December 4, 2022

**Second Sunday of Advent**

Isaiah 11:1-10

Vision of Peace

On this second Sunday of Advent, we welcome the prophet Isaiah into our midst. The Biblical prophets are not those who foretell the future. Instead, like all of the Biblical prophetic voices on record, Isaiah reveals what is hidden in this present moment. Because it is timeless, his writing is as potent and powerful on this first Sunday of December in the year 2022 as it was in the year that he first wrote them, about three thousand years ago.

Like his sister and brother prophets, the reality that Isaiah reveals brings difficult and joyful news together. So being willing to hear the prophets is really about being able to receive both Divine challenge and Holy comfort. That’s because the world as we know it, and the world as Mary and Joseph knew it as they began their journey to Bethlehem, and the world that Isaiah knew it as he put ink to papyrus may seem different, but really they are much the same.

Like Isaiah, like the Christ child’s parents, we also yearn for a time when the meek will receive equity and children will not experience the terror of violence as they make their innocent way in the world. Like them, it is our yearning that brings us to the hope of a Messiah, one to show us the way where our human imagination has come to an end. And so, we draw close to the manger, to the one who will bring us the comfort, as well as, the challenge that the prophets foretold.

As you hear the words of the prophet today, in all their joy and difficulty, take some time to reflect on these questions:

Who are the prophets - the ones who reveal truth, even if it is uncomfortable - in your own life? In the life of your church congregation?

What does your community do to respond to the yearning that Isaiah expresses and that so many feel for equity and justice? What could you do that you are not doing yet?

How does the coming arrival of the Christ child fill you with hope? What other responses might the arrival of the Messiah bring up for you?

December 11, 2022

**Third Sunday of Advent**

Luke 1:46b-55

Heartbeat of Justice

On this third Sunday of Advent, we hear the stirring words known as the Magnificat spoken by the mother of Jesus, Mary. Through her words, Mary paves the way for the ministry of Jesus. His life is a reflection of her teaching and vision as found in the song she sings today. Although Mary is such an important person in our faith story, there is but one United Church of Christ community that carries the name of Mary, St. Mary’s United Church of Christ in Westminster, Maryland. The origins of the name are lost to time, but the legacy of the name is a long one.

The area around Silver Run was settled predominantly by Germans who made their way across the Atlantic Ocean to Philadelphia and then south to the rich fertile land of this vicinity….There are still families in this congregation whose roots go back to these early residents of the Silver Run area in the mid 1700’s.

A union agreement between a Reformed and Lutheran congregation dated

31 May 1762 is the earliest contemporary record of the congregation. That document states clearly that a church was already standing, and that it was named Saint Mary's. Even the German documents from the eighteenth century are unanimous in calling the church Saint Mary's, and not *St. Maria* or *die Marienkirche*, German forms by which both Protestant and Catholic churches dedicated to the mother of Jesus are known.

The first church building in place by May of 1762 was most likely a log structure covered with clapboard siding and hardly to be distinguished on the outside from the modest first-generation residences of the area. Nearly sixty years later the cornerstone was placed on a new structure. Among Pennsylvania Germans a church was usually not consecrated until it was both finished and paid for. It was on this occasion that a name was given to the building. One pastor usually was given the honor of selecting the name and of announcing it as a surprise during the consecration ceremonies. Names thus selected did not always "take", however, and local nicknames could prevail instead. In the case of St. Mary's church, the name of the circa 1762 building was automatically applied to the new one.

Three hundred years later, the name still sticks.

Information adapted from: https://www.germanmarylanders.org/churches/st-marys-united-church-of-christ-silver-run

December 18, 2022

**Fourth Sunday of Advent**

Matthew 1:18-25

God With Us

According to the dictionary, the term incarnation means “a person who embodies in the flesh a deity, spirit, or abstract quality.” In Jesus, the Holy came to earth to live like us, to laugh like us, to mourn like us, and to love like us. In the simplest terms, the incarnation is the Divine coming to earth as a child, the infant Jesus, for the purpose of embodying concretely the abstract quality of love for one another.

