

Worship Resources *“Love Life”*

Advent 4, Year A, 18th December, 2022

Isaiah 7:10-16 NRSV / Matthew 1:18-25 NRSV

Prelude

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Welcome Guests / Announcements

Pass the Peace

Opening Hymn *Hark the Herald Angels Sing* **201**

Call to Worship [responsive]

One: The time has drawn near.

All: We watch, we wait expectantly, for the Good News of God.

One: A child has been born for us, a son given to us.

All: Emmanuel, God is With Us.

One: For long ago we were promised that God would dwell with us forever.

All: The Word became Flesh and lived among us.

One: As we wait for Christmas, we wait for Christ to come again.

All: Jesus, the One Who Saves, be born in us today, Amen.

Invocation

Lord Jesus, Master of both the light and the darkness, send your Holy Spirit upon our preparations for Christmas. We who have so much to do seek quiet spaces to hear your voice each day.

We who are anxious over many things look forward to your coming among us.

We who are blessed in so many ways long for the complete joy of your kingdom.

We whose hearts are heavy seek the joy of your presence. We are your people, walking in darkness, yet seeking the light.

To you we say, “Come Lord Jesus!” Amen.

Prophetic Reading: Isaiah 7:10-16 NRSV

Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, saying,
Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven.

But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test.

Then Isaiah said: "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also?"

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.

He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good.

For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.

Lighting The Advent Candle

On the fourth Sunday of Advent, we know that God's love has always been with us. God's love has been made known to us in a new way, through the birth of the Christ-child. God has become one of us, the Word that breathes the Spirit into us, and in Christ we know the fullness of God's love. We are called to share that love with the world. We light this fourth candle for the love God has for the whole world.

Lighting of the Fourth Advent Candle

(Sung to the tune of Away in a Manger - Hymn 194)

"Come, wander where lion and lamb gently play, where evil is banished and faith takes the day, A babe in a manger to fool the world's eyes. One candle is lit for God's loving surprise."

Hymn *O Come, O Come Immanuel* 172

A Time of Prayer

Joys and Concerns

Pastoral Prayer

In the hushed anticipation of your coming, O Lord, kindle in us the desire to remain awake; that we might be ready for your coming, and eager to pray.

O God, in days to come the mountain of your house will be established, and your joy shall reign. We pray for the church (especially...), that you might teach us your ways and that we might walk in your paths.

Out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and you, O God, shall judge between the nations. We pray for our nation, and all nations, that your peace would be manifest in every corner of the earth. Come Lord Jesus, **and hear our prayer.**

In your Kingdom, O Lord, wolves lie down with lambs and children play with serpents without fear. We pray for the sick, the suffering, and those in distress of any kind (especially...); that you would heal all injuries, comfort all grief, and settle all wrongs.

In your Kingdom, O Lord, even the wilderness and dry land are glad and rejoice. We pray for those who rejoice this week as they celebrate their birthday (especially... and anniversaries...); that they might obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing might flee away.

In the fulness of time, O God, you sent your son, to be born of our sister Mary. And his name was Emmanuel: God With Us. We thank you for your Presence with us, and we pray that you might be always present with those whom we love but see no longer. Come Lord Jesus, **and hear our prayer.**

Come among us O God, and hear our prayers; so that when your Son Jesus comes among us with great might, and in manger mild, we might recognize his face and his voice, and come to adore him. **Amen.**

Gospel Reading: Matthew 1:18-25 NRSV

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.

Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.

But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

"Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us."

When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Message - *Love Life*

When we think of the movers and shakers of the world, what type of people come to mind? For many of us, it would be those with power and influence, people with the resources to enact significant change, or those who can reach large numbers of people with their message. Certainly the captains of industry have great financial resources at their disposal, and sadly more and more that translates into great political capital as well. They can greatly influence public policy and opinion with their resources.

Likewise, those who have a large audience in the traditional media, and increasingly those who have large followings on social media, are often seen as having great influence, even resulting in the term “influencer” becoming a mainstream term for those on YouTube or Instagram with millions of followers and views. We often think of those with names like Rockefeller and Roosevelt, Churchill and Carnegie, and Oprah. Those with power and prestige can have an influence, particularly in the short-term. But when you look at the long arc of history, it isn’t always the rich and powerful who make the biggest impact.

