

November 28, 2021  
First Sunday in Advent

Prelude

Lighting the Candle of Hope

Steve and Karen Gold

\*Hymn 82 Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus

Prayer of Confession

**God of the future, you are coming in power to bring all nations under your rule. We confess that we have not expected your kingdom, for we live causal lives, ignoring your promised judgment. We accept lies as truth, exploit neighbors, abuse the earth, and refuse your justice and peace. In your mercy, forgive us. Grant us wisdom to welcome your way, and to seek things that will endure when Christ comes to judge the world.**

Hymn 698 Take, O Take Me As I Am

Assurance of Pardon

Surely God is our salvation, we will trust in God and not be afraid, for the Lord God is our Strength and Might. Shout aloud and sing for joy...for great in our midst is the Holy One of Zion, and he will save the people from their sins. Know you are forgiven and be at peace.

Old Testament Reading Jeremiah 33: 14-16

Time With Our Young Disciples

Gospel Reading Luke 1:1-4, 26-38

The Morning Message

The days are getting shorter and darkness comes earlier now as we approach winter. I'm not especially fond of it. I'd like to stay on daylight Savings Time year-round.

When I was in junior high and high school, I left home for the bus stop at 6:30 in the morning. It was always dark and, in the winter, cold, and I hated it. It made me sad and sometimes scared, especially if I had to walk alone.

After school, the kids in my neighborhood were the last be dropped off. At four o'clock in the wintertime, the sky was already gray, like the earth was trying to light herself with a dull bulb. Everything seemed dreary and lifeless. It made me sad. I longed for light.

Today we know there is a real condition called “Seasonal Affective Disorder,” which tells us that some people react poorly to the decrease of natural light that winter brings. It can lead to depression. Thankfully, many can be treated simply by increasing the amount of light he or she is exposed to. That can be done by adding lamps to the home, and in extreme cases, by moving to a location where the sun shines longer each day.

Today, on this first Sunday of Advent, we light one candle. We will add to that for the next three weeks. The light will grow brighter and brighter as we approach the birth of Jesus.

One candle doesn’t produce much light, does it? One candle in a dark room hardly makes a difference. I’ve tried reading by candlelight. It’s not easy.

But, think about this...a candle, even a small one, can be a strong symbol of waiting and watching in hope through the dark times.

We know about dark times, don’t we?

Several years ago, a large group of newly-graduated high school students flocked to Florida to have a last hurrah before they went their separate ways.

On their way home, a van-full of boys had an accident. Two of the four died as a result. They were known to us, and the survivors were known to us, and we grieved along with their families and friends. Young people grieve very deeply and they often look for a suitable tribute for those who died. A candle-light gathering was planned and our church provided the candles, the same ones we use on Christmas Eve. We were glad to do it. We hoped that one small gesture would comfort them.

When the first year anniversary of the accident drew near, one of the mothers asked if they could borrow our candles again. Of course they could. I know the candle-light gathering had a different tone the second time around. Time and distance had helped to heal the pain of tragic loss. The young people were beginning to see around the corner of grief and catch a glimpse of their promising futures. The faithful among them had started accepting the order of things, that, birth, death and life eternal, was God’s intention for all of us. Christians are not left without hope. We believe that to be absent in the body is to be present with the Lord. That is Scripture’s promise.

This text is about the promise of Christ’s eventual return. Can you hear its serious and warning tone? Even so, we do not tremble or quake at his appearing. We watch and wait as people of promise. Here we have Jesus speaking to his disciples, and at the heart of this apocalyptic writing, is the promise, that when he comes, he will gather his people from the four winds, from one end of heaven to another.

Another issue that this text raises for us is the unexpectedness of the events Jesus mentions. No one knows the day of his coming- not prophets, nor the angels, nor televangelists, not even Jesus, God's Son, knows when that will be.

To experience the unexpected is a fact of life. Stuff happens. Some terrible things, like a miscarriage, a job loss, the torment of an addiction.

So, we do things to avoid disaster, like plan carefully for that rainy day and carry a good life insurance policy. We don't build our homes where a thousand year flood happens every ten years. We take vitamins, and get regular check ups and get our Covid shots and install smoke detectors.

But, when our whole life revolves around avoiding fear, danger, disappointment, failure, or loss, something dies within us. We don't live as fully as we could, maybe not even as fully as God planned for us.

How is that? Ed had a student who he says is tremendously talented. She plays a couple of instruments and plays them beautifully. She is a tip-top of the class student. She is more mature than most. But, she misses nearly all the extra opportunities that school provides. Field trips are usually out. Staying away from home for even one night is unthinkable to her parents. Friends, that's a lot of anxiety, a lot of fear, and a terrible, unfair burden to heap upon any child.

I've learned some really important things from people who have endured great loss in their lives. Some years after his wife's death, a church member told me he was enjoying a relationship with one of his female neighbors. It was easy to see that he was happier and he credited this lovely woman for that.

"You know Cinda," he said, "when older people like me say they couldn't possibly find love at our age, or they're just not interested, they are trying to protect themselves. If you love again, you will one day suffer grief and loss again. And no one wants that. But, to love again, is a profound joy. It shouldn't be missed. It is not to be feared."

What is it we fear most? We could each make a list of fearful things and we when get to the end, remind ourselves that scripture says perfect love casts out fear. And, we may not yet love perfectly, but Jesus does. And Jesus has promised that he will gather each and every one of us up and hold us close to him. He will not forget, abandon or leave us on our own.

What might we risk in this season and the year ahead? Can we trust God enough to know that even if new and daring ventures might result in disappointment or loss, we can learn from those

experiences, too, and receive more deeply the healing presence of the one who came to us as a babe in Bethlehem and will come again?

As the days grow shorter and the darkness lasts longer, we light Advent candles each week to remind us that we do not face the darkness alone, but we have the Light of the World beside us.

When our grandson was two, he discovered flashlights. He entertained himself and all of us by shining his light into the dark corners, closets, cabinets, and other dark places in our house. Briar would shine his light into the darkness and discover what was waiting there.

Seeing things thru his eyes was quite enchanting. Sometimes the flashlight would reveal a penny, sometimes, a tortilla chip. Or a dead bug. Once it found a miniature Santa Claus, and many times, just showed dust bunnies.

But, in every case, it brought a simple, unpretentious joy. As in, "Oh...a toothpick!"

Pray with me...

Lord God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us, thru Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

\*Affirmation of Faith      The Apostles' Creed   p. 35

\*Hymn 581                      Gloria Patri

Presenting Our Tithes and Offerings

Prayer of Dedication

Holy One, in this season, we wait in hope.

and we give in hope:

hope for your coming reign,

hope of your presence with us even now.

Receive our gifts, that they may be used to bring hope to our community and beyond. Amen.

\*Hymn 92                      While We Are Waiting, Come

\*Blessing

Go now, and let the Lord steer you in the way of truth.

Be on your guard so that you will not be caught up in the anxieties of the world.

Be alert at all times and pray for strength to escape the traps

that would keep you from God.

\*Postlude