Although only Jesus is the Incarnation with a capital I, Christ’s followers can continue to embody in the flesh and make real the abstract quality of love. It is one thing for us to say that they love one another. Demonstrating that love through acts of service and compassion truly incarnates the love that Christ came to demonstrate.

One way we as the United Church of Christ incarnate Christ’s love at this time of year is by contributing to the Christmas Fund (formerly called the Veterans of the Cross).

The Christmas Fund has been caring for active and retired clergy and lay employees of the United Church of Christ for over 100 years, providing emergency grants, supplementation of small annuities and health premiums, and Christmas “Thank You” gift checks each December to our lower-income retirees.

United Church of Christ congregations and members have blessed the Christmas Fund with their generosity for many years. This year, your care and compassion will be especially appreciated by those servants of the church who are facing a time of need.

This testimonial from a Christmas Fund recipient was shared last year, a reminder that the fruits of loving incarnation will always be gratitude, joy, and connection. “The grant is enough to allow me a little breathing room at the end of each month. Thank you for that gift. But equally important to me personally is this grant symbolizes a wonderful connection to the church I love. I have been blessed in so many ways.”

For more information visit: https://www.ucc.org/giving/ways-to-give/our-churchs-wider-mission/christmas-fund/

December 25, 2022

**Christmas Day**

Isaiah 52:7-10

Voice One: Radiant Child, On this Christmas day, we pray for peace to fill us,

as the waters renew a dry and desolate landscape

Voice Two: How beautiful upon the mountains

are the feet of the messenger who announces peace!

Voice One: Radiant Child, on this Christmas day, we pray for hope to guide us forward,

making a way where the path is rocky.

Voice Two: All the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God!

Voice One: Radiant Child, on this Christmas Day, we pray for joy to uplift us,

carrying us on the swift currents of laughter and community.

Voice Two: Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices; together they shout for joy!

Voice One: Radiant Child, on this Christmas Day, we pray for love to surround us,

as the comforting and loving embrace of a trusted friend.

Voice Two: For the Lord has comforted his people; he has redeemed Jerusalem.

Voice One: Peace, Hope, Joy and Love!

May they fill, guide, uplift, and surround us now and always. Amen!

January 1, 2023

**First Sunday after Christmas Day**

Psalm 148

Cosmic Praise

Some people make resolutions at this time of year. Others prayerfully select a word or phrase to guide them into the days ahead. Still others prefer to find renewal every day, not setting aside only the first of the year as a day to intentionally promise a fresh start to God or self. Whichever camp you fall into, take your cue from Psalm 148, and begin with PRAISE.

In difficult times (and for many of us these mid- and post-pandemic days are definitely difficult times) praise can feel unnecessary or even inappropriate. Praise - the outward expression of gratitude - can seem like an extra we can’t afford. But scientists today affirm what people of faith have known for centuries. Praise is not just good for God, it’s good for you, as studies continue to show that gratitude felt and expressed lowers stress and increases overall happiness. Here are some ways to make your New Year praise-full

* Find and maintain a regular prayer practice.
* Notice God in the glory of creation, whether your vista of nature is a vast desert landscape, a stand of towering trees, a small city park, or simply the sun rising and setting.
* Make praise a part of your giving to your United Church of Christ congregation. (Haven’t pledged what you plan to give this year to your church? It’s never too late!)
* Bring your praise to social media, which too often trades in snark and unhealthy competition. How can you notice what is praise-worthy and uplift that instead?
* Look for ways that family members or friends shine God’s light in the world through their own acts of praise. Make sure to notice and thank them.
* Keep a gratitude journal, writing down what you are grateful for each evening or morning.

January 8, 2023

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

Mathew 3:13-17

Possibilities Unfolding

*Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."*

Don’t you wonder what Jesus remembered about the day of his baptism? Was it his thoughts, the inner knowing that this would be the “proper” way to “fulfill all righteousness”? Was it his relationships and conversations, like John’s reluctance to perform the sacrament, followed by his consent? Was it his physical sensations, like the feel of the cool water on dry and dusty skin? Would he most remember the miraculous arrival of the dove and the voice from heaven asserting his belovedness?

When asked what they remembered about baptisms, their own or loved ones’, two United Church of Christ clergywomen shared these strong memories.

