December 3, 2023

**First Sunday of Advent (Year B)**

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

Where Are You, God?

This is the first Sunday of Advent, the season when we set time aside to express the human longing for God to be right here with us. There are many moods in this season. Some of us are too busy and some of us are too lonely. Some of us take joy in all that there is, some of us grieve all that is lost. Some of us find comfort in the same story told a new way each year, some of us just want to hurry along to the turning of the year. Some of us find deep peace in the rituals of this season, and some of us feel very anxious. And many of us feel all these things! On each of our Advent Sundays, we are invited to sink deeply into our spiritual lives with a time of devotion and contemplation, knowing that God meets us exactly where we are - busy and lonely, joyful and grieving, comfortable and hurried, peaceful and anxious.

*Give us life, and we will call on your name. / Restore us, O God:*

*Let your face shine, that we may be saved. Psalm 80:18b-19*

First, read the focus scripture for this day.

Read it again, more slowly, perhaps even out loud.

Now read it a third time.

What are the questions or images that come to mind?
Here are some to get you started. You may have others.

-With one voice, the people call for life, meaning that they have felt in some way dead or numb to the world and to God. Have you or your community ever felt far from God or God’s purpose for you? What was that like? Remember that people in all times and places have had seasons of feeling far from God, but that did not stop them from seeking God’s face.

-The people cry out to be restored, brought back to life. What would it look like to be restored or renewed? What is your most audacious hope for the future of yourself or your faith community? Make it your intention, in these next weeks until the coming of the Christ Child, to imagine without limits all the good that God has in store for you.

-The people ask for God’s face to shine upon them. Remember now a time that you felt God’s presence very close and near. Where were you? What did it look, sound, smell like? Who were you with? It might be a time and place very far away; it might be the place where you are right now. Allow yourself to bask in the warmth of God’s close companionship.

-The people ask to be saved. Some traditions proclaim the idea of being “saved” more than others. Does the notion of being saved resonate with your spirituality? Why or why not? Is there another word you would use in place of this one?

End your time with this prayer: *God, sometimes we are too busy to find you. Sometimes we are lonely, and you feel far away. Wherever we are, come near to us we pray. Amen.*

December 10, 2023

**Second Sunday of Advent**

Isaiah 40:1-11

Messengers of Hope

This is the second Sunday of Advent, the season when we set time aside to express the human longing for God to be right here with us. There are many moods in this season. Some of us are too busy and some of us are too lonely. Some of us take joy in all that there is, some of us grieve all that is lost. Some of us find comfort in the same story told a new way each year, some of us just want to hurry along to the turning of the year. Some of us find deep peace in the rituals of this season, and some of us feel very anxious. And many of us feel all these things! On each of our Advent Sundays, we are invited to sink deeply into our spiritual lives with a time of devotion and contemplation, knowing that God meets us exactly where we are - busy and lonely, joyful and grieving, comfortable and hurried, peaceful and anxious.

*Comfort, comfort O my people, says your God.**A voice cries out: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Isaiah 40:1, 3-4*

First, read the focus scripture for this day.

Read it again, more slowly, perhaps even out loud.

Now read it a third time.

What are the questions or images that come to mind?

Here are some to get you started. You may have others.

Last week, we sat with the Israelite people in the discomfort that comes from feeling far from God. Today, we take comfort in the now, and in God’s presence with us. When have you felt truly comforted by God or God’s presence? Compare this to other times you felt God with you. How was that feeling of *comfort* unique?

These words are often sung as part of Christmas cantatas or presentations. Do these words bring to mind a tune for you? If not, what other songs of Christmas can you bring to mind? Why is it important to invoke God’s presence with song at this time of year?

In this scripture, A Voice calls for all of us to make ready for God to come. The scripture advises the listener to make a path where no path has been made before and where there are rough places, to make them smooth. Is there a place in your spiritual life where you have not ventured before? What would it be like to make a new path through that uncharted territory? Or, alternatively, is there a rough place in your life? A meanness, an addiction, an old hurt? What would it be like to begin to smooth out that part of your heart or mind?

End your time of meditation with this prayer: *Comforting One, wrap us in your compassion and warmth. Cover us now and always with the certainty of your healing presence. In your Holy Name we pray. Amen.*

December 17, 2023

**Third Sunday of Advent**

Psalm 126

Shouts of Joy

This is the third Sunday of Advent, the season when we set time aside to express the human longing for God to be right here with us. There are many moods in this season. Some of us are too busy and some of us are too lonely. Some of us take joy in all that there is, some of us grieve all that is lost. Some of us find comfort in the same story told a new way each year, some of us just want to hurry along to the turning of the year. Some of us find deep peace in the rituals of this season, and some of us feel very anxious. And many of us feel all these things! On each of our Advent Sundays, we are invited to sink deeply into our spiritual lives with a time of devotion and contemplation, knowing that God meets us exactly where we are - busy and lonely, joyful and grieving, comfortable and hurried, peaceful and anxious.

