weary people before we have received the anointing from the Spirit of the Lord God. The prophet Isaiah knew he couldn't do it alone. He needed the Lord's Spirit. He knew Zion and the people of Zion were in ruins from the ground up. Weary from more than 40 years of captivity, weary from being disconnected from the land that gave them life, the longing for the former days of old when the temple wasn't lying in ruins and the city was not pushed down by poverty and political anarchy. They were tired and "tired of being tired." This Isaiah knows that without the Spirit of the Lord God, no preacher would be able to stay on the battlefield, no preacher would be able to preach prophetically in a poverty-stricken, politically fragile city like Zion.

Turn to your neighbor and say: "We need the power of the Lord God."

But here it is: We must preach because the Lord has anointed us, has sent us to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners. We must preach with the power of the Lord, although the news we listen to rehashes the ills of our society. We must preach even though the secular news simply reports those statistics and stories that reinforce negativity in our nation and bear witness that the soul of the nation is in jeopardy. The lead story is seldom in the "Good News" category, and yet we must find a note of grace in a sad song and preach Good News in these bad times.

Yes, the people have been deported. Yes, the nation's religious life represented by "Jerusalem the golden," has been ransacked. Yet, the preacher has Good News because the preacher has been saturated, filled up, covered in the creative Spirit of the Eternal One.

This preacher is called and commanded to preach Good News in bad times. In this COVID-19, George Floyd era, we need to be anointed with the Spirit of the Messiah, to not only announce the word, but to be co-creators of Good News in bad times.

Second: The Word of God has been made flesh, but without the anointing of the Messiah, we the church simply make it word again. Isaiah isn't simply suggesting that we preach the word, but that we also embody it – that we give it flesh and blood and energy and make it live.

Those who have been 'buked and scorned, those who have been talked about sure as you are born, the widow living off the mite, the single mother trying to make ends meet, the senior citizens living off



their Social Security trying to decide whether to buy meat or medicine – they long for a word that can make life abundant, a healing word, a comforting word, a word that offers audacious hope, a ministry to reach out to those in need, bringing Good News in bad times.

Many will approach this Advent season by asking, “Is there any Good News?” Empty chairs and turned-down plates, the missing touch of a vanished hand, will bring us face to face with brokenness. Many are being held captive in the broken places of missed opportunity. Others are actually incarcerated in prisons designed for profit. Who will go and declare good news? What can your church do to announce and assist in the setting free of the captives?

Israel had been captive in Babylon. Before that, they had been captive in Egypt. Where are the places that bind you, your family and your church and community? What is holding you hostage? What way of thinking has made you a prisoner? I have Good News: The church and its baptized believers are empowered by the Spirit of God and anointed to carry Good News in bad times.

Don’t you get it? This is a word to the outcast! Listen to the list again: oppressed, brokenhearted, captives, prisoners. Are these kinds of folks on your radar screen? This is the scandal of God: that God cares for those who are living on the margins, often in silent sight of our churches, but rarely in the hearts of the established assembly of believers.

Third: We are to announce “The Year of the Lord’s Favor” – a day of vengeance, or better, “vindication.” In God’s timing, Israel’s fortunes will be reversed and the nations will in turn acknowledge Israel’s legitimacy.<sup>15</sup>

Who will go was settled in Isaiah, Chapter 6. But here in the 61st chapter, Isaiah shows us how: We go in the anointing spirit of the Messiah, the Anointed One. And we are sent not to the city center or to the favored and privileged ones. No, beloved, this Advent season, God is sending us to the meek, the weak and the lowly. To captives and prisoners and to the broken hearted.

Here the prophet announces grace to the forgotten. He announces hope to the hopeless. He offers justifying grace to prove to the oppressors that the oppressed will not be pressed down forever. Third Isaiah is announcing what some call the “Gospel of Particularity.” This is Good News to the poor, to those whom the late Howard Thurman called “the disinherited” and “those whose backs are against the wall.” Good News to those living life in anonymity on life’s margins.

God has loved us preventiently and marshalled through human history God’s divine will to bring us to a glorious and godly heritage through justifying grace, that all may see us full of dignity and divinity. While the powerful scoff at the promises of God, there is a purposeful, powerful, particular plan unfolding to save the least and the lost. It is the “year of the Lord.” We can’t bring it, but all of the places where we have dared to proclaim through word and deed are like breadcrumbs leading to the coming of the Lamb of God, whose kingdom will come and enable us to know and live in that beloved community.

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<sup>15</sup> Bartlett and Taylor editors, p. 53



There is Good News coming for those whom justice has evaded. A day of vindication and justice is on its way. Crowds are gathering in the streets of the nations around the world crying out: "No justice. No peace." An advent and the day of vindication is coming for Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Philando Castile, Breonna Taylor and George Floyd.

This word of liberation, spoken first under the anointing of the Lord's Spirit, is spoken by the power of the Lord's Messiah. Luke 4:17-19: "*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me. He has sent me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*"<sup>16</sup> Beloved, we are the preaching congregation anointed and assigned to bring Good News in bad times!

Amen.

## Other Illustrations

- The story of Nelson Mandela, the president of the African National Congress who was imprisoned for 27 years – 18 years on Robben Island – brings forth the splendor of Good News in bad times. After 27 years of imprisonment, Mandela emerged energized and ready to lead South Africa out of apartheid into a new day of freedom. The prisoner became the president. Mandela was the recipient of God's grace to sustain 27 years in prison and, following that, he was elected president of the same nation that had imprisoned him. This, my brothers and sisters, is a divine reversal of fortunes. This is a life that embodied the Good News of God's redeeming power.
- Freeing the caged bird – At the end of the sermon, invite the members outside, where a caged homing pigeon can be released to fly away. This is the release of the captives made real.

## Hymn Suggestions

- "[Spirit of the Living God](#)" (UMH 393) – A hymn about sanctifying and perfecting grace, often sung just before the sermon in Black churches. This is to remind both preacher and laity that the task of preaching is too daunting to achieve without the anointing of the Holy Spirit.
- "[Spirit Song](#)" (UMH 347) – A more contemporary hymn that speaks of the prevenient work of the Holy Spirit. This song has great appeal across age and ethnicity. It is easy to learn and inspires hope in those who may be going through bad times.

## Video Resource

- "[Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom](#)" (2013) – This movie chronicles Nelson Mandela's 27 years in prison and how his faith in the will of God sustained him. It also shows how the will of God moved to make this former prisoner of the white apartheid regime president of South Africa. It is a story about truth and reconciliation and God's use of human history to usher in "The Year of the Lord's Favor."

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<sup>16</sup> CEB version of Luke 4:17-19



## Fourth Sunday of Advent “The Favor of God”

Writer: Rev. Jeannette' Cooper

Scripture: 2 Samuel 7:1-11,16 and Luke 1:26-38

### Note to the Pastor

When we read Luke 1:26-38, we immediately hear the familiar response of praise to God from Mary. This Advent, I hope to help the church view the story through a different lens, from a different perspective. For the pew-sitters who have been in church all of their lives, they are postured to move through this lesson with an almost “quote-and-’peat” stance. By viewing this from what God is doing rather than what Mary is doing, the resident pew-sitter as well as the newcomer to scripture will discover a new way of looking at this Advent story. The people of that time, as well as now, had moved away from the direction first intended. God is now offering reconciliation to this world.

This scripture reminds us that God does not need permission nor a timeline upon which to speak. God enters this moment as the present and communicative God, with a new message of favor and change. Once again God offers grace. “Grace means the granting of a benefit, not as a right but as a favor,” according to Kenneth Kinghorn, in his book, “The Gospel of Grace.” Reconciliation is coming in the flesh. This is the transitional time, in how God’s power is viewed and received. It is said that revolution is not a one-time event. A new movement is being born, by God’s favor. God is beginning to turn this world that was created by God’s hands and none other into a world that will see God face to face. This reconciling grace is offered in a most unexpected manner and time. The kingdom is being transitioned from one of law to one of love made visible in the flesh.

The pastor has opportunity to bring a fresh approach to this scripture’s familiar portrayal. Take time to think of those moments when God has entered your life without your invitation or permission and planted a call upon your life. Share that perspective. The sermon offered here is only a jumping-off point or a point of departure by which you might journey on this fourth Sunday of Advent.

### Exegesis

**2 Samuel 7:1-11,16** – King David wants to honor God by building a great temple to which people may come to worship and sacrifice. His noble vision grows from his understanding that God dwells in a tent while David lives in a more permanent dwelling built of cedar (v.2). The prophet Nathan hears a message from the Lord concerning tent, tabernacle and temple, and thus speaks that message to the king – a message that promises the establishment of the house of David for all time (v.16).

**Luke 1:26-38** – The Gospel of Luke is attributed to Luke the physician. It is considered to be a universal gospel, written by a Gentile for Gentiles and in response to an earnest query by Theophilus. While the true identity of Theophilus is unknown, the name means “friend of God.” The gospel was written to show how the Holy Spirit of God is operative in the manifesting of the kingdom of God. Being that it was written by a physician, this Gospel can be viewed as the narrative that indicates healing for the world.