Our gospel story this morning is a prime example of that. The main characters in our narrative are not people of prestige and power. They are not wealthy landowners, connected with the religious or Roman elite. They are not skilled orators in the public arena. In fact, it doesn’t get much plainer and insignificant as Joseph and Mary. While they weren’t social outcasts, they were certainly far from the halls of power in their day. Joseph, a simple craftsman from a backwater town in Galilee and Mary, whose background we have no information of, other than some of her family lived in Bethany, an even smaller backwater village at the edge of the Judean wilderness. And while Joseph can claim descentance from King David, it’s obvious he’s not from a branch that has benefitted from that connection. He’s just an ordinary guy on the street in Nazareth, nothing special, at least not on the surface. Yet he’s about to be a main character in the most impactful of events of human history. However, he has no influence to speak of in the society of his day. No money to buy politicians or influence the media. He doesn’t have thousands of followers on Instagram, and if he had social media, his likes would probably all be his family and close friends. Yet this is who God chose to pair with Mary, the one chosen as a human adoptive father for Jesus: an average Joe, from the margins of the culture. Joseph was more than the average Joe however.

Our story this morning is not without tension; like any good narrative, we have a conflict to contend with. Mary is pregnant and her marriage to Joseph is not yet complete. While in today’s world that is hardly unusual, that was a huge deal in Joseph’s time. You can be sure there would have been “talk” around town. Some things never change from then to now. After all, Mary would have begun to show, and it would be obvious that either Joseph wasn't the father, or it would be assumed that he couldn't wait for the marriage to have

some fun. Regardless, the gossip mill in Nazareth would be running full tilt. To seek justice from the Temple and the courts would have enabled him to save face in society, but would have resulted in Mary being publicly shamed, perhaps even stoned to death. Yet, Joseph made a different choice, and in that choice we see the first hints of why this apparently unremarkable man from Galilee is chosen to play such a significant role in human history.

The prevailing interpretation of the law was clear in this matter. He could not take her as his wife if she carried the child of another. The law was meant to ensure his honor, that his heirs would be legitimate to continue his legacy. Male lineage was central to a patriarchal culture such as his. The only choice he had, according to current legal thought, was how to dismiss Mary. He could take the very public approach through the courts or Temple, which would not bode well for Mary. The other option, which would show compassion and concern for another, agape love, to quietly dismiss her back to her father's household, often with some sort of compensation from the father for his trouble. His concern for the law shows his commitment to his faith, yet, like the child he was soon to take as his own, he shows how the law should be interpreted in light of the nature of a compassionate God.

His story is one of compassion and faith. He makes plans to settle things in his own quiet way, And a quiet way it is. In the entire New Testament, Joseph doesn't have one word of spoken dialogue. But does he need to speak? His actions demonstrate so much more. Then an angel visits him in a dream and tells him to do something radical; to take Mary as his wife and that her child was conceived through the Spirit. In his slumber God provided him the answer that eluded him in his waking discernment. He makes the choice to follow the directions of his dream and accept Mary's child as his own, and give him a name, the name of Jesus, or "God saves," when translated from Hebrew. His choice to accept Jesus and give him a name is crucial to the story. It is only by becoming part of Joseph's family that he can be tied to the line of David. It is only this connection, and that of Mary's virgin conception, that tie him to the messianic prophecy in Isaiah 7.

But despite the connection to prophecy, Joseph still had the choice to make. He could have gotten up the next morning, decided that he shouldn't eat before bed because of the crazy dream he had, and gone on with the plan to divorce Mary. But he didn't. He made the choice to accept God's divine message from the angel. He decided to make the righteous decision, founded on a faith that has love and compassion as its lens. Throughout this story, Joseph is living in the tension that Jesus leads us into in the Sermon on the Mount four chapters later in Matthew. "You have heard it said...but I say..." The law is the law, but it's application needs to be interpreted through the compassionate nature of the Divine.