*1When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,
   we were like those who dream.
2Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
   and our tongue with shouts of joy;
then it was said among the nations,
   ‘The Lord has done great things for them.’
3The Lord has done great things for us,
   and we rejoiced.*

First, read the focus scripture for this day.

Read it again, more slowly, perhaps even out loud.

Now read it a third time.

What are the questions or images that come to mind?

Here are some to get you started. You may have others.

In the first week of Advent, we searched for a God who seemed to be lost. In the second week, we took comfort in finding our way to God at last. Now, in the third week, we lift up our voices in praise. What is your favorite way to express praise to God? Do you praise in quiet prayer or in direct action? Alone or with a group? Does your praise flow silently or through song and word?

How much time each week does your faith community spend in praising God? Do you express praise in worship? In meetings? In emails or newsletters? Do you believe that your faith community should spend more or less time in praising God?

End your time of meditation with this prayer: *I praise you, Holy One. And as I do, I breathe in your goodness. We praise you, Holy One. And as we do, we rejoice in all the ways you have been gracious to our community. In your amazing name we pray. Amen.*

December 24, 2023

**Christmas Eve (Fourth Sunday of Advent)**

Luke 1:26-38

Birthing a Promise

*Christmas Fund Offering*

This is the fourth Sunday of Advent, the season when we set time aside to express the human longing for God to be right here with us. There are many moods in this season. Some of us are too busy and some of us are too lonely. Some of us take joy in all that there is, some of us grieve all that is lost. Some of us find comfort in the same story told a new way each year, some of us just want to hurry along to the turning of the year. Some of us find deep peace in the rituals of this season, and some of us feel very anxious. And many of us feel all these things! On each of our Advent Sundays, we are invited to sink deeply into our spiritual lives with a time of devotion and contemplation, knowing that God meets us exactly where we are - busy and lonely, joyful and grieving, comfortable and hurried, peaceful and anxious.

*The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” Luke 1:30-33*

First, read the focus scripture for this day.

Read it again, more slowly, perhaps even out loud.

Now read it a third time.

What are the questions or images that come to mind?

Here are some to get you started. You may have others.

-During the Advent season, we have expressed longing for God, found comfort in God’s presence and praised God for all the good we have received. Now we open our arms to embrace the Christ Child. Which of these moods of Advent are you feeling now? Or are you experiencing another mood altogether?

-What are some of your Christmas Eve traditions of the past? How are those traditions like or unlike how you will spend this Christmas Eve? How do those traditions help you draw close to the Child? Are there some traditions which need to shift or change?

-A big word for the coming of the Christ Child is *incarnation*. Spend some time with this word and this idea. How is incarnation confusing or uncertain for you? How is incarnation real or profound for you?

-If you are intentional about it, the season of Advent can help you get closer to God and deepen your spiritual life. Do you have ideas about how you might continue this intention beyond Christmas Day? What will help you live into that intention?

End your time of meditation with this prayer: *Incarnate One, We long to be with you because you long to be with us. Your longing brings us the gift of the Christ Child. Help us to respond with a gift worthy of that gift, today and all days. Amen.*

December 31, 2023

**First Sunday after Christmas**

Luke 2:22-40

Long-Awaited Gift

In today’s scripture, the elder (Simeon) meets the infant (Christ Jesus). The image of the old person - wrinkled with the passing of their days and sporting a long, white beard - meeting the new baby - smooth and innocent - has been adapted in the secular world as a fitting image for the passing of the year. As we say goodbye to the old and usher in the new, what rituals do you practice to deepen and enrich your experience of the passing of time? Here are a few ideas. Maybe you have others.

**Star Words**

It is not known where the tradition of Star Words began, but this tradition is growing year by year among many congregations. In this tradition, words of intention, challenges to grow or spiritual gifts are written on paper stars. Then, each member of the group draws one star to guide them into the new year. Like the Wise Magi who followed the star in the sky to the Christ Child, pray that your word will lead you through the year until you more fully discover Christ’s purpose for you.