Here the angel Gabriel speaks to the Virgin Mary about God's promise of deliverance and extends God's message concerning the life of Jesus. Notice that Mary is of the house of David (v.27), that Gabriel speaks of the further establishment of the house of David, and that this lineage will remain an important part of the early understanding of Jesus.

## The Sermon Outline

- 1) Introduction:
  - a) God is changing the worldview of its own salvation.
- 2) Proposition:
  - a) God's expression of favor offers a route from estrangement to reconciliation; from seeking to manifestation, through the message to Mary, so that the world can receive Jesus, God incarnate.
- 3) Point 1:
  - a) There is a call on the life of Mary for a favored purpose.
- 4) Point 2:
  - a) Where there is a call, there is the equipping to live that call.
- 5) Point 3:
  - a) The confirmation seals the covenant.
- 6) Conclusion:
  - a) The journey of the call evokes praise.

## The Sermon

### "The Favor of God"

**Scripture** – 2 Samuel 7:1-11,16 and Luke 1:26-38

**Key verse:** *"And the angel came in unto her, and said, 'Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women.'" – Luke 1: 28 (KJV)*

2020 brought many different tragic events that demanded our attention. The helicopter crash that killed Kobe Bryant and eight other persons on a Sunday morning was a shocker to sports fans and many others around the world. The COVID-19 virus reared its ugly head, becoming a pandemic and killing more people in a few months than all those who died in Vietnam. Marches, riots, funerals – as a result of 400 years of silence – riveted our TV schedules. Political scandals and the political campaigns are a side dish for dinner-time conversations. Schools and churches struggle to find new ways to be relevant stewards in these challenging times, finding new ways and technologies to teach and preach to a scattered audience. Yet none of these newsworthy stories can hold a candle to the news that God is changing our understanding of own salvation history. This story of God, Mary and the angel still creates "awesome wonder."



When we first look at Luke 1:22-38, our focus is Mary – perhaps because our collective memories point us to her. Yet, when our vision sharpens, we realize that this passage is far more about God’s work rather than who or what Mary is. Here is God interrupting the normal routines of life. God has been silent for an interval of long years; silent, yes, but never absent. God breaks the sound barrier with a brand-new proclamation. Just as God spoke creation into existence, the Lord now speaks this creation into a new existence. The world will never be the same. Here we become witnesses to the act of reconciliation, as it begins to unfold, for future generations.

This is the beginning of a time of transition that calls the world to move beyond patriarchs, prophets and worldly kings; beyond self-proclaimed rulers; beyond mere rituals and routines, in order to move into a different and a more personal relationship with the one we know as the God. A new approach to salvation is established in the story of the Advent visit to Mary.

God begins the selection process, in which this new order shall be revealed. Gabriel is sent to deliver a call upon the life of Mary. She is to play a most important role in this reconciliation process. God will use her to bring divine love to the world in a way that before has never been shared. Mary is being called into service that will interrupt her personal plans. No longer will she exist on the margin; she now has a new existence being spoken into her. Her purpose has changed from the mundane to the special. She is now favored for something special. God has chosen her to bring forth a son, the God Child. Chosen. Isn’t it amazing how God chooses what might be considered secondary for primary work in the manifestation of the kingdom? God finds favor in Mary and wants it declared as so.

God’s expression of favor offers a route from estrangement to reconciliation; from seeking to manifestation, through the message to Mary, so that the world can receive Jesus, the Son of God, in the flesh.

This masterful story of God’s placing a mortal woman in the center of events weaves in the thought that we humans matter, as the history of God’s salvation story unfolds. Each one of us desires to matter, to be chosen. We wait to be invited to be on the team, a part of the group. We wait to be invited to “that” party, that special event; we wait to be in that special relationship. It’s human nature to want to be considered a part of something that we find worthy. This woman is being offered a call that supersedes all invitations.

In my mind’s eye, I can see Mary, on one hand, being happy that, in the midst of her faithfulness to the rituals and expectations of the faith, God had noticed and chosen to find favor in her. Yet, on the other hand, she is bound to wonder, “Why me?” God pulls her from the margins of society and gives her new purpose. No longer will she be on the sidelines but on the frontline of God’s reconciling work. God becomes vocal and present to a world that had searched for his up-front and personal presence for 400 years. Now is the time that our Creator God chooses to reveal himself in all fullness as the omnipotent and omniscient One who shows vulnerability to the world. Yes, God engages, in a new way, with the condition of the mortal world

However, with all that Gabriel shares about God’s favor upon Mary, this frontline work brings its own challenges. Mary finds that living in “The Favor of God” is more than a notion. With favor, there are



challenges. The overarching challenge to her favored life was to become a new paradigm in a stagnant world. Everyone wants to be chosen; but who wants to stick out like a sore thumb? Or, in other words, who wants to sacrifice what's known for the scary unknown? I can only imagine that the same trepidation existed amongst some well-known change agents, such as Rosa Parks who was just tired and wanted a seat; her intent was not to start or spark a revolution. I can only imagine that Colin Kaepernick never thought that people would want to crucify him because he kneeled, when he'd only wanted to draw attention to racial inequality and brutality.

When I watched Marjorie Matthews being elected as the first woman bishop in The United Methodist Church, it was both a marvel and a political mess. She broke the glass ceiling, allowing for Leontine T. Kelly and a long list of other women who would be elected bishops of the church. Marjorie Matthews' election revolutionized the portrait and the understanding of leadership in this United Methodist Church because she heard and answered God's call. God was present and speaking. Wonders happen when we submit ourselves to the call on our lives.

God uses Mary, one on the margin, to bring reconciliation to a torn world. She was hard-pressed to adopt a new understanding of her call in the world. She was changed from being a traditional betrothed woman to one who would stand out in society and history. Sometimes, God offers us a new way of bearing witness to his affirmation of the journey ahead, even when we are not sure of our own ability. God's call upon our lives breaks the barriers of self-understanding and worth to a new way of looking at self. There is that affirmation of being chosen by a winning coach on the never-losing team.

In the shifting of our new understanding of self, we are never alone, into the walk of the call. That's a promise, as Jesus said, that "*Lo, I shall be with you always.*" (Matthew 28:20) God offers encouragement and leaning posts along the journey. We are never left without a means to withstand the shifting of our new part within the kingdom. Not only are we affirmed for the call upon our lives; but we are also equipped for that call and in the context of community. Here, we find a supportive word from God through Gabriel.

Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth, a mentor, a woman of faith. Gabriel points Mary to a human example of God's peculiar unwavering love found in a relative, who was also shown the favor of God in her life. She could experience the first-hand witness by Elizabeth of how God had changed the barrenness of an old lady into a productive life, with child. God is now expanding the boundaries of Mary's life and, through the birth of Jesus, the boundaries of a world. How God had done the extraordinary in an otherwise ordinary life is embedded and exemplified in family. God is not only willing but able to do what others find impossible.

My own story was rehearsed to me again and again. I am the product of two parents whose RH factors did not match. Biology had one answer, but God had another. God did and still does the impossible. What seemingly impossible thing has God done for you?

Mary was being equipped with a story. Testimonies strengthen and shore up the one, in a new walk, to believe more deeply. For to hear that God has done it for Elizabeth makes a certain assurance that the favor of God would surely not fail her.



This is confirmation that God is intentional about Mary's service to the future of the kingdom. The covenant between Mary and God is made known. God has anointed Mary to bear the message, Jesus, in the flesh. Mary acknowledged that when she visited with Elizabeth. She would bridge the gap between the Spirit of the faith and the incarnation, the faith in the flesh. She has been anointed to introduce the world to the transition, from this estrangement they had experienced into a full-blown revolution. A revolution to faith practicing upon the horizon. God had fixed it so that Mary would usher in the reconciling grace of God to the world. Routine rituals and practices would be upturned by God's presence being born into the world. God gives Mary the anointing to live out loud the integrity that was already deeply seated in her heart. God offers the same for you and me as we live in the favor of God. God also gives us a task to bring the message to the world.

Once we thought and did not act; once we sat on the sidelines without an inkling that the call on our lives would be for the frontlines. But when God does God's thing upon our lives, we have the courage and the will to do what we once could not even imagine. When we are affirmed, equipped, confirmed, validated and anointed by the call of God upon our lives, nothing can stop the bursting forth of the sanctifying cry from our lips, "For with God, nothing is impossible."

Mary responds within her deepest self that says, "*Behold, I am the handmaiden of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your work.*" When she accepted the favor and the will of God, the angel departed from her. The revolutionary transition begins to unfold in her response of integrous commitment that extends beyond her own works. Jesus is conceived. Telling Joseph and family would be perceived as hard work, but that had already been fixed. God gives purpose, ways and means, and the final results. If we only draw near and believe his Word. The challenge of bearing the message in this world has already been made manageable. Do not be afraid, for God has found favor in the bearers.

Are we ready for Jesus to enter into our lives? Are we ready to carry God's message out to a world in great need? Will the message be mere words or will our lives embody the loving presence of God in the world? God sends a gift through his favor to the world that needs a favor: Jesus, the Lord incarnate.