In this liminal time of Advent, this time of already and not yet, we know the impact of this humble family that is forming in the sticks of a somewhat insignificant province of the Roman empire. We can identify with them. After all, they are regular people like us. People without the influence that wealth and privilege bring. People living simple lives in humble circumstances. Yet the impact they make on the world is still being felt over two thousand years later.

Next week we will gather together to celebrate the arrival of the light of the world in a stable in Bethlehem. We will end our celebration by lighting our own candles from the Christ candle, symbolizing us carrying that light into our world, as disciples. As we continue in our time of Advent meditation and reflection for the next few days, let us ask ourselves, are we truly being that love light in the world? As individuals, what are we doing every day to show that agape love to all whom we meet? As a community of faith, what are we doing to live lives of love together and how are we showing that love outside these walls?

God didn't choose King Herod to father Jesus, God chose a lowly carpenter. God didn't choose an elegant queen to mother Jesus, but a simple peasant girl. From Mahatma Gandhi to Mother Teresa, the Divine choice has often been for the humble to do the work of the Divine over the mighty. Great things have been done by those on the margins who were willing to answer that call, the greatest of which was simply agreeing to the call of parenthood in our story today. We all have received that call to live similar lives of selfless love. The question today is will we answer that call, in everything that we say and do.

As we conclude our service on this last Sunday of Advent, let us give some thought of at least one, if not more ways we as individuals can live love this week, and how we as Christ's body in this time and place can visibly live love in the world around us. May we all find ways to embody the love that defines our Creator. May it be so, Amen.

A Call to Serve

We believe in the God of justice and righteousness, and God believes in us to carry forth the mission of loving and caring for the community. Let us now share our gifts and resources so that we may continue to walk humbly with God and with neighbors.

A Time for Reflection - *Musical Interlude*

The Prayer of Thanksgiving

Creator God, we thank you for everything that you have given us, especially for the hope that Emmanuel brings to us. Help us to use these blessings in a way that brings honor and glory to you, and brings hope to a people that so desperately need it. We ask that you take today's gifts--great or small, money, time or talent—and use them to continue the work that you have called us to. Amen.

Hymn

Healer of Our Every Ill

377

The Christmas Tree (*Gather around the tree in the Narthex*)

In ancient times the cedar was revered as the tree of royalty. It also signified immortality, and was used for purification. Today, the Christmas tree is the center of

our festivities. Glittering with lights and ornaments, it is a part of the beauty and meaning of Christmas. There are several legends and stories about the Christmas tree.

The first use of the Christmas tree was in the medieval German Paradise Plays, held outdoors and portraying the creation of humankind. The Tree of Life was a fir tree decorated with apples. Later other ornaments were hung upon them, such as paper flowers and gilded nuts. In England branches or whole trees were forced into bloom indoors for Christmas. From these beginnings the use of a tree at Christmas was established. Martin Luther was perhaps the first to use a lighted tree.

The story is told that on one Christmas Eve Martin Luther wandered outdoors and became enraptured with the beauty of the starry sky. Its brilliance and loveliness led him to reflect on the glory of the first Christmas Eve as seen in Bethlehem's radiant skies. Wishing to share with his wife and children the enchantment he had felt, he cut from the forest an evergreen, glistening with snow, and took it home. He placed upon it candles to represent the glorious heavens he had seen. The use of a candle-lighted tree spread to all Europe, then America came to regard it as the central ornament of Christmas.

We have placed this tree as a symbol of Christ, like the ancient cedars, who reigns as King forever, and whose coming will purify our hearts.

As we decorate this tree, let us think in anticipation of what the coming of Christ means to us, what promise that has for us, and how that promise adorns our own lives, as a visible decoration of light for the world to see.

(Ornaments are placed)

In John chapter one we are told: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.

Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

We light this tree this morning as a symbol of that light of hope, shining out into the community and world.

Benediction

As we journey forth this morning into a world filled with the ever busier bustling of the holiday season, let's take intentional time each day, quiet time, unplugged time, to reflect on how we were a light to others that day and how we can be a light in the darkness everyday, in all that we say and do. Amen.