**Watchwords**

A watchword is like a star word, except instead of a single word, a passage of scripture is written on each paper. If you choose this one, get curious about the scripture you are given. What words or phrases stick with you? Read it over several times. You may want to find it in the Bible and read it in context. Make this scripture part of your prayer life by praying it every day for a whole year. How does the watchword change as you live with it? How does it change you?

**Letting Go of the Past**

The new year is a good time to release what is no longer serving you from the past. Set aside some time to take stock of the past year. What were you doing when you felt God’s presence and blessings most strongly? After you have written these thoughts down, ask God to bless what has happened in the past and to bless you in helping to release it. You may want to burn or bury the paper as a symbol of cleansing.

**Set an Intention of Gratitude**

As you step into the New Year, set an intention to express gratitude more often. Maybe you want to list three things you are grateful for before you go to sleep at night. Maybe you would like to wake up with the intention to express gratitude throughout the day. Maybe you want to be more aware of moments through the day when you feel grateful and express those in the moment.

However you prepare for the New Year, be gentle with yourself and choose one you will enjoy. You will be more likely to keep it up, and the practice will be more impactful that way.

January 7, 2024

**The Baptism of Christ (First Sunday after Epiphany)**

Mark 1:4-11

Defining Moments

“Every time you listen with great attentiveness to the voice that calls you the Beloved, you will discover within yourself a desire to hear that voice longer and more deeply. It is like discovering a well in the desert. Once you have touched wet ground, you want to dig deeper.” -*Henri Nouwen, Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World.*

A Dutch priest interested in the intersection of theology and psychology, Henri Nouwen was born in January 1932 and moved to the United States in the early 1960s. In the 1970s and into the 1980s, he taught at Yale and Harvard where many progressive seminary students received their education in those years. Nouwen’s teaching about the human need for connection with God and one another, and the necessity for creating peace in individuals as well as in communities and the world, was influential to a generation of pastors, many of whom went on to serve at United Church of Christ churches.

Nouwen was deeply moved by the work of L’Arch communities, which are Christian communities formed of people both with and without developmental disabilities, and at the end of his life he left his relatively prestigious and well-paying career to live in a L’Arch community himself.

Nouwen wrote widely about this life and experience. But although he never spoke publicly about this, Nouwen revealed in his letters and in conversations with friends that he knew he was gay. Because of his generation and circumstances, the reality of Nouwen being closeted caused him pain and loneliness. And yet, his writings about the importance of creating beloved community taught countless student pastors who went on to lead movements to create Open and Affirming United Church of Christ congregations, which welcome all.

It is likely that the church where you are worshiping today was at one time led by a pastor who was taught by Henri Nouwen, who passed away in 1996. He was never able to live openly as full self, and for that this generation may grieve. Yet, his life opened doors for countless others and the impact of his teaching is still being felt today and for that, all who were touched by his life can rejoice.

January 14, 2024

**Second Sunday after Epiphany**

Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18

Known and Loved

“In a real sense all life is inter-related. All men are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be...

This is the inter-related structure of reality.” - Martin Luther King, Jr., *Letter from Birmingham Jail*

This week includes Martin Luther King, Jr. Day. The day will be celebrated in many secular settings like schools and businesses. It’s also important to honor this day in church, as we celebrate King’s call to ministry and the church and faith that formed his thought and action.

In the above short quote from King’s classic and powerful, *Letter from Birmingham Jail,* he takes his fellow pastors to task for their unwillingness to advocate on behalf of the civil rights movement. He asks them to imagine what would be possible if Christians spoke with one voice against injustice and hatred.

That same impulse is behind the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, which began more than a century ago when friends corresponded about their longing for unity across the lines that too often divide those who profess to follow the same Christ. One of the friends suggested a day to pray for unity and the other responded that it would be even more powerful to expand that day to an “octave” or eight holy days. The original octave was founded by two Episcopalians, Father Paul, and Mother Lurana. During this week, all Christians are called to reflect on scriptures, pray for unity within the faith and participate in communal services together.

From Martin Luther King, Jr. in the American South, to Mother Lurana in the British countryside, listen! Can you hear the voices of our ancestors in faith? They are calling, commanding us to pray, move and act together for peace.

January 21, 2024

**Third Sunday after Epiphany**

Mark 1:14-20

Follow Me

*Ecumenical Sunday*

In today’s reading, Jesus calls the disciples to follow him not only to a new line of work (fishing for people instead of fish) but also to a whole new way of life. Centuries later, those who are called to ministry also find themselves not just in a job, but in a vocation or way of living. Helping to navigate the sometimes complicated waters of this vocation is the MESA team of the United Church of Christ’s National Offices.