## Other Illustrations

- Sitting on a tarmac in New York in the summer of 1969, scared to a state of rigidity, waiting for take-off for a first-time flight overseas, when the pilot announced a delay in take-off. He explained and consequentially turned on an amplified report of the launch into space. If God can put an aircraft on the moon, then surely the trip to England would be a breeze. In that moment, the transition of scientific capabilities became a fruition. This was not just a one-time experience. "Revolution is not a one-time event," says American writer and civil rights activist Audre Lorde. Once you've gone there beyond what you have known, there is no un-experiencing it. Favor from God has been given for a new thing. Space travel is made believable.



- A young biracial man, who was reared by a divorced mom and grandparents, defied all previous conceptions to become the first Black president of the United States of America. Nothing is impossible with God.

## Hymn and Song Suggestions

Traditional hymns:

- ["Jesus Calls Us"](#) (UMH 398)
- ["He Touched Me"](#) (UMH 367)
- ["Surely the Presence of the Lord"](#) (UMH 328)
- ["I Surrender All"](#) (UMH 354)
- ["Blessed Assurance"](#) (UMH 369)
- ["How Great Thou Art"](#) (UMH 77)
- ["Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence"](#) (UMH 626)
- ["O Come, O Come, Emmanuel"](#) (UMH 211)
- ["Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus"](#) (UMH 196)

Other music:

- ["Hallelujah Chorus"](#) from "Messiah" (George Frideric Handel)
- ["Mary, Did You Know?"](#) (Michael English)
- ["Now Behold the Lamb"](#) (Kirk Franklin)
- ["Sweet Little Jesus Boy"](#) (Mahalia Jackson)
- ["Sweet Little Jesus Boy"](#) (Natalie Cole)
- ["Ave Maria"](#) (Franz Schubert)

## Children's Resource

Use the coloring sheet on the following page and tell the story to children, or find many other activities for children online.

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- *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible*, online edition.



**The Angel Gabriel tells Mary that she will have a very special baby**

[www.ActivityVillage.co.uk](http://www.ActivityVillage.co.uk) - Keeping Kids Busy



## Christmas Eve "Shepherds in a Hurry"

Writer: Rev. Debra Griffis-Woodberry

Scripture: Luke 2:1-20

### Note to the Pastor

Preaching on Christmas Eve presents challenges. Given the expectations of the season, everyone is tired (including and especially pastor and staff). People are emotional and feel stress. Mental health professionals tell us that emotions escalate during the Christmas holiday. This season is packed with good and bad memories. Children are over the top with excitement. All this leads to attention spans that are short.

The familiarity with the Luke 2 passage presents another challenge. We wonder, "Can anything new be said?" The hope is that listeners will find places of personal identification and current places of application. One objective of this sermon is to enable listeners to address the idea that there is something in the nativity story that has vital meaning for them today. Secondly, it is hoped that listeners find encouragement to begin or continue development of their faith stories. Another challenge is to make this ancient and beloved story a catalyst to usher people to action as Christ followers in the world today.

### Exegesis

**Luke 2:1-20** – The lectionary for Year B Christmas Eve lists Luke 2:1-14 as the gospel text. However, we are extending the reading through the 20th verse. Scholars agree with this decision:

"While the lectionary permits ending the reading at 2:14, to do so is to cut off responses to the angelic announcement. Each is offered as a proper model for how to react to the hearing of the gospel. The heavenly choir offers the first response in their song of glory. One response is simply to praise God. The shepherds obeyed the angel and announce what they heard to other people who, in turn, are amazed. Finally, at the end of the story, the shepherds glorify and praise God 'for all they had heard and seen.' They not only praise God but announced the good news to others." (Lewis R. Donelson, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 1*, p.121.)

"Luke's story of Jesus' birth consists of three units: verses 1-7, the birth itself; verses 8-14, the Annunciation to the shepherds; verses 15-20, the visit of the shepherds to Bethlehem. The gospel reading for today embraces the first two units with the third optional. ...Perhaps it would be most helpful to...leave the preacher the option of using one, two or all three units." (Fred Craddock, *Preaching Through the Christian Year B*, p.31)

This pericope contains elements that are representative of the whole of Luke's gospel. Luke is inclusive in nature. He mentions people that other gospels do not. Particularly, Luke includes the importance of ministry to the poor. So, the poor shepherds were included. Those who are sometimes invisible are made visible. Another feature of Luke is hospitality. Mary and Joseph were sheltered (basic as it was) in an over-crowded city.

It's Christmas Eve! May the loving gift of Christ shine in and through you.



## The Sermon Outline

- 1) Introduction
  - a) Passage is unique to Luke.
  - b) Familiarity could cause us to overlook some meaning for today
  - c) Invite listeners to hear it again “for the first time.”
- 2) Using “holy imagination” to find our place in Bethlehem.
  - a) Introduce concept of using “Holy Imagination” to place oneself in the text.
  - b) Mention possible places and feeling of connection i.e., understanding a position of power like governor or emperor, as well as the joy of holding new-born baby, fear of unknown, pondering prayer of Mary, steady, calm support of Joseph, an astonished shepherd.
  - c) Expand on identifying with the shepherds as Essential Workers
- 3) The journey of faith beckons us to write our own “Christmas Story”.
  - a) Affirm the presence of God’s grace throughout our lives.
  - b) Discuss Incarnation and the opportunities for God to become “flesh” in us today.
- 4) We need to go to Bethlehem
  - a) Jesus is there with grace, comfort, hope, love, joy, peace, etc.
  - b) To discover what God is birthing in us today.
  - c) Reference Anne Weems’ poetry
- 5) Conclusion
  - a) Be like the shepherds
  - b) Go quickly to discover where Jesus is
  - c) Tell the message with urgency to troubled world

## The Sermon

### “Shepherds in a Hurry”

Scripture – Luke 2:1-20

It is Christmas Eve. I invite you to take a deep breath. Step away from the exhaustion of the season; the gift purchasing, holiday gatherings, anticipated family drama, or the grief that you may feel because of an empty chair at your table. Take a deep breath, step away from whatever distracts you, and come to the nativity scene.

We can see it in our minds and hearts. We church folks know the story of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. We know all the people in the story. Mary, Joseph, Baby Jesus, the shepherds and the angels – they are not strangers to us. For hundreds of years, the church has tried to recreate the nativity scene as we dress people in bathrobes, angel costumes and fabric for the magi that represents royalty. Many churches have a dedicated closet just for storing the costumes, head-wraps, angel wings, gold, frankincense and myrrh. The “play” is repeated every year.



Students of the Bible know that the magi were not at the manger scene, yet we add them in anyway, thinking it makes the picture complete. Adding the magi also gives more people a part in the play.

Matthew's gospel tells of Joseph's dream and the magi's story. While the gospel of Mark omits the birth narrative entirely, the gospel of Luke gives us all the characters except the magi. Luke's style was to include all, so the governor and the shepherds are included. For a theological understanding of the birth of Jesus, we embrace the gospel of John.

Remembering Christmas plays of the past usually brings a smile to our faces as we remember a funny story of the clumsy shepherds knocking over the wooden sheep, or the magi dropping the frankincense, or some other off-the-script action or remark. We smile when we remember the year our child or grandchild was an angel or shepherd or Mary or Joseph or the Baby Jesus.

Because it is so beautifully familiar and emotional, we may not recognize God's word for us today. I invite you to hear again for the first time Luke's birth narrative. Walk alongside the people in the story and employ your imagination to see, feel, hear, taste and experience the events of Luke 2.

*Read Luke 2:1-20 here.*

Do you see yourself somewhere in this story? Where are you in Luke's birth narrative? Can you relate to the position of power and authority held by the emperor Augustus or the governor Quirinius? Maybe you have made corporate decisions that affect the masses.

Perhaps you focused on Joseph, identifying with his courage and faithfulness. He was from the right family to be chosen. Mark Harris offers reflections from the perspective of Joseph in "[A Strange Way to Save the World.](#)"

*Here, the preacher may quote lines from the song by Harris.*

*If you do not know the song, you may offer other reflections on the life of Joseph.*

Perhaps upon hearing the reading today, you identified with Mary – uncomfortably pregnant while riding a donkey, uncertain of the near and distant future. Could you relate to the joy and fear all bundled together when her baby was born? Did you see yourself in her as she held the baby, pondering all things in her heart?

Most of us do not quickly or easily identify with the angels. If people are especially kind or gracious, often they are called "angels in disguise." Some are called to be God's messengers. From that perspective, maybe we could identify with the angels. Still, it is not likely for most of us.

The shepherds offer yet another perspective on life as they enter the nativity scene. Shepherds were ordinary people who did the basic labor of taking care of sheep. Sheep were a mainstay of livelihood, providing people of the Bible with food and milk, wool for clothing, coverings for tents that provided shelter, a medium of exchange, and a proper offering in the sacrifice system of the day.



Shepherds were the essential workers of their time. Maybe you can identify with them. The COVID-19 pandemic continues to teach us the value of essential workers. The work of shepherds could not be done from home. They needed to be with the sheep under their watchful care. The people who clean the public bathrooms, stock the shelves, mop the floors, and drive the trucks carrying groceries or medical supplies join the nurses, doctors and medical staff in working all hours. They must work in shifts.

