



INCARNATION

REDISCOVERING THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CHRISTMAS

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HOPE

We will follow this section together in weekend worship (or we invite you to do this on your own if you are unable to join us for weekend worship).

Today begins the season of Advent—a season the Christian Church has marked for centuries in anticipation of Christ’s coming at Christmas. Advent is a word that literally means to arrive or to come and the season of Advent is an annual 4-week Christian journey of discipleship by remembrance we take leading to Christmas. We anticipate the gift of Christmas with hope-filled remembrance of Christ’s first coming in Bethlehem and hope-filled preparation for Christ’s second coming at the end of time when all will be set right and God’s Kingdom will come fully on earth, just as it is in heaven. We remember with hope-filled thanksgiving that God Incarnate has come to us in Bethlehem (Emmanuel—God with us); we live presently, daily opening our lives to Christ’s hope-filled redemption; and we work and live towards a hope-filled future, anticipating Christ culmination of time and the eternal reign of God’s Kingdom in its fulness.

“Today we light the first candle of the Advent wreath. This first candle represents HOPE.”

Romans 15:13:

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in faith so that you overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

Christmas Carol:

Come Thou Long Expected Jesus – UMH 196

Come, Thou long expected Jesus
Born to set Thy people free;
From our fears and sins release us,
Let us find our rest in Thee.
Israel’s strength and consolation,
Hope of all the earth Thou art;
Dear desire of every nation,
Joy of every longing heart.

Born Thy people to deliver,
Born a child and yet a King,
Born to reign in us forever,
Now Thy gracious kingdom bring.
By Thine own eternal Spirit
Rule in all our hearts alone;
By Thine all sufficient merit,
Raise us to Thy glorious throne.

We invite you to read this devotion and think about/discuss the questions in your home (perhaps during your next meal) following the worship service.

“For Christians, hope is ultimately hope in Christ. The hope that he really is what for centuries we have been claiming he is. The hope that despite the fact that sin and death still rule the world, he somehow conquered them. The hope that in him and through him all of us stand a chance of somehow conquering them too. The hope that at some unforeseeable time and in some unimaginable way he will return with healing in his wings.

No one in the New Testament calls a spade a spade as unflinchingly as Saint Paul. ‘If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile,’ he wrote to the Corinthians. ‘If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied’ (1 Corinthians 15:17, 19). That is the possibility in spite of which Saint Paul and the rest of us go on hoping even so.”

“[Jesus died on the cross], and what emerged from his death was a kind of way, of truth, of life, without which the last two thousand years of human history would be even more tragic than they are. A six-pointed star, a crescent moon, a lotus—the symbols of other religions suggest beauty and light. The symbol of Christianity is an instrument of death. It suggests, at the very least, hope.” (Excerpted from Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker’s ABC*. HarperSanFrancisco, 1993, pp. 21, 46-47.)

Reflect or Discuss:

1. What fun things (items or experiences) do you hope for this Christmas?
2. What do you hope for in the coming year?
3. What impact do you hope your life can make on our world?
4. What did you hear in the sermon that helps you think more deeply about hope?
5. What did you hear in the sermon that will help you live with a greater sense of hope?

Suggested Prayer: Lord Jesus, I like the idea of overflowing with hope, but many days, my reservoir gets awfully low. In this Advent season, keep me connected to your gift of hope. Amen.

PEACE

We will follow this section together in weekend worship (or we invite you to do this on your own if you are unable to join us for weekend worship).

Last week, we began the season of Advent by lighting the first candle – the candle of HOPE—remembering the hope born to us in Bethlehem. This week, we light the second candle – the candle of PEACE. God brings us peace as we personally and collectively open our lives to the Prince of Peace – Jesus the Christ.

The candles are lit.

Luke 1:78-79

“Because of our God’s deep compassion, the dawn from heaven will break upon us, to give light to those who are sitting in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide us on the path of peace.”

Christmas Carol:

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel – UMH 211

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

We invite you to read this devotion and think about/discuss the questions in your home (perhaps during your next meal) following the worship service.

"Peace has come to mean the time when there aren't any wars or even when there aren't any major wars. Beggars can't be choosers; we'd most of us settle for that. But in Hebrew peace, shalom, means fullness, means having everything you need to be wholly and happily yourself.

One of the titles by which Jesus is known is Prince of Peace, and he used the word himself in what seem at first glance to be two radically contradictory utterances. On one occasion he said to the disciples, 'Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.' (Matthew 10:34) And later on, the last time they ate together, he said to them, 'Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you' (John 14:27).

The contradiction is resolved when you realize that for Jesus peace seems to have meant not the absence of struggle but the presence of love." (From Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC*. HarperSanFrancisco, 1993, p. 63.)

Reflect or Discuss:

1. Recall (and share, if possible) a time when you felt deeply at peace. What factors gave you that peace?
2. What are the things that most rob you of peace?
3. In what ways can the hope we focused on with the first candle of Advent be a force God uses to give you greater peace now?
4. What did you hear in the sermon that helps you think more deeply about peace?
5. What did you hear in the sermon that will help you live with a greater sense of peace?

