



Westminster Presbyterian Church
Eugene, Oregon
"At Home" Worship
November 29, 2020

Gathering Around God's Word

If you are worshipping with another family member or with children, you are invited to have different voices share and read the various parts of the service. You can also call/FaceTime someone to worship together.

(If you have a prayer request you would like added to the At-Home Worship service, please email Brooke office@wpceugene.org)

CALL TO WORSHIP

O that God would tear open the heavens and come down!

Of that day or hour, no one knows, only God.

Be alert! Keep awake!

The time is drawing near:

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ,
the Son of God.

OPENING HYMN

Come Thou Long Expected Jesus

#82

CALL TO CONFESSION

Like a faded, dry leaf that the wind blows away, our sins dry us up; faded and brittle, we are carried off by the wrongs we have done. Yet God loves us still and is able to restore and renew us with the water of life.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION.

Loving God, we confess that we become distracted, even weary, in our discipleship. We keep busy, we rush about. We do not remain alert to your divine presence in our lives, in the church, in the world. Awaken us to your power and glory and peace, so we do not miss how near you are to our very own gates. Be gracious to us, we pray, until we are gathered, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven, into your embrace. We pray in the name of Christ, who was, and is, and is to come. Amen.

DECLARATION OF FORGIVENESS

The grace of God, given to us in Christ Jesus, strengthens us to the end, so that we may be blameless when Christ comes Again. Thanks be to God, who is faithful and has called us into the fellowship of the Son, Jesus Christ our Lord!

The Word

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Gracious God, heaven and earth will pass away, but your words will not pass away: Your Word stands forever. May our generation be attentive so that, by the power of your Holy Spirit, we remember your ways and gladly do right, meeting you wherever and whenever you appear. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

SCRIPTURE READINGS

Old Testament Reading: Isaiah 64:1-9

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence— as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil— to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence! When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him. You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways. But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed.

We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity. Yet, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people.

New Testament Reading: Mark 13:24-37

“But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven. “From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. “But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know

when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

ANTHEM

SERMON

“Keep Awake”

Rev. David Ukropina

Today is the first Sunday in Advent, and as we know from previous years of worship, the word advent means coming, and the season of Advent is a season of watching and waiting for the coming of Jesus Christ, both in his incarnation at Christmas and his second coming at the end of time.

Now although the themes of Advent are the same every year, the context for Advent changes every year because every year that we experience feels a bit different. And the year 2020 may be one of the most contextual in a long time. It seems widely agreed in society and in the culture that the year 2020 is one we’re looking forward to being done with.

Among all the difficult things we’ve been dealing with this year, the pandemic is the one that’s most central to our immediate lives. And one way the pandemic connects with Advent this year is that it has very much put us in touch with waiting. We are all of us waiting for the time when the pandemic is mostly behind us and we can live in some kind of “new normal.”

But while we are waiting for this new period, most if not all of us have become very fatigued. I know I have. There is a kind of cumulative effect of all the waiting and changes that have made our lives more stressful, along with the grief we all feel from so much suffering, and I know I and others are looking for some kind of relief from that kind of fatigue.

At the same time, I recognize that I and others tend not to be very good at waiting. I think this is true in normal times, and it is true now. We are just not very good at waiting for many things, and when it comes to something so long and difficult as this pandemic, many of us feel wiped out with fatigue.

As I look to the connections with the waiting of Advent and this year’s context, I realized quickly that one of the things that makes this year’s waiting so difficult is that usually our waiting leads to a happy time around Christmas and a joyful time of worship in the sanctuary, both during Advent and on Christmas Eve.

And as I’m writing this and delivering the sermon, I know in the back of my mind that this year, there will be no worship together in the sanctuary. Like others, I am saddened at the loss of people together singing Silent Night with candles, gathering together for fellowship and singing our favorite hymns.

While the church is finding ways to still help others and connect during this time, we can’t get around a feeling of loss, both at church and in our personal lives. As you are hearing this service, we just finished Thanksgiving week, which means we probably were not able to gather as usual with large groups of family and friends, nor will we likely be able to at Christmas.

And all of this is happening at a time of grief in our society when gathering together, especially for worship and for family celebrations, feels more important and more missed than ever. Just when the healing of large gatherings is most needed, it’s also most dangerous and discouraged.

It's sad that many of us will not be able to travel and meet with our families, but maybe this particular season of Advent of the year 2020 will also put us more in touch than ever with our need for God. More than ever, we need to know in the middle of the pandemic, in the middle of political battles and a struggling economy that God is with us.

Yet as we know from Advents past, as the church we do not start Advent by going straight to singing angels and startled shepherds, but instead we get Bible passages about the end of the world. This particular year is the start of readings from Mark's gospel, and a passage that sometimes gets called "the little apocalypse."

In our passage today, Jesus tells us that "in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken." Much of this apocalyptic writing borrows imagery from the prophetic books of Isaiah, Ezekiel, Joel and Daniel.

The overall sense of the passage is a disturbance in the cosmic order of things. Many commentators think that Jesus' words about "this generation not passing away until these things happen" is a reference to the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in the year 70. And yet Jesus' words also apply to the end of time, when Jesus will gather his elect from the ends of the earth.

Now Jesus talking about the end of time is not meant to be frightening to us, to the point of keeping us in a state of permanent anxiety. They are meant to be more consoling than anxiety provoking. It's as if Jesus is saying I know that all these things will happen, but know when they do happen that I will still be with you.