People who work the night shift will tell you that nighttime/early morning hours are unique. They know that when they look at the stars of the night sky, most everyone else in the community is sleeping, but they are laboring hard to make production or beat the clock on a deadline. Like the distribution center or mill that runs all day and all night, the shepherds' work was 24/7. As suddenly as a web pop-up ad, the angels appeared to the night shift shepherds. The angels appear with good news, beckoning them to Bethlehem. Naturally, the shepherds were afraid. The angels reassured them and quickly they went to Bethlehem.

In this story, we encounter people of power and the poor ones. People made their way to Bethlehem where Jesus was born. Today, in our hearts and minds, we are invited to find our place at the manger. The birth of Jesus is a major touchstone in God's salvation story. Our formation as disciples of Christ happens as we connect our story to God's larger salvation story.

Singer and songwriter Sherry Pedersen reflects on the gift of Christ and implications of his love in a song titled "Turn It Into Wine." The chorus is a reminder to live your particular song of Christmas each day and to seek Jesus in every person. *(We don't have permission to reprint this song, but you may find it on the CD titled "Bless This Child," by Sherry Lynn Pedersen, and quote it in a sermon not for publication.)*

The journey of faith beckons us to find our place at the Nativity and to write our own Christmas song. We write the verses of our particular "song" as we embrace the saving grace of Jesus Christ, remembering times when God was more than a word to us. We compose our Christmas song as we discover places where Jesus is being born anew as a continuing expression of sanctifying grace.

The verses of our songs may be disjointed and messy because that is how life often is. Our Christmas songs might tell of doubt and fear and pain. When we find our way to Bethlehem, God births in us hope and grace and love and peace. Is God birthing something in you today?

In a poem titled "Christmas Comes," Ann Weems included the line, "Christmas comes every time we see God in other persons." ("[Kneeling in Bethlehem](#)," by Ann Weems, p.61) I invite you to look for the presence of God in each person you encounter now and throughout the coming year. What will you experience from God? How will the presence of God change your perception of each person? How will you offer praise to God or show love? And how will this perspective shape you? Maybe in another year you'll have answers to these questions.

The scripture says that the shepherds went with haste to Bethlehem to find Jesus. They felt the urgency to go immediately. The pull of good news of the birth of Jesus was strong. Upon seeing for themselves the miracle, they went and told everyone what had been revealed unto them.



Today's world is characterized by tension between groups of people, uncertainty of a peaceful future, lack of acceptance, and even hatred of others. These conditions are shouts for the church to feel urgency. Quickly, Christ followers need to offer ways of reconciliation and hope to a broken world.

"When we are Bethlehem-bound we can no longer look the other way," wrote Ann Weems ("In Search of our Kneeling Places," pg. 19, "[Kneeling in Bethlehem](#)"). I remember the Bible story of the poor woman known mostly as Lot's wife and the consequences when she looked back. We look forward.

Like shepherds, go in a hurry. Absorb all that Bethlehem would teach you. And then, like the shepherds, make known all that you have heard and seen concerning the Christ Child.

## Other Illustrations

- Shepherd and sheep appear many times throughout the Bible and often represent God's tenderness and love for humanity. Any of these could be added as illustrations to the sermon, showing the value of shepherds
- Psalm 23: The psalmist begins to describe God with the words, "The Lord is my shepherd..."
- Psalm 78:70-72: "He chose his servant David, and took him from the sheepfolds; from tending the nursing ewes he brought him to be the shepherd of his people Jacob, of Israel, his inheritance. With upright heart he tended them, and guided them with skillful hand."
- In Matthew 18:12, Jesus said: "What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray?"
- John 10:11: Jesus refers to himself as the Good Shepherd.
- Integrate your own story into the sermon. Where do you see yourself in the Gospel lesson? Invite others to tell you how they see themselves by using social media to ask persons to tell of times when God was more than a word to them. Incorporate their answers (with permission) into the sermon.

## Hymn and Song Suggestions

Music for Christmas is abundant for contemporary and traditional worship. The best choices are songs that are known and therefore sing-able in your context and culture, though singing is not a primary congregational action during the COVID-19 pandemic. Even so, Christmas offers opportunity for a soloist or small group to present new or different music to the congregation.

Traditional hymns:

- "[While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks](#)" (UMH 236)
- "[Angels from the Realms of Glory](#)" (UMH 220)
- "[Silent Night, Holy Night](#)" (UMH 239)



- ["Angels We Have Heard on High"](#) (*UMH 238*)
- ["Jesus, Jesus, Oh What a Wonderful Child"](#) (*African-American spiritual*)
- ["The Virgin Mary Had A Baby Boy"](#) (*The Faith We Sing 2098*)

Other songs:

- ["If I Were A Shepherd"](#) (*Stephanie K. Adams*)
- ["Strange Way to Save the World"](#) (*Mark Harris*)
- ["Mary, Did You Know?"](#) (*Mark Lowry*)

## Visual Resources

- Jan Richardson offers a wonderful selection of images suitable for use in worship at [janrichardsonimages.com](http://janrichardsonimages.com). You can become an annual subscriber or buy individual images.
- You can find many videos related to Luke 2:1-20 online. Be sure to respect copyright laws.

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## First Sunday of Christmas “Fulfillment of Divine Promise”

Writer: Rev. Kathryn W. Scarborough

Scripture: Luke 2:22-40

### Note to the Pastor

The first Sunday after Christmas can be a challenging time to preach. Some participants in your congregations may be away from home while visiting family. Some people may hear this text addressed in a sermon for the first time. While I use personal stories in this sermon, I encourage you to use your own life-stories in place of my personal examples and make the sermon your own.

Luke’s gospel, often referred to as the “Gentile Gospel,” places emphasis on Jesus’ ministry to those who were the least, the lost and the last. Luke wants us to know that Jesus broke down the many walls that divide people. He called his followers to care for all people, especially those of low social status, the poor, the sick, the blind, widows and even Gentiles. In today’s text, Jesus is revealed to Simeon and Anna, two older adults near the end of their lives. Often in today’s culture, older people are shoved aside instead of being valued for their years of wisdom and experience.

Sanctifying grace is the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit throughout our lives. Because of their close walk with God, Simeon and Anna were prepared to receive the gift of Jesus’ birth. This text gives us an opportunity to evaluate how we see people. Do we see them according to their status, age, disability – or as children of God? Who is Jesus calling us to care for today? What are some of the ways we can include the “least of these” in our churches?

Words can be powerful, especially in the context of rituals and celebrations. Commitments are made. Love is given a voice. Promises shape relationships. Simeon and Anna with infant Jesus may remind us of times we stand with a family at the baptismal font at the baptism of an infant or young child. Take time this week to reflect on the power of words as we celebrate the sacraments in the church. As pastors, we are responsible for teaching the deep meaning of rituals that are celebrated as we live in covenant relationship with God and one another.

Just as Jesus grew in wisdom and favor with God, each of us needs to grow continually in our discipleship. Let us support, encourage and hold one another accountable as we work until Jesus returns!

### Exegesis

**Luke 2:22-40** – In this scripture, we see the law and the Holy Spirit working together. Luke’s account of the presentation of Jesus in the temple describes all that the law required at the birth of a child. Mary and Joseph faithfully fulfilled the law concerning purification of women after giving birth (Leviticus 12:1-5) and the law concerning the firstborn child consecrated to the Lord. (Exodus 13:2,11-16) The offering brought by Joseph and Mary – two turtledoves or pigeons (Leviticus 12:6-8) – indicates that they were poor.

Luke introduces Simeon as a righteous and devout person: The Spirit rested upon him. The Spirit guided Simeon to the temple. It was no accident that Simeon was in the temple. Jesus is recognized as



God's agent of salvation – the universal reach of God's redemption. Simeon praised God using language from Isaiah 40–66 (Isaiah's vision for the restoration of Israel also included Gentiles). The inclusion of Gentiles is also found in Luke 3:6, 38; 4:25 – 27; and 7:1-10.

God fulfilled the promise to Simeon that he would see the consolation of Israel and the coming of the Messiah. Simeon has been faithfully watching and waiting, and now is released from his post. The word used for peace occurs 14 times in Luke. Peace is the goal and the result of God's redemptive work in Jesus.

Simeon's second oracle was directed to Mary: The birth of Jesus marked the coming of salvation and also would bring conflict. Israel will be divided in response to Jesus. Mary will share in the pain of the rejection of Jesus and the division of Israel.

Luke pairs male and female figures in his text. Anna's character and piety are emphasized. She was thought to be about 84 years old, widowed after seven years of marriage, and with a single-minded devotion to God. Her story prepares the reader for future references to widows in Luke. Her blessing was praising God and speaking about Jesus. Her witness was similar to that of Simeon. Simeon and Anna's lives of devotion had made them sensitive to God's presence in the events of their time.

The passage ends by noting that when Joseph and Mary fulfilled all requirements, they returned to Nazareth. This marks a transition between the birth narrative and Jesus' ministry. Jesus grew. He was filled with wisdom and the favor of God was upon him.

