

ADVENT STUDY FOR THE WARWOOD-SHORT CREEK CHARGE 2020

Sisters and brothers, I have looked for a curriculum to express the frustration, grief, anger, and malaise that we are feeling right now. I wanted something that balanced the eternal hope of the coming of Christ with the reality that right now life is really hard. We are feeling sad and sometimes angry. Guess what? Nobody has written an Advent study that says life is hard; where is God?; and Christ is coming. This study is written by me and it reflects my best theological understanding of the situation we are all in. I hope together we can prayerfully discern the eternal truth that God is with us and that Christ is hope.

We are not going to go in a chronological order of the Biblical narrative. Instead, we are going to use Biblical themes to help deal with issues related to what we are experiencing in 2020. We have all had seasons of pretending that everything was okay, when things were not. We have experienced having plans, then not having plans, then making new plans-only to cancel those plans because of Covid 19. We have experienced or know of people who have suffered. Finally, as a people of faith, we have been forced to resist and change in ways we could not have imagined. If any of this sounds familiar, please join me in this study in Advent. We will do the study by a recorded video by 7pm on December 2, 9, 16, & 23. If you do not have a computer, you can call the pastor 304-813-7213 and have a conversation about the study or make an appointment and have a social distant conversation at the church office or hall. The email invitation will include the links to the video, curriculum, and phone number.

Where is God? An Advent Study 2020

Week 1 Pretending Everything is Okay

Week 2 Plans that Don't Work Out

Week 3 Resisting

Week 4 Suffering

Week 1 Pretending Everything is Okay

The Biblical Text is Luke 1:5-64 NRSV

⁵ In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. ⁶Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. ⁷But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

⁸ Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, ⁹he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. ¹⁰Now at the time of the incense-offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. ¹¹Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹²When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. ¹³But the angel said to him, 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. ¹⁴You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. ¹⁶He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.' ¹⁸Zechariah said to the angel, 'How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.' ¹⁹The angel replied, 'I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. ²⁰But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.'

21 Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. ²²When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. ²³When his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

24 After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, ²⁵'This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.'

26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.'²⁹But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³²He 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. ³³He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.'³⁴Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?'³⁵The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born* will be holy; he will be called Son of God. ³⁶And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷For nothing will be impossible with God.'³⁸Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her.

39 In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴²and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. ⁴⁵And blessed is she who believed that there would be* a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'

46 And Mary* said,

'My soul magnifies the Lord,

⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

⁴⁸ for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
⁵⁰ His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.'

⁵⁶ And Mary remained with her for about three months and then returned to her home.

⁵⁷ Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son.⁵⁸ Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.

⁵⁹ On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. ⁶⁰But his mother said, 'No; he is to be called John.' ⁶¹They said to her, 'None of your relatives has this name.' ⁶²Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. ⁶³He asked for a writing-tablet and wrote, 'His name is John.' And all of them were amazed. ⁶⁴Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God.

We are looking at many important stories of the Advent season: the visitation of Mary with her cousin Elizabeth, the prophetic pronouncement of Mary in the Magnificat, the conceptions of John and Jesus.

These stories are dramatic and traumatic. They disturb the status quo of the lives of everyday people Joseph, Mary, Elizabeth, and Zechariah.

- Do you think Mary, Elizabeth, and Zechariah pretended everything was okay in their lives? Why?
- Where was God for each of these persons in this passage?
- Why do you think we like to pretend everything is okay in our lives?
- How does the story of the Visitation help you deal with unexpected life issues?
- How does reading the Magnificat help you deal with the current reality of world around us?
- Which biblical character from the story do you relate to most and why?
- Where is God in COVIDTIDE?

HOMEWORK:

1. List at least 5 signs of hope you see this week. We will talk briefly about those signs next week.
2. Read the upcoming lesson.

Week 2 Plans that Don't Work Out

Homework review:

What signs of hope did you see last week?

Biblical Text: Luke 2:1-20 NRSV

2In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

8 In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah,* the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host,* praising God and saying,

¹⁴ 'Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!'

15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' ¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

This text is traditionally read on Christmas Eve. This is the payoff text from the buildup narrative of four weeks of preparation of Advent. We have the gift: the birth of Jesus. We know how it ends. This year I want us to explore it from the side of the parents. Put yourself in the lives of Mary and Joseph.

- Do you think this birth plan went the way Mary wanted it to go? How do you imagine it differed from her expectations?
- In what ways did the Roman Empire interfere in the life of Jesus before he was born?
- How could the shepherds have been more helpful?
- Where was God in the birth story of Jesus?
- How do you think this Christmas Eve will be different than other Christmas eves?
- How do you think Covid will impact Christmas?
- Where is God in COVIDTIDE?

HOMEWORK:

1. Remember at least 1 time that God has changed your plans. We will talk briefly about the way next week.
2. Read the upcoming lesson.

Week 3 Resisting

Homework Review:

In what ways has God changed your plans?