That reminded me of a story I once heard about the famous movie Ben Hur. Many who have seen the movie remember the famous chariot race scene. When the star of the film, Charlton Heston, was practicing for the scene, he became very skilled at driving the chariots, but he grew worried that during the actual filming, he might not win the race. But then the director told him, "Charlton, you just stay in the chariot and I'll guarantee you win the race."

That's kind of like what I hear Jesus saying to us in these words. It's like he's saying to us during times of violence and discord and upheaval that we need to stay focused on God and faith, and God will help us get through all the turmoil we see around us. Of course, we need to be aware of the times and working for a better world, but God will get us through.

One hope I have for this year of 2020 is that as bad as it's been, maybe it helps put us all more in touch with our need for God. I remember having that sense after 9/11, that when many people felt like their very foundation was shaken, they had a greater sense of a need for God, and for a time, you even saw more people in church than usual.

Now while we know that one day Jesus will return to earth and put things right that have been wrong, we learn from passages like this one that we cannot know the time, neither the day nor the hour. We may know the day that Christmas will come, and we know that script, and the Advent calendars may lead us to December 25, but we do not know the timing of Jesus' return.

Until Jesus returns, the message of this text and of the church is that we should live in a state of expectant watchfulness. Even with the fatigue we all feel, we need to remember that Jesus may return at any time, and that this should be the cause of joy, as Jesus will return us to right relationship with God.

I remember hearing a story about a minister and her young four year old niece Sarah who were planning a beach trip together. A week before the trip, the minister called Sarah and asked “Are you ready to go to the beach?” About a half hour later, the minister’s sister called back and said “What did you say to Sarah?” When the minister asked why, her sister said, “Well, she’s sitting at the end of our driveway with a packed suitcase waiting for you.”

That’s my prayer for all of us today. I pray that this year’s Advent will be a rich time of waiting as confident, active, expectant believers. Even in the midst of fatigue and sadness that we all feel, we can still lay claim to the hope and the joy that come to us as Jesus comes at Christmas time.

One of the realities I’ve been aware of during the pandemic is the way our minds slowly, gradually adjust to our current circumstances. When all this pandemic really began affecting us back in March, I remember that many of us thought that we’d hunker down awhile, and then hopefully be back to worshipping by Holy Week and Easter. How long ago that seems now!

At the time, it would have been hard to imagine that we still would not be together by Advent and Christmas. But now, the opposite problem is happening. Back then, it was hard for our minds to picture a year-long pandemic, but now, its hard for us to picture getting back to a world without a pandemic, because we’ve gotten so used to it.

As with all of you, I welcome the recent news of some companies that are making vaccines and the early indications that some of the vaccines may be highly effective in treating the virus. That early good news feels like a glimmer of hope in the midst of an unrelenting disease.

Still, our ultimate hope is not in a vaccine but in a person. I hope that both in the midst of this pandemic and in the midst of this season of waiting, we can become even more aware of the presence of Jesus Christ, both here and now, in our church and in our lives. I hope the need we have for God leads us to a greater awareness of God.

I also find myself hoping that as the pandemic starts to fade, whenever that may be, that we begin to appreciate even more the presence of God in our lives. I know we will all appreciate more things like getting to see loved ones during the holidays or any time, and things like our kids being back in school, travelling, or just daily joys we may have taken for granted.

I hope we all appreciate the joy of coming to worship and participating actively in the life of the church. While we are trying to maintain connections, and worship and fellowship and mission, the joy of a lived Christian life in community relies so much on people being together in person, and we all look forward to that return.

So again, the message I take from today’s passage from Jesus about the end of the world is Jesus telling us to hang in there, because God will make things right. My hope especially during this season of Advent is that our Christmas joy is not drowned out by our fatigue that we’ve all felt this past year.

My hope is that amidst the turmoil of politics, the pain of economic distress, the false words of leaders claiming divine authority, that we remember that Jesus warned us about all of this. He warned us ahead of time that such things would happen, and he tells us in the middle of it to keep alert and keep awake.

I hope we can all keep awake to God in the world, and keep awake to a way of living that

might actually be restful in the midst of stress and fatigue. I hope we can all find a rest from the noise, the contention, from people shouting and lying. I hope we can all find rest and comfort in the words of Jesus which remind us of God's enduring presence through all the turmoil of the times and of the centuries. Amen.

AFFIRMATION OF FAITH – Apostles Creed

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth. And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; he descended into hell; the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy catholic Church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. Amen.

Responding to God's Word

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE AND THE LORD'S PRAYER

God of power and glory, we remember your mighty acts from across the ages, the times you saved us and brought us home, and also those times when we felt alone and afraid. O God we are your people, the work of your hand. Look upon us with your shining face, especially in the time of need...

We pray for those who look to you for healing and hope...

those who are sick or recovering from injury...

those who are lonely and need companionship and care...

those for whom the holidays bring sorrow or pain...

those whose deep sadness overshadows joy...

let your face shine upon us, O God...

We pray for people in need of reconciliation:

for those battling addiction and those in recovery...

for people estranged from those they love...

For those lost in grief...

Let your face shine upon us, O God, that we might be saved.

Renew the spirit of a world grown weary with waiting and hoping. Especially we pray for wars to end, for hunger and poverty to end. And we pray too for the church, as we also grow weary in our waiting and watching for your power and glory to be made known. Grant us clarity, passion and true fellowship, so that we are awake to your presence.

Let your face shine upon the church and all this weary world, we pray, in the name of the One born in a manger and coming again on clouds of glory, the one who taught us to pray, saying...

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.

Sending of God's Word

CLOSING HYMN

Prepare the Way

#106

BENEDICTION

And now may the Lord watch between you and me, when we are absent one from the other.

-Genesis, 31:49