## The Sermon Outline

- 1) Waiting
  - a) Advent and Christmas are a time of "expectant waiting."
  - b) Discipleship is the work of waiting.
  - c) What gift has God prepared for you that God is waiting for you to receive? What keeps us from receiving? (Give a personal illustration.)
- 2) Fulfillment
  - a) The Old Testament reading today helps us recall the words of the prophet Isaiah from the third Sunday of Advent. Through faith, he rejoiced and praised God without having yet received the promise.
  - b) On Christmas Eve we celebrated the fulfillment of divine promise in the birth of Jesus Christ.
  - c) What did the Law require when a child was born? Fulfillment of the law concerning the first-born son and purification of the mother shown by Mary and Joseph.
  - d) Importance of rituals in the church today.
- 3) Sanctifying grace
  - a) In this text we see God's sanctifying grace at work. (Define) We experience God's grace throughout our lives.



- 4) Introduce Simeon and Anna
  - a) Simeon (guided by the Holy Spirit) and Anna (single-minded devotion to God).
  - b) The way they lived their lives prepared them to receive God's gift.
  - c) An unforgettable moment! This story of Jesus' presentation in the temple tells us that Jesus is the fulfillment of Isaiah's vision of Israel's restoration. He is God's agent of salvation. God's redemptive act in Jesus is for all people, including Gentiles.
  - d) Blessings of Simeon and Anna. Primary purpose to declare who Jesus is.
  - e) The birth of Jesus also points to the advent of conflict. The Messiah will not only restore God's people but also divide them. God's grace is not a guarantee that we will live trouble-free lives.
- 5) Discipleship
  - a) After all requirements were fulfilled, they return to Nazareth. Jesus grows. He was filled with wisdom and the favor (some translations use grace) of God was upon him. If Jesus needed to grow in wisdom and grace, how about us? (part 2 of my story)
- 6) Challenge
  - a) Today, we live in expectant waiting – waiting for Jesus' return. Look for God's grace at work in your daily lives; and rejoice and be glad because God fulfills His promises!

## The Sermon

### **"Fulfillment of Divine Promise"**

Scripture – Luke 2:22-40

This is the sixth sermon in the series "Come, Follow Me: Advent – Grace in the Life of a Disciple." The sermons remind us that Advent and Christmas are a time of expectant waiting, and discipleship is the work of waiting. In the first sermon, the Rev. Brian Arant offered a key phrase for our use: "While we wait, we work!" Our waiting is not idleness.

In the November/December 1992 issue of The Interpreter magazine, the Rev. Linda H. Hollies wrote an article titled "Worth Waiting For" that got my attention. One sentence she wrote sticks with me still: "During Advent, we wait for God's gift while God waits for us to receive it."

We aren't the only ones waiting! How many times in our lives has God tried to get our attention? What gift has God prepared for us, that God is waiting for us to receive? I recall a conversation many years ago with a former pastor, the Rev. Jerry Davis. I made a comment about being busy; and he responded, "We're all busy with something." It made me stop and think: What am I busy doing? Am I busy with my plan or God's plan? We cannot receive God's gift if we are holding on to something else. What does God want to fulfill in and through us?

The theme of fulfillment runs through both the Old Testament and gospel readings for today. Oh, if only we could be more like the prophet Isaiah introduced in the third Sunday of Advent and again today. Isaiah rejoiced over what was yet to come. His faith was not based on what had already happened, but on God's promise of Jerusalem's vindication and restoration.



On Christmas Eve, we came together to celebrate the fulfillment of God's divine promise in the birth of Christ, Immanuel, God with Us. What Isaiah had seen through the eyes of faith 400 years earlier has come to pass. The words spoken to Mary by the angel Gabriel in Luke 1:30–33 have been fulfilled.

Luke's gospel is often referred to as the Gentile Gospel; but Luke also shows great respect for Jewish scripture. Luke 2:21 tells us that Mary and Joseph had the child circumcised on the eighth day; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

Not much of Jesus' childhood is recorded in the Bible, so what we have must be important for us to know. Our text begins with the account of Jesus' presentation in the temple. Mary and Joseph faithfully fulfill the law by bringing Jesus to the temple in Jerusalem. A woman who had given birth was ceremonially unclean and unable to enter the temple or touch any holy object until she offered sacrifices. This would be about 40 days after the birth of a son. All sacrifices had to be made at the Jerusalem temple, so they traveled to Jerusalem with Baby Jesus. They could not afford a sheep; so they gave the offering of the poor – two turtledoves or pigeons. They also were required to consecrate their first child to the Lord. These were important rituals for Israel and certainly for Mary and Joseph.

Rituals are still important for us today. They help us connect the sacredness of life and the presence of God in our everyday lives. Weekly worship and rituals of the church are important. Our Christian journey begins at the baptismal font – a scene not unlike the one in the temple that day. Daily family rituals are also important – having family devotions, prayers before meals, a daily walk to celebrate God's creation, and other rituals that help you recognize God's goodness and presence in all of life. Unfortunately, the pressures of modern life have reduced the place of ritual observances in much of today's culture.

God continually works in our lives through the presence of the Holy Spirit. Sanctifying grace is the process of living out our relationship with God, enabling us to be all that God has created us to be. Richard J. Foster, in his book "Life with God," says, "Grace guides us along the path of discipleship... even more, it empowers us for life with God." (p.179) Consider the guidance of grace.

Luke introduces us to two people who were in the temple that day: Simeon and Anna. We might say: "Why are they important to this story?" Luke was not writing an eyewitness account, so the way they lived their lives must have had an impact. Luke tells us that Simeon was righteous and devout, and he was guided by the Holy Spirit to the Jerusalem temple that day. The temple complex was very large at the time of Herod. It was no accident that Simeon was there in the right place when Mary and Joseph brought Baby Jesus. In this scripture we see the law and Holy Spirit working together. Simeon was prompted to be there by the Spirit; Jesus' parents were there to fulfill the law.

God is always working in our lives, but there are times when we are more aware of God's presence. For example, in February 2005, Robert and I headed to Florida for what was supposed to be a three-day visit with our son and his family. It turned out to be much longer. We were there six weeks while I was hospitalized and treated for bacterial meningitis. We felt that God had guided us to that area where they had excellent medical care, and Robert was able to receive family support. We could feel the power of prayers and the presence of God during that experience.



Both Simeon and Anna are older adults, nearing the ends of their lives. Perhaps that is why I identify with their story. They represent pious Israel waiting for the coming Messiah.

Another quote from "Life with God," by Richard Foster, seems appropriate: "The core Disciplines are at the heart of Christian practice because they directly position us to receive the flow of God's life through us." (p.143) John Wesley taught that the means of grace are ways God works in us to open our hearts and lives to God's work in us. These are important for us in the process of sanctification as we move toward Christian perfection through the work of the Holy Spirit. Robert Benson, in his book "The Echo Within: Finding Your True Calling," says, "There is within each of us an echo of the Voice of the One Who whispered us into being. We must listen for that echo and to that echo; we must listen fiercely and faithfully and fearlessly. Within the echo of the Voice that spoke us into being is the sound of our own true voice." (p.19)

Simeon's and Anna's lives of devotion had made them sensitive to God's presence. I find it interesting to note that Jesus was recognized by Simeon and Anna, but when the wise men came seeking Jesus in Matthew's account, neither Herod nor the chief priests nor scribes had known when Jesus was brought to the Herod's temple as an infant – or the importance of his coming.

We all experience unforgettable moments in life. It could be celebrating the news of a graduation, getting that job you want, news of an upcoming marriage, or the announcement of a new baby. For Simeon, taking Baby Jesus in his arms was one of those unforgettable moments. Simeon responds by praising God using language from Isaiah, Chapters 40-66, and blessing the child in what is known from the opening words in Latin as the *Nunc Dimittis*. The gift of God's grace always requires a response from us. Luke wants us to know that Jesus is the fulfillment of Isaiah's vision of Israel's restoration, God's agent of salvation, but Luke also stresses the universal reach of God's redemptive act. Jesus came for all people, including the Gentiles.

Simeon has been faithfully waiting. When Joseph and Mary arrive with infant Jesus, Simeon is now released. He has seen what he has been waiting for, and he is at peace. Even so, Simeon's final address to Mary was not exactly what any new mother would want to hear. The coming of salvation also points to the advent of conflict because all people will not receive or accept this gift of salvation. The long-awaited Messiah will not only restore Israel, but also will divide them. As the mother of Jesus, Mary will share in the pain of his rejection. God's grace is not a guarantee that we will live trouble-free lives, but God does promise that he will be with us.

Anna, referred to as a prophet, had a single-minded devotion to God. Luke says in Chapter 2, Verse 37, "She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day." She was a widow, having lived with her husband only seven years after their marriage, and is generally thought to have been 84 years old. Surely her life had not been easy, but God was with her. Her presence in this story prepares us for the other references to widows in Luke's gospel.