Nicole Pickens recalls, “I remember my baptism vividly. I was 12 years old. The baptistry was located behind the chancel, with a window cut to about waist height. I could see my family and friends below. It was January 6, and the waters in which I was immersed were chilly! My pastor gently hurried me to my mom and a hair dryer. On the way home, Mom smiled and said we should stop at the grocery store for cake because we had a new birthday to celebrate.”

Meg Wilson adds, “When my daughter was baptized the minister said to the congregation “is she worthy of God’s love?” Everyone applauded and answered yes! Since becoming ordained I ask the question and people joyfully respond yes. I do it when I introduce the child to the congregation. Worthy is a powerful word!”

What do you remember about your baptism? The physical sensations? The words spoken? The relationships with others present? Your own internal knowing? If you don’t remember your own, what other baptisms have been impactful to you?

January 15, 2023

**Second Sunday after Epiphany**

John 1:29-42

All That We Are

Each week, the UCC Witness and Worship Artists’ Group makes available a wealth of resources to enrich your worship service - prayers, psalms, liturgy, scripture studies, sermon starters and more are available by searching the internet for Worship Ways at the United Church of Christ. Here is the Invocation for the worship liturgy created by Rev. Trayce Potter for Martin Luther King, Jr. Sunday.

Invocation

*God of our weary years and God of our silent tears,*

*thou who has brought us thus far on the way,*

we invite your presence into our midst

as we pay tribute to all who have labored for justice, equality and love.

We pray that in this moment you would strengthen us

to continue to fight for the fulfillment of the dream that the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther

 King Jr.

so eloquently laid out on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial.

Help us to labor so that every valley is exalted,

every hill and mountain made low,

the rough places are plain, and the crooked places made straight

so that the glory of the Lord is revealed,

and all flesh see it together.

Let your love guide us to see one another as fully human with diverse hues, colors, ethnicities and cultures, and respect the content of their character.

Let your spirit strengthen us for the fight of today and tomorrow

until all God’s children can say with full conviction,

“Free at last. Free at last. Thank God All-Mighty, I’m free at last.” Amen.

https://www.ucc.org/worship-way/martin\_luther\_king\_weekend\_service\_january\_

\*This service quotes from **Our God is Marching On**, and **Letter from Birmingham Jail**, by Martin Luther King, Jr. Lines in italics quote from **We Shall Overcome** #570 in **The New Century Hymnal**, and **Lift Every Voice and Sing** #593 in **The New Century Hymnal**

January 22, 2023

**Third Sunday after Epiphany**

Matthew 4:12-23

Called Together

Wonderful Creator, In the beginning you made the world – rocks and trees, water and animals. You created, and you looked on your creation and called it good. Good, you decided, but not complete. And so you created us. You made people. You created us to be beautifully diverse – with many colors of skin, many levels of ability, many shapes and sizes. In our diversity, you also created us with a common longing – to love and be loved, to grow and thrive, to live lives of meaning and purpose.

Brother Christ, You came to earth to show us how to be both fully human and completely divine. You loved and cried, taught and touched, died and rose again. By your healing touch, you brought others close to you and to your heavenly Parent. You modeled for us how to live lives of sacrifice and service, how to be healers of the ills of body and mind. You encouraged us to be bringers of hope to all we encounter.

Holy Spirit, You are the Advocate. You accompany us day by day, hour by hour, breath by breath. You are the challenger, the encourager and the sustainer. You impel us toward places of need and longing in your world and infuse us with the desire to be your people. You lift us, giving us energy when our own spirits flag. And you promise to remain with us, no matter what.

Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer; you are both one and three. You are both distinct and in relationship. As neither one part of your divine being is complete without the others, so we are called to lives of radical interconnectivity. Create in us a desire to bring hope and healing to all we encounter. In your many powerful names we pray, Amen.

January 29, 2023

**Fourth Sunday after Epiphany**

Matthew 5:1-12

The Vision Beautiful

*Health and Human Service Sunday*

Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those with illnesses of the mind and heart, the diseases and dis-eases of these troubled days, and blessed are those who facilitate the slow work of healing.

Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are those who wail with the grief of loss, and blessed are those who abide with the ones who weep.

Blessed are the meek. Blessed are the children who have been abandoned to circumstance, and bless those who fill the absences in those precious lives with warmth and commitment.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Blessed are those at the mercy of mean and chilly streets, and blessed are those who offer a warm meal, a dry bed and the promise of a transformed society where all have plenty. Amen.

*Today, we gather together with the whole United Church of Christ in observing Health and Human Service Sunday. We bear witness to the faithful heritage the UCC has in co-creating spaces of wholeness with communities across this country and around the world. The UCC and its predecessor denominations courageously founded schools, hospitals, and orphanages during times of pandemic, war, and social upheaval. Now, there are more than 400 UCC affiliated health care centers, hospitals, affordable housing and retirement communities, transitional housing for those experiencing homelessness or domestic violence, and service centers for children, youth, families, and those with developmental disabilities. These ministries continue to show up in the most challenging circumstances—and do so with the fervor of healing and justice. It is thus a day to celebrate that the life of the church is vibrant beyond our church walls and outreach ministries.*

“Health and Human Service Sunday.” https://www.ucc.org/worship-way/health-and-human-service-sunday/

February 5, 2023

**Fifth Sunday after Epiphany**

Matthew 5:13-20

Restoring Beauty

“There are very few real emergencies. This doesn’t mean truly terrible things don’t happen. But if we can do things like breathe, delay gratification, feel our feelings in real time, keep ourselves from too much impulsivity, and reach for the right practice or people, we can survive—we can emerge-and-see—through disaster. And with spiritual hindsight, many of our disasters might turn out to be Holy Spirit portals: the way God gets in.

Life as it stands will keep trying to shake us up or smash our boat onto the rocks. This is not because God is a jerk. It’s because Nature throws novel viruses and earthquakes and worse into our path. It’s also because humans are inventive and wonderful, but then we dream up things that ruin lives, like crystal meth, hypercapitalism, and high-waisted jeans (not a good look for anyone).

If we think we are safe, we are wrong. Nothing can insulate us from loss. But safe was never the point. There are fates worse than death—like not ever really living.

If you are lucky, you are currently between emergencies. Maybe you’ve had a rare chance to get off the roller coaster entirely. Your legs have just stopped shaking, and you think, “I’m never doing that again.” You are sitting in the sun, eating something delicious and terrible for you: fried dough, a corn dog, a caramel apple that will pull out your crown. Enjoy the moment. It’s not going to last.

And if you are in the middle of a fast-moving or slow-motion emergency—a sick toddler, a wayward teen, a relationship at a crossroads, a dance with addiction, a mental health crisis—only time will tell if it really was a true emergency. Because with the right kind of attention, ruptures can reveal us, emerge us, and help us evolve faster than any virus.”

This is an excerpt from *How to Begin When Your World is Ending: A Spiritual Field Guide to Joy Despite Everything* copyright © 2022 Molly Phinney Baskette admin. Broadleaf Books. Used by permission. All rights reserved. *How to Begin When Your World is Ending* is available at broadleafbooks.com or wherever you purchase your books.

February 12, 2023

**Sixth Sunday after Epiphany**

Matthew 5:21-37

From the Heart

*Racial Justice Sunday/Science and Technology Sunday*

First Congregational Church UCC of Poughkeepsie, NY knows that most people find new churches through webpages, and they want to assure that all who visit understand their stand on the importance of science as a companion to faith. Their website has a whole page dedicated to explaining their stance on the value of science.

“For too long, science and faith have had a combustible relationship…Some people like to describe science as being true whether you believe in it or not because it is based in conducting repeatable experiments, collecting measurable data and arriving at conclusions that match the data. Many consider faith, if not contrary to science, at least completely separate from it because they regard faith as believing in what cannot be proven.

But in the United Church of Christ, we don’t regard science and faith as mutually exclusive, or as occupying completely separate realms. Instead, we want them to be engaged in conversation because we think they each have something to offer to the other. For we trust that God is still speaking, and we listen for God’s voice not just in places of quiet contemplation or majestic beauty, but also in labs and lecture halls, through the lenses of microscopes and telescopes, in moments of discovery and through efforts to understand the world around us. We value intellectual curiosity and the way that science can uncover new information that expands our perspective. Because we are committed to service, social and economic justice, and careful stewardship of creation, we also are interested in the ways scientific discoveries can support or undermine these commitments.