Biblical text Matthew 2:2-15

2 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men* from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising,* and have come to pay him homage.' ³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah* was to be born. ⁵They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

⁶ "And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd* my people Israel." '

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men* and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.' ⁹When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising,* until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

¹³ Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.' ¹⁴Then Joseph* got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, ¹⁵and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son.'

- Resisting evil, injustice, and oppression is a promise we make at our baptism and in our renewal of our baptismal vows. Who are the Herods of today? In what concrete ways are persons being treated unjustly, cheated, ignored, oppressed?
- How can we support people that are powerless and vulnerable to those who exploit them?
- How can the church honor Jesus and support the people Jesus is on the side of? Can you list some ways we can help our community in this age of exploitation?
- What gifts can we bring Christ? What does Christ ask of us? How much skin are we honestly willing to put into the game?
- Where is God when people are exploited?
- Where is God in COVODTIDE?

The legend of Santa Claus comes from the life of the real Bishop of Myra named Nicholas. He was a Greek Christian that lived on the coast of what is now Turkey on the Mediterranean Sea. He was a devout man and suffered persecution for his faith before the legalization of Christianity in the Roman empire. He persisted in faith. He resisted in faith. He resisted evil. He stayed true to his first love, Jesus Christ, when the powers and principalities took away his liberty. Years later he helped write the Nicene Creed, and his generosity is known in his gift-giving including putting gold coins in stockings as they dried on the mantle place. (Sound familiar?)

- How can we keep the faith and continue to be generous in the time of Herod and Covid?

HOMEWORK:

1. Name as many examples as you can of how God has brought you joy since last, we met. We will talk briefly about joy next week.
2. Read the upcoming lesson.

Week 4 Suffering

Homework Review:

How has God brought you joy since last we met?

Biblical text Matthew 2:16-23

6 When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men,* he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men.* ¹⁷Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

¹⁸ 'A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.'

¹⁹ When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, ²⁰'Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead.'²¹ Then Joseph* got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. ²²But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. ²³There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, 'He will be called a Nazorean.'

You know COVID has robbed us of so much: it has robbed us of lives... the lives of people who have died from the disease, but also from people that have avoided treatment from other diseases. Who do you know that has been sickened or died from COVID?

There have been so many tragedies these past months. The profound sense of loss I felt for the miscarriage of Kelsey's first pregnancy is something that has stayed with me. I read the slaughter of the innocents and I now understand on a new level. I weep with Rachel.

So, is this 2020? Is it just bad luck? What is it?

- How could God let these murders happen? Why does suffering occur? Where is God in our suffering?
- What does our faith teach us? Is faith enough in the face of anguish?
- Where is God in COVIDTIDE?

As this season of Advent comes to close, we are in the week of peace. We are seeking peace, and that includes taking time to express grief and frustration, worry and fear, and pain and suffering.

Please join me in a brief service of a Blue Advent Service to grieve over this lost year of 2020- in this recorded video.

Collect Prayer for Advent- together

Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Prayer for our Loneliness

In our loneliness and distress, Come Holy Spirit Come. In our grief, hopelessness, and loss, be near Holy Spirit. In our numbness and going through the motions, Holy Spirit move us toward a better way. Holy Spirit, our comforter, our advocate, and our assurance that God has not abandoned us surround us with peace.

CANDLE LIGHTING LITANY OF REMEMBRANCE (Bart will light and show on camera)

Pastor: We light this Advent candle to remember those persons who have been loved and lost. We pause to remember their name, their face, their voice. We give thanks for the memory that binds them to us this season, which anticipates Christmas.

All: May God's eternal love surround them.

Hymn: Silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright 'round yon virgin mother and child. Holy infant, so tender and mild, sleep in heavenly peace. Sleep in heavenly peace.

Pastor: We light the second candle to redeem the pain of loss: the loss of relationships, the loss of jobs, the loss of health. As we gather up the pain of the past, we offer it to You, O God, asking that into our open hands. You will place the gift of peace.

All: Refresh, restore, renew us, O God, and Lead us into your future.

Hymn: Silent night, holy night griefs abound, ever in sight, Christ now comes in manger bare, Holds our loved ones in his holy care. Joy, at last, to be ours. Joy, at last, to be ours.

Pastor: We light this third candle to remember ourselves this Christmas time. We pause and remember the past weeks, months and for some of us, years of down times. We remember the poignancy of memories, the grief, the sadness, the hurts, the pain of reflecting on our own mortality.

All: Let us remember that dawn defeats darkness.

Hymn: Silent night, holy night, shepherds quake at the sight, glories stream from heaven afar, heavenly hosts sing alleluia, Christ, the Savior, is born! Christ, the Savior, is born!

Pastor: This fourth candle is lit to remember our faith and the gift of hope which God offers to us in the Christmas story. We remember that God who shares our life, promises us a place and time of no more pain and suffering.

All: Let us remember the one who shows the way and who goes with us into our tomorrow.