She responds to the visit of Joseph and Mary by praising God and speaking about the child. "Anna's outsider status as a widow is radically reversed to an insider role in redemption history." ("Life with God," p.144)



After all requirements were fulfilled, the young family returned to Nazareth. This section marks a transition between the birth narrative and the next story when Jesus returns to the temple in Jerusalem for Passover. During this 12-year interval, Jesus is growing, just like children in our churches as they approach the age for confirmation. Chapter 2, Verse 40 says, "The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor (grace) of God was upon him." This time of growth was important for Jesus to fulfill his mission. If it was important for Jesus, what about us? We, too, need to be growing in our discipleship and relationship with God.

I spoke earlier of a time when my husband and I were in Florida. The story of our unexpected six-week stay there did not end when we returned home. I had explored going into the ministry in 2002 and had been asked to wait. When we returned from Florida in 2005, I was asked to serve a small church as a lay supply pastor. A few weeks after I arrived, I saw a church sign that read, "If you want to make God smile, just tell him your plans!" My journey led to returning to school, becoming a local pastor and serving Bethel UMC at Peachtree Rock for 13 years.

Our paths are not always straight. Sometimes they wander. In "The Echo Within: Finding Your True Calling," writer Robert Benson sums it up: "To assume the One Who made us has only one way of revealing to us the thing for which we were made is to attempt to handcuff the Almighty...We get on a career path, and we cannot find a rest area, much less an exit. And sometimes another thing happens. Sometimes we are nudged a bit at a time in the direction of our dreams even though it is not clear to us for years and years. Guess Who is doing the nudging?" (pp.171-172)

The first disciples heard Jesus say, "Follow me." We are called to follow Jesus daily as we wait for his return. Our challenge is to prepare, to share the story of God's love, to look for God's grace at work in our daily lives, be aware of God's nudges, and to rejoice and be glad because God fulfills his promises! Amen.

## Other Illustrations

- Your life is rich with experiences of holiness. Use your life.

## Hymn and Song Suggestions

Traditional hymns:

- "Song of Simeon" ([Upper Room Worshipbook](#) 24)
- "Now Let Your Servant Go" ([Upper Room Worshipbook](#) 209)
- "[Canticle of Simeon](#)" (UMH 225)
- "[Go Now in Peace](#)" (UMH 665)
- "[My Master, See, the Time Has Come](#)" (UMH 226)
- "[Great Is Thy Faithfulness](#)" (UMH 140)



- ["Take Time to Be Holy"](#) (UMH 395)
- ["Go, Tell It on the Mountain"](#) (UMH 251)
- ["That Boy-Child of Mary"](#) (UMH 241)
- ["Joy to the World"](#) (UMH 246)
- ["Grace Alone"](#) (*The Faith We Sing* 2162)
- ["Jesus, Name above All Names"](#) (*The Faith We Sing* 2071)

## Video Resource

- ["Mary of Nazareth – Presentation in the Temple"](#) (Ignatius Press, October 16, 2014).

## Online Resources

- UMC Discipleship Ministries [Worship Planning](#).

## Resources for Children

- ["Jesus is Dedicated Luke 2 22-40"](#) (Saddleback Kids, February 11, 2015).
- ["Sunday School Lesson: Simeon and Anna Rejoice"](#) (Ministry-To-Children).

## Articles

- "Worth Waiting For," by Linda H. Hollies, *The Interpreter*, November-December 1992.

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## Second Sunday of Christmas “Come, Follow Me Home”

Writer: Rev. Hillary Taylor

Scripture: Jeremiah 31:7-14 and John 1:18-25

### Note to the Pastor

Desmond Tutu often says Jeremiah is his favorite book of the Bible. Its honest outrage toward everyone – even God – resonates deeply with him.<sup>17</sup> Many clergy understand this sentiment intensely – even if we have no experience leading international peacebuilding efforts. All clergy will lead congregations through difficult changes. That work alone is enough to make us feel outraged. But there’s something about the aftermath of the holidays that can multiply our outrage many times over. The hope that “maybe this Christmas will be different” is now completely gone.

We are left with even more memories of dysfunctional family or church dynamics than last year. And now we have to go back to our churches, where we are expected to absorb a whole church full of dysfunctional family dynamics. Add a national crisis or two on top of that, and you’ve got a real doozy!<sup>18</sup> For this reason, I have chosen to focus my meditations on Jeremiah 31:7-14. I love this passage because it interrupts the chaos of the times by announcing God’s triumphant, grace-filled love at the end of all things. It doesn’t matter who we are, where we’ve been, what we’ve done, how imperfect we are: God will see us through to a new Holy Land.

Pastors must internalize this message if they are to continue in ministry beyond Advent, beyond Christmas, beyond crisis, even. Because in the end, we must begin again. God is especially looking out for pastors in this process and will provide for their needs: “I will lavish the priests with abundance and shower my people with my gifts, declares the Lord.” (v.14) It may feel weird to see religious leaders as people for whom God especially cares in Jeremiah. Prophets typically criticize priests for their privilege and elitism.

But God knows many are trying the best they can, sacrificing their own wellbeing so that members of their community can feel secure. We know religious leaders are told to “make worship happen the way members want it at all costs, or else.” They often feel pressure to preach teachings that contradict their own particular understandings of God’s Word in order to keep their jobs. They can’t complain when community members are creating conflict for no reason and denying them their rightful portion. They are also people who often absorb so much pain from others that they forfeit self-care and perpetuate harm.

In the face of chaotic holidays, God says religious leaders, too, must turn toward God’s grace. Once they do, they will not want for anything. They will be taken care of, and their ministries will lead people to God’s holy home. In these challenging days, may you know God walks alongside you – even as you continue the work of Advent the whole year long.

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<sup>17</sup> His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, with Douglas Abrams, “Despair: The World is in Such Turmoil,” *The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World* (New York, NY: Avery, 2016) 119

<sup>18</sup> This project was completed in the spring and summer of 2020, during which two nationwide crises – the COVID-19 pandemic and protests against racist police brutality – dominated the news cycle.



## Exegesis

**Jeremiah 37:7-14** – The prophet Jeremiah is known as the “weeping prophet” and apocryphal author of Lamentations. For 40 years, he judged the powers and principalities of his day, warning that if the Southern Kingdom of Israel did not turn toward God’s will, the Babylonian Empire would overtake them just as the Assyrian Empire overtook the Northern Kingdom. God’s presence with them helped Israel become a great nation (*Deuteronomy 7:7-8*), though it was small in size. Sadly, the two major sins of worshiping idols and ignoring the plight of the poor provoked God to let Babylon conquer Israel.

As a prophetic text, Jeremiah is not only meant to chastise and grieve – it is also meant to cast hope in the face of despair. This is precisely the purpose of this week’s text. As part of a group of verses called “The Little Book of Consolation,” Jeremiah 31:7-14 creates a hopeful vision for the future restoration of Israel, even though the Babylonian Empire hasn’t invaded yet.<sup>19</sup> One might say that Babylon represents the powers of sin and death in the world.<sup>20</sup> The flexible Hebrew grammar in Verse 7 shows that God’s salvation can be experienced both now, and also not yet. (The words may be translated “Save, O LORD, your people, the remnant of Israel,” or, “The Lord has saved his people, the remaining few in Israel.”) Indeed, God’s people will experience alienation and exclusion, but that is not the end of the story. They will eventually experience healing and restoration, but first they must experience real periods of darkness.

Some of the darkest parts of the invasion are referenced in this week’s scripture. Many elite Judeans become “scattered” [*zarah* (זרה)] like seeds in their forced migration (v.10).<sup>21</sup> Other already marginalized groups within Judean society (*Deuteronomy 14:28-29*) become even more vulnerable without a homeland. References to the “blind and the lame” (*Jeremiah 31:8*) fill readers’ minds with battle wounds.<sup>22</sup> Images of “pregnant women and women with children” hint at surviving sexual violence.<sup>23</sup> And yet, God deems these marginalized people as part of Israel’s “core.” What’s more, the nations in which they have been absorbed (i.e., invading nations like Babylon) now have become the harbingers of God’s grace and good news.<sup>24</sup> In God’s new kin-dom,<sup>25</sup> every power dynamic turns upside down. The weak are lifted up, and the powerful are made low.