Suggested Prayer: Lord Jesus, when you grew up, you modeled a life of peace and trust. Help me to keep reordering my life, finding my peace in your purposes rather than losing it in my fears. Amen.

JOY

We will follow this section together in weekend worship (or we invite you to do this on your own if you are unable to join us for weekend worship).

We continue in this season of Advent anticipating Christ's coming to us as Christmas. The first week we lit the candle of HOPE and last week we lit the candle of PEACE. Today we light the candle of JOY.... remembering that we experience the joy of fulfillment and purpose we were created for as we daily live receiving and following the Christ born in Bethlehem.

The candles are lit.

Luke 2:8-11:

"Nearby shepherds were living in the fields, guarding their sheep at night. The Lord's angel stood before them, the Lord's glory shone around them, and they were terrified. The angel said, 'Don't be afraid! Look! I bring good news to you—wonderful, joyous news for all people. Your savior is born today in David's city. He is Christ the Lord.'"The Lord's angel stood before them, the Lord's glory shone around them, and they were terrified. The angel said, 'Don't be afraid! Look! I bring good news to you—wonderful, joyous news for all people. Your savior is born today in David's city. He is Christ the Lord.'"

Christmas Carol:

O Come All Ye Faithful – UMH 234

O come all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant,
O come ye, O come ye, to Bethlehem.
Come and behold him, born the King of angels;

Refrain:

O come let us adore him, O come let us adore him,
O come let us adore him, Christ the Lord.
Sing, choirs of angels, sing in exultation;
O sing, all ye citizens of heaven above!
Glory to God, all glory in the highest;

(Refrain)

We invite you to read this devotion and think about/discuss the questions in your home (perhaps during your next meal) following the worship service.

"In the Gospel of John, Jesus sums up pretty much everything by saying, 'These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full' (John 15:11). He said it at the supper that he knew was the last one he'd...eat.

Happiness turns up more or less where you'd expect it to—a good marriage, a rewarding job, a pleasant vacation. Joy, on the other hand, is as notoriously unpredictable as the one who bequeaths it." (From Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC*. HarperSanFrancisco, 1993, pp. 57-58.)

"Sarah was never going to see ninety again, and Abraham had already hit one hundred, and when the angel told them that the stork was on its way at last, they both of them almost collapsed. Abraham laughed "till he fell on his face" (Genesis 17:17), and Sarah stood cackling behind the tent door so the angel wouldn't think she was being rude as the tears streamed down her cheeks. When the baby finally came, they even called him "Laughter"—which is what Isaac means in Hebrew—because obviously no other name would do....Sarah and her husband had had plenty of hard knocks in their time, and there were plenty more of them still to come, but at that moment when the angel told them they'd better start dipping into their old-age pensions for cash to build a nursery, the reason they laughed was that it suddenly dawned on them that the wildest dreams they'd ever had hadn't been half wild enough." (Excerpted from Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who's Who*. HarperSanFrancisco, 1979, pp. 172-173.)

Reflect or Discuss:

1. Recall (and share, if possible) a time when you felt almost ridiculously joyful. What made that time so joyful?
2. What are the things that most take away your joy in life?
3. How can the child born at Christmas give you a joy that runs deeper and more durably than just the outward circumstances that create happiness?
4. What did you hear in the sermon that helps you think more deeply about joy?
5. What did you hear in the sermon that will help you live with a greater sense of joy?

Suggested Prayer: Lord Jesus, what you began at Christmas is still going on around me and within me. Let your joy anchor me in hard times, and overflow from me to others at all times. Amen.

LOVE

We will follow this section together in weekend worship (or we invite you to do this on your own if you are unable to join us for weekend worship).

We come now to the 4th week of Advent—having lit on the first weekend the Candle of Hope, the second week the Candle of Peace, and then last week the Candle of Joy—today we light the Candle of Love---- Remembering that God’s unconditional love has come to each one of us in Jesus Christ; and Christ calls us to live this love towards all others.

The candles are lit.

John 13:34

“Jesus said to them, I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Christmas Carol:

Hark! The Herald Angels Sing – UMH 240

Hark! the herald angels sing,
“Glory to the new born King,
peace on earth, and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled!”
Joyful, all ye nations rise,
join the triumph of the skies;
with th’ angelic host proclaim,
“Christ is born in Bethlehem!”
Hark! the herald angels sing,
“Glory to the new born King!”

Christ, by highest heaven adored;
Christ, the everlasting Lord;
late in time behold him come,
offspring of a virgin’s womb.
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see;
hail th’ incarnate Deity,

pleased with us in flesh to dwell,
Jesus, our Emmanuel.
Hark! the herald angels sing,
“Glory to the new born King!”
Hail the heaven-born Prince of
Peace!
Hail the Sun of Righteousness!
Light and life to all he brings,
risen with healing in his wings.
Mild he lays his glory by,
born that we no more may die,
born to raise us from the earth,
born to give us second birth.
Hark! the herald angels sing,
“Glory to the new born King!”