Hymn: Silent night, holy night, Son of God, love's pure light radiant beams from thy holy face, with the dawn of redeeming grace, Jesus, Lord, at thy birth. Jesus, Lord, at thy birth.

Pastor: In the spirit of this season, let us now ask our God for what we need for ourselves as we participate in the Christmas season as people coping with our loss, pain, suffering, loneliness, grief, sadness. In response to the words, "Loving God, hear our prayer", you're invited to respond with "And in your merciful love, answer." God, we come to you as Christmas dawns with the pain growing inside us. As the nights have been growing longer, so has the darkness wrapped itself around our hearts. In this season of our longest nights, we offer to you the pain in our hearts, the traumas that some of us cannot put into words. Loving God, hear our prayer,

All: And in your merciful love, answer.

Pastor: Compassionate God, there are those among us who are grieving over what might have been. A death or loss has changed our experience of Christmas. Once it was a special day for us too, but someone has died or moved away. Or we have lost a job, a dream, a goal, a cause. We find ourselves adrift, alone, lost. Loving God, hear our prayer,

All: And in your merciful love, answer.

Pastor: The Christmas season reminds us of all that used to be and cannot be anymore. The memories of what was, the fears of what may be, stifle us. All around us we hear the sounds of celebration. But all we experience is a sense of feeling blue. Please be near us every lonely night. Loving God, hear our prayer,

All: And in your merciful love, answer.

Prayer for Nights of this season

Lord, It is night. The night is for stillness. Let us be still in the presence of God. It is night after a long day. What has been done has been done; what has not been done has not been done; let it be. The night is dark. Let our fears of the darkness of the world and of our own lives rest in you. The night is quiet. Let the quietness of your peace enfold us, all dear to us, and all who have no peace. The night heralds the dawn. Let us look expectantly to a new day, new joys, new possibilities. In your name we pray. Amen.

Dismissal

Pastor: Go forth in the name of the promised Christ.

All: Thanks be to God.

ADVENT IN THE HOME

Advent is a season of four weeks including four Sundays. Advent derives from the Latin *adventus*, which means “coming.” The season proclaims the comings of the Christ—whose birth we prepare to celebrate once again, who comes continually in Word and Spirit, and whose return in final victory we anticipate. Each year Advent calls the community of faith to prepare for these comings; historically, the season was marked by fasts for preparation. Each Sunday of Advent has its distinctive theme: Christ’s coming in final victory (First Sunday), John the Baptist (Second and Third Sundays), and the events immediately preceding the birth of Jesus Christ (Fourth Sunday).

ADVENT 2020 Lectionary Readings

| Advent Year B | First reading | Psalm | Second reading | Gospel |
|---|----------------------------|--|--------------------------------|--------------------------|
| First Sunday of Advent November 29, 2020 | <u>Isaiah 64:1-9</u> | <u>Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19</u> | <u>1 Corinthians 1:3-9</u> | <u>Mark 13:24-37</u> |
| Second Sunday of Advent December 6, 2020 | <u>Isaiah 40:1-11</u> | <u>Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13</u> | <u>2 Peter 3:8-15a</u> | <u>Mark 1:1-8</u> |
| Third Sunday of Advent December 13, 2020 | <u>Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11</u> | <u>Psalm 126</u> or <u>Luke 1:46b-55</u> | <u>1 Thessalonians 5:16-24</u> | <u>John 1:6-8, 19-28</u> |
| Fourth Sunday of Advent December 20, 2020 | <u>2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16</u> | <u>Luke 1:46b-55</u> or <u>Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26</u> | <u>Romans 16:25-27</u> | <u>Luke 1:26-38</u> |

LIGHTING ADVENT CANDLES AT HOME

First Sunday or Week

READ: Isaiah 60:2-3

PRAY: We light this candle as a symbol of Christ our Hope. May the light sent from God shine in the darkness to show us the way of salvation. O come, O come, Emmanuel.

Second Sunday or Week

READ: Mark 1:4

PRAY: We light this candle as a symbol of Christ the Way. May the Word sent from God through the prophets lead us to the way of salvation. O come, O come, Emmanuel.

Third Sunday or Week

READ: Isaiah 35:10

PRAY: We light this candle as a symbol of Christ our Joy. May the joyful promise of your presence, O God, make us rejoice in our hope of salvation. O come, O come, Emmanuel.

Fourth Sunday or week

READ: Isaiah 9:6-7

PRAY: We light this candle as a symbol of the Prince of Peace. May the visitation of your Holy Spirit, O God, make us ready for the coming of Jesus, our hope and joy. O come, O come, Emmanuel.

CHRISTMAS EVE/DAY (Light all the candles)

READ: Do not be afraid;
for see—I am bringing you good news of a great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. (LUKE 2:10)

PRAY: We light this candle as a symbol of the birth of Christ the light for all the world. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life, * and the life was the light of all people. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. (John 1:1-5)