During this restoration process, God adopts Israel as a firstborn child, just as Ephraim, the second son of Joseph, was adopted as such by his grandfather, Jacob, as his firstborn son.<sup>26</sup> It’s the kind of undeserved “underdog blessing” that fits with the history of Israel. With this adoption comes a sense of God’s protection and guidance. Not only will God free these rebellious Israelite citizens from dire

<sup>19</sup> Andrew Nagy-Benson, “Pastoral Perspective – Jeremiah 31:7-14,” *Feasting on the Word*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Year B, Vol. 1 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010) 170

<sup>20</sup> Christopher B. Hayes, “Theological Perspective,” *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 1, 174

<sup>21</sup> “Zarah (זרה),” *Bible Study Tools*, accessed May 19, 2020, available at <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/hebrew/nas/zarah.html>

<sup>22</sup> Louis Stulman, “Jeremiah,” *The CEB Study Bible with Apocrypha*, ed. Joel B. Green (Nashville, TN: Common English Bible, 2013) 1259 OT

<sup>23</sup> Christopher B. Hayes, “Theological Perspective,” *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 1, 170

<sup>24</sup> Patrick D. Miller, “Jeremiah,” *New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. 4., ed. Leander E. Keck (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2015) 746

<sup>25</sup> Earthly kingdoms have a reputation for creating bonds of oppression (poverty, war, prejudice, inequality, etc.) rather than eliminating them. As such, some people may interpret the phrase “Kingdom of God” as hierarchical, violent, and imperialist – much like the earthly kingdoms of Pharaoh, Herod, and Caesar. This is why many modern scholars are now substituting the word “kin-dom” for “kingdom.” A “kin-dom” is a community of people with shared power and responsibility for and with one another. The phrase “Kin-dom of God” highlights God’s desire for kinship, fellowship and connection with the created world. Put simply, a “Kin-dom of God” implies friendship, not domination, between God and creation. For a deeper read, check out Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, “Identificate con Nosotras,” *La Lucha Continues: Mujerista Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004) 243-251

<sup>26</sup> Robert D. Miller II, “Ephraim,” *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. David Noel Freedman (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2000) 416



straits, God will also set them on a calm path where they can recognize God's abundance. Here, the writer alludes to Psalm 23 with references to "still waters" and "clear," "right paths." God is a shepherd who has led them away from the turbulent "waters of Babylon" (*Psalm 137*) where they could not find God's presence.<sup>27</sup>

While journeying back to Israel, the exiles will be able to exchange their sorrow for gladness. But first, they must be willing to reorient their hearts and minds to worshipping God and doing God's will. Once this happens, God plans to make the Israelites flourish like a "lush garden." (*Jeremiah 31:12*) They will participate in a New Eden, complete with abundant ingredients for delicious feasts. All will be able to dance with joy for God's grace – from the young women to the old men (v.13). Even religious leaders – the ones who feel the brunt of the people's fears around scarcity, sin and death...the ones who worry the most about their people at the expense of their own spirituality – they will not want for anything.<sup>28</sup> God will provide for them, too! All of this is simply part and parcel of God's plan for recreation. Sin and death have no power here. Neither does Babylon, or any force of empire, for that matter. This is the good news we all need, even as we wait on God's redemption for all of God's people.

## The Sermon Outline

- 1) Summary of key points from previous sermons
- 2) The concept of "homecoming"
  - a) A return to sacred space and sacred place
    - i) Examples: school, church, a house, family members
  - b) An opportunity to explore why it's important to us
- 3) "Homecoming" through the lens of forced migration
  - a) The reality of people being forced to move from their homes because of social, political, economic, etc. circumstances
  - b) The complicated questions about "homecoming" which arise from forced migration
- 4) Homecoming and the Babylonian Captivity
  - a) Why the Israelites would be conquered by Babylon
    - i) Unfaithfulness to God and unneighborliness to neighbors
    - ii) Jeremiah's warnings; Israel's refusal to change; Babylonian Invasion
    - iii) Psalm 137 as the Israelites' homesick lament
- 5) Jeremiah 31 as part of a hopeful interlude amid predictions of destruction
  - a) God re-adopts the Israelites
    - i) References to Jacob and Ephraim
    - ii) Rebellious underdogs that don't deserve the blessing, but receive it anyway
  - b) Redemption of everyone, including very marginalized groups of people
    - i) Women, children, people with disabilities
    - ii) Who are the groups we are marginalizing today that were also marginalized in the past?

<sup>27</sup> Christopher B. Hayes, "Theological Perspective," *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 1, 172

<sup>28</sup> G. Malcolm Sinclair, "Homiletical Perspective," *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 1, 175



- c) Imagery of God as a shepherd
  - i) Going after the lost sheep stuck in Babylon
  - ii) Psalm 137 becomes Psalm 23, which becomes Jeremiah 31: 9-10
- d) Imagery of a garden that is lush and well-watered. Perhaps a restoration to the Garden of Eden, or the creation of a New Eden.
  - i) Tears of Trauma become Tears of Joy
  - ii) Hardened hearts become softened and let love and holiness be cultivated
  - iii) Spontaneous worship of God erupts as a climatic response to homecoming
- 6) Jeremiah and “What Might Have Been”
  - a) The reader’s sense of homesickness for a home that does not yet exist
- 7) John the Baptist and the ongoing message of homecoming
  - a) Jesus presence gives us a foretaste of God’s homecoming
    - i) Jesus is God’s grace enfleshed
      - (1) Jesus gives us prevenient grace
      - (2) Jesus gives us justifying grace
      - (3) Jesus gives us sanctifying grace
  - b) Grace helps us make a home on Earth while we wait for our true homecoming.
    - i) We should not be satisfied with making a home here. We should long for the Kin-dom of God, which Christ points to
    - ii) We must work to bring God’s Kin-dom on Earth
      - (1) We do that by studying Jesus’ life and embodying his teachings for the transformation of the world
      - (2) We also must study the lessons of Advent throughout the year, which will help us to be more grace-filled

## The Sermon

### “Come, Follow Me Home”

**Scripture** – Jeremiah 31:7-14 and John 1:18-25

We come now to the end of the Advent-Christmas season, and what a season it has been! We’ve learned a lot about God’s grace: how it calls us to work toward Christ’s hope-filled coming, even as we wait with anticipation. We’ve learned how God’s grace transforms us into holy people, even as we attempt to be “bearers of holiness.” We’ve learned how God’s grace connects us to the larger story of God’s plan for reconciliation and redemption. All that’s left to do is bring the message of Advent and Christmas home so we can get into the Epiphany season!

But is the work of Advent ever really done? Are we supposed to leave Advent triumphant and self-assured of our place in God’s plan for salvation? Or are we to finish this season with curiosity and openness to the ways in which God’s grace will move us for the rest of the year? Let’s find out together.



Will you join me in prayer? Let us go to God.

*Opening prayer as led by the Spirit*

What do you think of when I say the word “homecoming?” This is a difficult word to define sometimes. For some, the word “homecoming” might be used to refer to an alumni weekend for schools or camps. It may refer to a pilgrimage we take every year to the vacation area where we learned to surf, the hunting spot where we got our first buck, the church where we learned about Jesus Christ. “Homecoming” may refer to the return of someone working far away, like a missionary or a member of the armed forces. It can even refer to someone’s death, and the fact that they have gone to be with God. Regardless of how we define “homecoming,” its intention is to make people feel valued, appreciated, loved.

Recently, I’ve been thinking of what it means to experience homecoming through the eyes of immigrants forcibly removed from their homes. Several of my friends do ministry with migrant workers. They tell me how their clients have journeyed through tumultuous circumstances to build new lives in a different country. And while these workers are grateful for these new opportunities, many wish they could go back to their home countries. Sadly, the present social, political, economic and even environmental circumstances make it impossible to return to their home countries permanently – or even for short visits. For these migrant workers, the concept of homecoming becomes filled with complicated questions like, “Where is ‘home’ for me now?” “Is it possible to make a new home in a new place?” “What happens if I forget my old home?” “Will I forget who I am in the process?” Answers to these questions are filled with lament, but also resilience.

If we’ve been studying our Bibles, then we know our ancestors of faith had similar questions and feelings as they faced their own forced migration. You know the story: About 600 years before the birth of Jesus, the Israelites were a little too “at home” with the injustice and idolatry happening throughout the kingdom. The Israelites refused to acknowledge their need for God’s grace, so God allowed the Babylonians to invade the land. It was the only way to get the attention of these covenant-breaking people.

After the war, the Israelites were forced to emigrate 1,600 miles (the distance from Saluda, South Carolina, to El Paso, Texas) to Babylon’s capital city. The Israelites were forced to make a home for 70 years in a place that hated their very existence. Their experience of exile is recorded in Psalm 137: “*By the rivers of Babylon – there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion...How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?*” (vv.1,4). They’re not sure if making a home in Babylon is betraying their homeland. “*If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither!*” writes the psalmist. “*Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy.*” (vv.5-6) The people feel complete and utter homesickness. In order to survive the exile, the Israelites will need an indestructible source of hope. They will need a vision for their homecoming back to the Holy Land.

Fortunately, before the Babylonians attacked Jerusalem, the prophet Jeremiah shared just such a vision of homecoming with them. It happens to be our scripture for today. In his vision, God beckons



the children of Israel to come back to Jerusalem. But not just any Jerusalem – a new Jerusalem, in a new Israel. It's a new land with new rules. All of the sins committed by the Israelites? They are all forgiven. All the anger God expressed toward them when they refused to live like a covenant community? All of it is gone. The slate is completely blank. The Israelites are re-adopted as God's beloved children, free to become the holy people they were originally created to be. Jeremiah says God wants to give them a second chance – even though they don't deserve it. Because our God does not abandon us. God is all about grace, redemption and welcoming us home.