According to their website,\*

“Within the United Church of Christ, the *Ministerial Excellence, Support and Authorization team (MESA)*, supports the critical implementation of denominational polity for authorized ministry, especially equipping the Committees on Ministry that determine authorization of those persons who hold or are pursuing ministerial standing.

In other words (to make metaphorical use of “mesa”), the Ministerial Excellence, Support and Authorization team serves as host at the table that is ministry in the United Church of Christ. Gathered at the table are authorized ministers, calling bodies, Associations, Conferences, and Committees on Ministry, to which the MESA team offers support and resources for faithful and effective ministry. Additionally, MESA’s role as host includes the encouragement of ongoing conversation regarding issues of ministry in the 21st century. The MESA team works in a collaborative model to meet the needs of those at the table.”

All settings in the United Church of Christ, speak to and with each other, rather than for each other. MESA is one of those settings that is ready to be in conversation with you. Maybe, like those first disciples, you hear Christ calling you too. Maybe, like those first disciples, you are ready to change your life as well as your vocation. Maybe, you just have a question or an idea about ministry. Whatever the case, pull up a chair at the table and begin or continue the conversation with MESA today.

\*https://www.ucc.org/what-we-do/justice-local-church-ministries/local-church/mesa-ministerial-excellence-support-and-authorization/

January 28, 2024

**Fourth Sunday after Epiphany**

Mark 1:21-28

Power to Do

*Health and Human Service Sunday*

In the story today, Jesus casts out an unclean spirit in the temple. As he gazes with love on the broken person in front of him, Jesus thinks only of how that person could be healed. He is not concerned about distracting others from the way things “should be” or making a mess in that holy space. Jesus only lovingly wants to act in ways that bring wholeness where there is brokenness, health where there is illness, community where there is isolation.

Today is Health and Human Service Sunday when we honor the work of the United Church of Christ’s The Council for Health and Human Service Ministry (CHHSM).

Last year CHHSM’s annual meeting was held in Denver, which gave Archway Homes a chance to showcase the work they have been doing in Colorado for fifty years.

“Since its founding in 1974, Archway Communities, initially established as Mountain United Church Housing, became Rocky Mountain HDC in 1995 and is now Archway Communities, has remained steadfast to its commitment to provide service-enriched affordable housing for very low-to-moderate income families in the Denver Metro region and Colorado Springs.

With 8 properties in the Denver metro and Colorado Springs (and two more in development!), we have been developing affordable housing communities, expertly managing properties, and providing essential supportive services to individuals and families for almost 50 years.

By integrating housing and supportive services, Archway Communities is helping 1,516 residents improve economically and socially. We are a faith-based non-profit that is affiliated with the United Church of Christ.

Archway wishes to create communities of dignity and respect for families, neighbors and staff.

Creating community requires a commitment to seeing the humanity and interconnectedness of all that we do.

It requires a willingness to step up with courage and decency, to do the hard tasks, and the ability to celebrate each triumph joyfully.”

Find out more at Archway’s website: https://www.archwaycommunities.org/mission/.

What are the health and human service organizations in your area? How can you celebrate and support them?

February 4, 2024

**Fifth Sunday after Epiphany**

Mark 1:29-39

Source of Strength

In today’s story, a woman is healed by Jesus and then serves a meal to him and his disciples. It was a simple act but a profound one that was recognized and remembered and the server’s story was told and retold for generations to come.

On this first Sunday of the month, many congregations will celebrate communion. Who serves communion in your congregation? Do you recognize and remember those who serve in the church in this special way? One church community recognizes their communion servers with these words of blessing and gratitude.

Might your community do something similar?

**Pastor**: Recognizing that the Spirit falls on all, we rejoice that these people have been called out of our community to serve in this way. They are our communion servers.

**Servers**: It is a blessing to serve the community in this way. As we serve the elements, we look for the face of Christ in each of you, and we ask God’s help, that you might see the face of Christ in each of us.

**Congregation**: We thank you for this service to our family of faith. As we share communion with each other, we remember, through your leadership, Our Lord Jesus Christ. We rejoice that Christ came to us as Jesus to live, to die and to rise again; we celebrate that Christ lives with us still; and we look forward to the time when all will be gathered at the table of plenty.

**Pastor**: Grateful for the service of these among us, let us enter into a time of prayer together:

**All**: (prayer) Holy One, Bless these, our communion servers, as you bless each of us in the ministry to which we have been called. Thank you for your Spirit, poured out so abundantly on each of us. Create in each one of us a pure heart and a true intention to serve, however you have called us. In your name we pray. Amen.