We invite you to read this devotion and think about/discuss the questions in your home (perhaps during your next meal) following the worship service.

“The unabashed eros of lovers, the sympathetic philia of friends, agape giving itself away freely no less for the murderer than for his victim (the King James version translates it as charity)—these are all varied manifestations of a single reality. To lose yourself in another’s arms, or in another’s company, or in suffering for all men who suffer, including the ones who inflict suffering upon you—to lose yourself in such ways is to find yourself. Is what it’s all about. Is what love is.

Of all powers, love is the most powerful and the most powerless. It is the most powerful because it alone can conquer that final and most impregnable stronghold which is the human heart. It is the most powerless because it can do nothing except by consent....

In the Christian sense, love is not primarily an emotion but an act of the will....in Jesus’ terms, we can love our neighbors without necessarily liking them. In fact liking them may stand in the way of loving them by making us overprotective sentimentalists instead of reasonably honest friends.

When Jesus talked to the Pharisees, he didn’t say, ‘There, there. Everything’s going to be all right.’ He said, ‘You brood of vipers! How can you speak good when you are evil?’ (Matthew 12:34) And he said that to them because he loved them.

That doesn’t mean that liking may not be part of loving, only that it doesn’t have to be.” (Excerpted from Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker’s ABC*. HarperSanFrancisco, 1993, pp. 64-65.)

Reflect or Discuss:

1. What’s the most touching, beautiful human love story you have ever seen or heard about?
2. In what ways have people made it harder for you to believe in God’s love? In what ways have they brightened your life with God’s love?
3. How does the Christmas story about the God of the universe choosing to be born as a poor child in a manger, to live, die and rise again for your sake, speak to you about the depths of God’s love for you?
4. What did you hear in the sermon that helps you think more deeply about love?
5. What did you hear in the sermon that will help you live with a greater sense of love?

Suggested Prayer: Lord Jesus, this day, this week, this holy season is a gift of love from you. Grant me the insight to keep learning about and exploring how deeply you love me and my world. Amen.

LIGHT

We will follow this section together in Christmas Eve worship (or we invite you to do this on your own if you are unable to join us).

Today, we complete our Advent journey of anticipation and remembrance by lighting the Christ Candle. Having lit on the first weekend the Candle of Hope, the second week the Candle of Peace, the third week the Candle of Joy, and then last week the Candle of Love—today we remember the redeeming life and light of Incarnation—the gift of Emmanuel. As we light each of the Candles, culminating with the Christ Candle, let us always remember the Hope, Peace, Joy and Love that is our because God is with Us.

The candles are lit.

Isaiah 9:2, 6-7

“The people walking in darkness have seen a great light. On those living in a pitch-dark land, light has dawned....A child is born to us, a son is given to us, and authority will be on his shoulders. He will be named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. There will be vast authority and endless peace for David’s throne and for his kingdom, establishing and sustaining it with justice and righteousness now and forever.”

We invite you to read this devotion and think about/discuss the questions in your home (perhaps during your next meal) following Christmas Eve Worship.

"We are also, God knows, a people who walk in darkness. There seems little need to explain....But the prophecy of Isaiah is that into this darkness a great light will shine, and of course the proclamation of the Gospel, especially the wild and joy-drunk proclamation of Christmas, is that into this darkness there has already shone a light to dazzle the world...."

When that child was born the whole course of history was changed. That is a fact as hard and blunt as any fact. Art, music, literature, our culture itself, our political institutions, our whole understanding of ourselves and our world—it is impossible to conceive of how differently world history would have developed if that child had not been born. And in terms of faith, much more must be said because for faith, the birth of the child into the darkness of the world made possible not just a new way of understanding life but a new way of living life....

All the way down the twenty centuries since that child was born, there have been countless different kinds of people who in countless different kinds of ways have been filled with his spirit, who have been grasped by him, caught up into his life, who have found themselves in deep and private ways healed and transformed by their relationships with him, so much so that they simply have no choice but to go on proclaiming what the writers of the Gospels first proclaimed: that he was indeed the long-expected one, the Christ, Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace....that in this child, in the man he grew up to be, there is the power of God to bring light into our darkness, to make us whole, to give a new kind of life to anybody who turns toward him in faith, even to such as you and me." (Excerpted from Frederick Buechner, *The Hungering Dark*. HarperSanFrancisco, 1969, pp. 50-54.)

Reflect or Discuss:

1. How has the child born at Christmas brought light into your darkness or made you whole?
2. Suppose Jesus had chosen not to be born, to become a part of our world's history. In what big ways do you think our world might be different?
3. For many people, 2020 has seemed to be a year of particular darkness. In what ways can the light of Christmas shine brightly into even the final days of a dark year?
4. What did you hear in the sermon that makes you think more deeply about light?
5. What did you hear in the sermon that will help you live with a greater sense of being and sharing God's light?

Suggested Prayer: Lord Jesus, you didn't have to go online to find a Christmas gift for me. You gave yourself, shining the life-giving light of your love and grace into my life, and you keep doing it. I want to give you the gift of myself in return this Christmas. Amen.



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