In Jeremiah's vision, God doesn't just extend this homecoming to average Israelites. God extends it to the "faithful remnant of Israel;" the people who were cast out of the community before the Babylonian invasion; the people who didn't have any rights to begin with in the old, unfaithful nation. God invites all sorts of folks from the margins of society to be first in line back to the Holy Land: the blind, the lame, pregnant women, women with children. More than likely, these people have dual identities; they are war veterans with disabilities; they are survivors of sexual abuse; they are single, undocumented parents with young ones (v.8). God calls these members to lead the masses on this homecoming journey. After all, the marginalized are the most in need of a homecoming because they are most in need of a home. And God wants to provide this home for them, Jeremiah says. Because God does not abandon us. God is all about grace, redemption and welcoming us home.

As for those who are homesick by the streams of Babylon, God sees them, too, and is coming to their rescue. Jeremiah envisions God walking alongside them, like a shepherd herding lost sheep. God wants to bring these Israelites to a new source of water: a brook beside easy, well-trodden roads. Roads that have no potholes or obstacles. Roads that lead to Mt. Zion, the holy mountain in Jerusalem, from the Valley of Death's shadow (*Psalms 23:4*). And when they get up to Mt. Zion, God wants to plant these Israelites into the good soil, like a farmer plants a garden, so the people will cultivate a sense of holiness, both individually and as a community. Tears that were once shed from trauma will give way to tears shed for joy. These tears will break the hardened hearts of the Israelites so that love can grow wild amid their holiness. And from this holy love, worship of the Lord will spontaneously erupt. There will be laughing, singing and dancing of all styles, from all sorts of unlikely people. Because God does not abandon us. God is all about grace, redemption and welcoming us home.

When I read this vision from Jeremiah, I, too, find myself longing for this kind of homecoming. I've never been forcibly relocated from my home, but I know what it means to feel profoundly homesick for a world that doesn't yet exist. I wish the Israelites had listened to Jeremiah when he asked them to turn back to God. Who knows where we would be if they had done so. Maybe we wouldn't feel such profound loneliness in the world right now. Maybe sin and death wouldn't have such a hold on us. Maybe trauma would be a thing of the distant past. Maybe justice would actually roll down like a river, and righteousness like a mighty stream. (*Amos 5:24*) Maybe there would be a real feeling of abundance, joy and gladness.

But maybe – just maybe – Jeremiah's vision of home isn't as far off as we think. Maybe it's actually within our reach. Fast forward to John 1:18-25. Like Jeremiah, John the Baptist is an extreme person



with an extreme message: *"Make straight the way of the Lord."* (v.23). It's virtually the same prophetic warning as Jeremiah, but it refers to the coming of Jesus Christ. As Christians, we believe Jesus' birth allows us to experience a foretaste of God's homecoming here on Earth. Like the vision of God drawing the Israelites into a new nation, Jesus draws us toward salvation – even when we can't see it or don't know we need it. Like the vision of God remaking the social order, Jesus forgives us of our sins and regenerates us into new people, even when we don't deserve it. Like the vision of God making the floundering flourish, Jesus makes us holy our whole lives long, even though we may backslide and stop participating in the means of grace.

You see, John 1 shows us that Jeremiah's homecoming vision was never meant to be a "one-off" deal for the ancient Israelites. Homecoming is a grace-filled invitation always available to God's people, though it may take different forms at different times. But while we live on Earth, we also must know our experience of homecoming is not complete. We wait for a time when sin and death will be completely destroyed, where the traumas of war will not be experienced, where people will no longer be marginalized by societal status, where everyone has enough of what they need, where all are satisfied with what they have, where joy and gladness are easily experienced.

So, while we figure out how to make a home in spite of our homesickness, it is our duty not only to study the birth of Christ as much as possible: We also must embody Christ's life, so that the world will feel more like the Holy Kin-dom it was originally created to be. As my colleague, Brian Arant, likes to say, "While we wait, we work." Filling the world with God's grace is the only way to go from a feeling of exile, to a feeling of homecoming. It will not be easy. It will not be perfect. But the good news is that God does not abandon us in the process. God is all about grace, redemption and welcoming us home.

With all that said, I invite you to begin our study of Advent for the rest of the year. Doing so may give us a few pointers for how to bring the new Kin-dom just a little bit closer to Earth.

In the name of God the Creator, Christ the Redeemer, and the Holy Spirit, our Sustainer. Amen.

## Other Illustration

One of my favorite songs presently is "[Front Porch](#)," by Joy Williams. I like this song because it's about hopeful reconciliation. We don't know if the subject of the song is an estranged lover or a wayward child. What we do know is the singer wants them to know they can come back home – specifically to the front porch.

Front porches have huge significance where I come from. They are the "welcoming spaces" used to extend warmth and friendliness to everyone – friend and foe alike. Bishop Kenneth Carder explains that they are deeply metaphorical in the Methodist tradition. "Wesley described prevenient grace as the porch on a house," he writes. "It is where we prepare to enter the house...But, there is more to a house than the porch!...We must enter the house..."<sup>29</sup> The front porch is the "non-committal space"

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<sup>29</sup> Kenneth L. Carder, "A Wesleyan Understanding of Grace," *Resource UMC*, originally published in *Interpreter*, November-December 2016, accessed June 9, 2020, available at <https://www.resourceumc.org/en/content/a-wesleyan-understanding-of-grace>



between the yard – a space that exists outside of God’s provision – and the front door – the space where we choose to be “welcomed home” into a life of faith.<sup>30</sup>

When I was a missionary in South Africa, one of my friends, Rebekka Mosiane, described to me her family’s forced migration from South Africa to Namibia during the Apartheid era. Like many black families, hers was forced to move thousands of miles away to enforce the system of racial segregation. Her family was forced to adopt a new language, a new culture, a new home. As a result, she didn’t know her family’s mother tongue (Setswana), and when she resettled back in South Africa years later, she found herself alienated from many South Africans because she mostly spoke Afrikaans (the language, as it turns out, of the oppressive Apartheid government). We talked about how difficult this experience was for her: how she felt that she should be at home in South Africa, but in some ways could never feel at home there. But neither did she feel at home in Namibia. Her existence was somewhat of a “Third Culture” – not South African or Namibian, but a hybrid nationality that only she occupied.

Sometimes I wonder if Jesus and his family ever felt estranged from their home culture when they were forced to emigrate to Egypt to avoid Herod’s death sentence. We know Jesus likely spoke several languages while growing up and doing ministry in Palestine. I wonder if he was ever told he wasn’t “Jewish” enough for his community. I wonder if he was ever ostracized in his upbringing because of the different places he grew up. But, of course, Jesus’ experience of exile is not unique. There are several instances where his ancestors experienced a much longer, much harsher exile from their homeland. And the book of Jeremiah touches on that very fact.

## Hymn and Song Suggestions

Traditional hymns:

- [“This Is My Song”](#) (UMH 437)
- [“Amazing Grace”](#) (UMH 378)
- [“The Summons”](#) (*The Faith We Sing* 2130)
- [“Come! Live in the Light”](#) (*The Faith We Sing* 2172)

Other songs:

- [“Redemption Song”](#) (Bob Marley)
- [“Front Porch”](#) (Joy Williams)
- [“O Freedom”](#) (*The Faith We Sing* 2194)
- [“Freedom Is Coming”](#) (*The Faith We Sing* 2192)
- [“Washed By The Water”](#) (NeedToBreathe)

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid



- "[If I Can Dream](#)" (*W. Earl Brown*)
- "[Redeemed](#)" (*Big Daddy Weave*)
- "[Love's Recovery](#)" (*Indigo Girls*)
- "[Total Praise](#)" (*Richard Smallwood*)

## Visual Resources

- "[An American Tail](#)" (Amblin Entertainment, 1986) – An older animated film, but a good one! It features a family of mice (the "Mousekewitz" family) emigrating from Russia to New York City.
- "[Dakota Exile](#)" (PBS, 2019) – A documentary on the Dakota Nation's experience of forced immigration within the land we now call the United States of America.

## Books

- "[The Coming](#)" (*Daniel Black*) – A novel about the transatlantic slave trade and the journey of the Middle Passage.
- "[God's Companions: Reimagining Christian Ethics](#)" (*Samuel Wells*) – A theology book about God's abundance in the wake of human perceptions of scarcity.
- "[The Prophets](#)" (*Abraham J. Heschel*) – Chapter 6 is a ground-breaking commentary on the book of Jeremiah.

## Other Media

- Map of Babylonian Takeover of the Middle East, Including Judea (Southern Kingdom of the Nation of Israel) – Suggested sources include [The CEB Study Bible](#), [The CEB Student Bible](#) and [The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary](#).
- "[Forced From Home](#)" (Doctors Without Borders) – An interactive exhibit on the present global refugee crisis from Doctors Without Borders.

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This “Come, Follow Me: Advent – Grace in the Life of a Disciple” Sermon Series was developed and written by a team from the South Carolina Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church.

It is intended for use with the “Come, Follow Me: Advent – Grace in the Life of a Disciple” Adult Discussion Guide, also produced by the South Carolina Conference.

The seven main contributors offer different gifts and come from varying traditions. Rather than editing their work to fit a common style (as is done with curriculum resources written by multiple authors), the editors retained their distinctive writing styles as a witness to their experiences and understandings.

We extend our appreciation to all involved for their work.

Both the Sermon Series and the Adult Discussion Guide can be downloaded at

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