February 11, 2024

**Transfiguration**

Mark 9:2-9

Compassionate Community

*Racial Justice Sunday*

*Science and Technology Sunday*

Today, as we recognize Racial Justice Sunday in the United Church of Christ, nearly four decades ago, the United Church of Christ was not just the first denomination, but the first organization of any kind to formally research and quantify the connection between racism and earth justice. The 1987 document, “*Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States: A National Report on the Racial and Socio-Economic Characteristics of Communities with Hazardous Waste Sites*”, states:

“In January 1986, two cross-sectional studies were initiated, utilizing appropriate statistical techniques, to determine the extent to which African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders, Native Americans and others are exposed to hazardous waste in their communities…. Much of the data in this report has never before been complied for public review. It is our hope that this information will be used by all persons committed to racial and environmental justice to challenge what we believe to be an insidious form of racism. We share a common definition with National Council of Church Racial Justice Working Group.”

*As you read the below definition of racism from 1987, consider if it still resonates today. What would you keep the same? What would you change?*

“Racism is racial prejudice plus power. Racism is the intentional or unintentional use of power to isolate, separate and exploit others. The use of power if based on a belief in superior racial origin, identity or supposed racial characteristics. Racism confers certain privileges on the dominant group, which in turn sustains and perpetuates racism. Both consciously and unconsciously, racism is enforced and maintained by the legal, culture, religious, educational, economic, political, environmental, and military institutions of societies. Racism is more than just a personal attitude; it is the institutionalized form of that attitude.

We realize that involvement in this type of research is a departure from our traditional protest methodology. However, if we are to advance our struggle in the future, it will depend largely on the availability of timely and reliable information. We believe this date should be utilized by federal, state, and municipal governments to prevent hazardous wastes from becoming an even greater national problem. No residential community, regardless of race, should be left defenseless in the midst of this mounting crisis.”

To read the report in its entirety, as you consider what has changed and what has yet to be transformed, navigate to: https://new.uccfiles.com/pdf/ToxicWastes&Race.pdf.

February 18, 2024

**First Sunday in Lent**

Psalm 25:1-10

God’s Loving Paths

The psalmist asserts that God is with them all the way along the path. Sometimes, it is not so clear to see God’s hand at work. To understand God’s movement in your life, it can be helpful to create a spiritual timeline. Why wait? Use this paper to begin creation of your spiritual timeline right now.

When was the first time you remember sensing God’s presence?

What names or images of God did you hold when you were younger that are different now?

List two or three times of illness, grief or despair when you experienced God with you.

List two or three times of gratitude or joy when you experienced God with you.

Looking back, was there a circumstance or common thread that is carried across all the memories you share here? Were you alone or with a group? Were you in a church building or in nature? Were you actively seeking God’s presence, or did the Divine intrude unexpectedly into everyday life?

What does this exercise reveal about the presence of God in your life? Up to now? In this present moment? Into the future?

February 25, 2024

**Second Sunday in Lent**

Psalm 22:23-31

Always Close

*Seminary Sunday*

*Church Vocations Sunday*

Psalm 22:30-31

*Posterity will serve him;*

 *future generations will be told about the Lord,*

*and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn,*

 *saying that he has done it.*

The psalmist is confident that those to come will be taught about the ways of God, and proclaims boldly that even generations yet to be born will know to praise the Divine One.

How confident are you and your congregation that “future generations will be told” about God? If your confidence is wavering, maybe now is the time to look around, to notice those who have gifts for leadership and ministry, and to lift them up. Maybe it’s time for your church to be a place that nurtures ministers.

Congregations who successfully call out gifts of ministry from among their members do so intentionally and prayerfully. Wondering how your congregation can nurture the call to ministry in young people? Here are some ideas to try.

1. Remember that the church needs a variety of kinds of leadership in the future. Maybe that tech genius who always helped you fix the projector in your confirmation class is called to ministry. Maybe the young person who is always ready to argue with authority figures or scripture is ready for ministry. Maybe the artist, whose bulletin doodles often echo the theme of worship, is ready for ministry.
2. Too often we see gifts in others and fail to recognize or celebrate them. Calling out what we see in others can help them see something new in themselves. If you think someone has a gift for ministry, say so!
3. Create an atmosphere where people can try and mess up and try again. Ministry has a steep learning curve, and giving lay people the chance to preach, to make pastoral calls and to stretch their skills in other ways can be the best preparation of all for those who are called to ministry.
4. Support those who are called to ministry spiritually and practically. Pray for and with them. And find ways to support those who are called to ministry materially as well, whether it's through gifts of money, books or just the occasional cup of coffee and listening ear.