So it is not surprising that since 2008, our congregation has chosen to recognize in worship the mutually valuable insights that can be gained when science and faith are in open and honest dialogue with one another. Indeed we desire a faith that is “scientifically sophisticated, technologically advanced, morally just, ecologically sustainable, and spiritually alive.” (from the UCC’s Pastoral Letter on Faith Engaging Science and Technology).

We want to make clear the UCC’s belief that science and religion are not mutually exclusive, and we extend our unequivocal welcome to persons who devote their lives to scientific inquiry, no matter the discipline.

We are a thoughtful, thinking church.”

“Faith and Science.” www.opentogod.org/science.

February 19, 2023

**Transfiguration Sunday**

Matthew 17:1-9

Dazzling Reign

Bleach and ashes.

This week, we mark the beginning of the season of Lent on Wednesday, traditionally called Ash Wednesday. But before we get to Wednesday, we pause here on Sunday, and with the disciples climb the mountain where we see Jesus transfigured, his face and clothes dazzling, almost as if they’ve been bleached.

Bleach and ashes.

The ashes on Wednesday symbolize our mortality - they remind us that we come from God and to God we return. When the mark of ashes is placed on a forehead or hand, we are invited to step into Lent in a posture of repentance. But before we are reminded we are all human, we are reminded by Jesus that we are also all divine. Before we are invited into repentance, into a time of turning from sin, we are invited into a moment of grace so glorious it seems blinding.

Bleach and ashes.

It’s no accident that we always acknowledge the Transfiguration, just days before we step into Lent. It’s because we need both. We need the blinding light of the divine as much as we need to remember that we are ultimately made of the same dirt as the rest of creation. We are star stuff and we are earthy stuff and both are vital to our experience as humans.

Bleach and ashes.

As you begin the long Lenten journey this week, you are invited up the mountain to raise your arms in wonder to the Light. In a few days you will be invited to the valley as, with your bare hands, you scoop the dirt from the ground. Carry both the light and the dirt with you. You will need them both. Remember both.

Bleach and ashes.

February 26, 2023

**First Sunday in Lent**

Matthew 4:1-11

Abundant Grace

*Seminary Sunday/Church Vocations Sunday*

UCC General Minister and President Rev. John Dorhauer produces and presents a weekly podcast called *Into the Mystic*, a reminder that the art of spiritual reflection should be made a priority, taken seriously and practiced regularly.

On this Seminary Sunday and Church Vocations Sunday, his emphasis on spiritual reflection is especially timely for those on the path to theological education and church work.

On a recent episode of the podcast called “Watch Over Your Heart’s Integrity,” he begins with a favorite quotation from the ancient and wise desert fathers, “In your exploration of God, whatever path you find your soul longs after in your quest for the Sacred, do that, and always watch over your heart’s integrity.”

Rev. Dorhauer goes on to say that he was surprised to learn as a student that there were so many different theologies and that so many of them were incompatible with each other. The more he studied, the more in awe he became of all the ways there are to access God and determine what Her primary characteristics might be. Was God removed and heavenly, or accessible and willing to sit with us, or present in sanctuaries and available to priests alone, or over seeing judge. He learned as a student that the answer to all these is a resounding YES. Dorhauer was further in awe that those who put together the texts seemed to accept, even to celebrate, these dichotomies.

How do you find God? In a soaring cathedral? In nature, being on a mountain? In a quiet and rustic chapel in silence? In the smile of a child or a hug from a loved one? In a beautiful and artistic turn of phrase? Any of these things and many more can call to mind the goodness of God.

“There are as many pathways to God as there are people walking the earth,” Dorhauer concludes. Whatever path you might find yourself on, follow the words and wisdom of the desert fathers. “In your exploration of God, whatever path you find your soul longs after in your quest for the Sacred, do that, and always watch over your heart’s integrity.”