



between

MEMORY

&
HOPE

Lessons from quarantine

TRICON
Trinitarian
Congregational Church

ADVENT 2020

small
groups

Remembering the light of Christ,
that has shined through the
darkness of our past, we may
begin to chart our way forward,
with Advent's promise of
HOPE, PEACE, JOY, AND LOVE.



Table of Contents

pg. 4 Introduction
pg. 6 Chapter 1: The Mirror of the Prophets
pg. 12 Chapter 2: The Birth of Jesus: A Promise Fulfilled
pg. 16 Chapter 3: Possibilities of Advent

Guidelines for Participants

- Work to create a safe space where all people and opinions are honored.
- Please remember that what is offered in your small group is confidential.
- Share air time; listen for the wonder in others' stories.
- Speak only for yourself, using "I" statements.
- Respect silence as a time to process and reflect.

2020 Advent Groups

Tuesday	10:00 AM	Cynthia LaMothe
Tuesday	7:00 PM	Rob Freund
Wednesday	10:30 AM	Polly Vanasse
Wednesday	7:00 PM	Betsy Swaim
Thursday	7:00 PM	Jane Turner-Michael
Friday	10:00 AM	Shirley Huettig



Introduction

Welcome to this year's Advent small group discussion series called, ***Between Memory and Hope; Lessons from Quarantine***. We chose this title because between memory and hope reflects the Advent season so perfectly, and also, this Advent in particular. During the four weeks of Advent we remember the dark, oppressive world into which Jesus was born. The iron fisted tyranny of the Roman empire was exceedingly violent and easily provoked. There was great social unrest, racial tensions and severe religious bigotry. Yet, in this shadowed land we also remember a poor, unwed, pregnant Jewish teenager who subversively prophesied that God will "bring down the mighty from their thrones and exalt the lowly" (Luke 1:52). It is always the Prophets who voice God's promises. These are promises that, for those who trust in God, provide a foundation of hope for tomorrow. It was the Prophet Isaiah who proclaimed, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; Those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined." (Isaiah 9:2)

And so, remembering the words of the Prophets, the people of God fiercely clung to hope and prepared for a great light to enter the world and rescue God's people. The light was called Messiah, Prince of Peace, Son of God. The harder life got for the Jewish people, the more they expectantly waited for the fulfillment of God's promises. It was their memory of the sacred scriptures that fueled their persistent hope for tomorrow.

This Advent, we also stand in that liminal space between memory and hope. We have all lost so much to the pandemic and yearn for the life we used to know. Now, still quarantined, we remember what Christmas used to be like and wonder how we will rekindle hope, peace, joy and love this year. But once again, from our own deep darkness, we are promised a light to guide us forward. For

most of us, the Advent story is well known, and we remember God's promises were fulfilled on that silent, holy night, when the world stood still and Messiah Jesus was born. This is the Messiah who came to show us the way of love and extended the promise by saying, "I am with you always, even until the end of the age." (Matthew 28:20). When we awaken to these memories and stories of God's faithfulness and steadfast love, they can open a door in our weary souls and revive a real and vibrant hope for tomorrow.

This Advent, from the shadowed place of quarantine, zoom meetings and social distancing, we will remember together and look back not only on the ancient scripture stories but also our own lived experience of God's rescue. Where has light shined through the darkest places of your life?

May the light of hope, peace, joy and love shine through as we share together the Advent promise that, even now, connects us between memory and hope.

In faith and hope,

Bob

Rev. Robert Brown

Senior Minister



Chapter I: The Mirror of the Prophets

This year we begin Advent not only in anticipation but in despair; our world has been broken apart by a novel coronavirus that kills, by the cries for racial justice, by fires and storms across the globe, and by politics that have polarized our nation.

Opening Prayer

Too often our answer to the darkness
is not running toward Bethlehem
but running away.
We ought to know by now that we can't see
where we're going in the dark.
Running away is rampant...
separation is stylish:
separation from mates, from friends, from self.
Run and tranquilize,
don't talk about it,
avoid.
Run away and join the army
of those who have already run away.
When are we going to learn that Christmas Peace
comes only when we turn to face the darkness?
Only then will we be able to see
the Light of the World.
*From *Kneeling in Bethlehem* by Ann Weems*

Main Idea

Old Testament prophets, especially Isaiah, foretold the coming of Christ to heal a broken world and to shake up the world order. The promise of redemption and forgiveness can have a powerful effect on Christians in times of conflict, despair and confusion, but first the prophets require us to face the truths of who we have become.

Try this thought experiment: It's 25 BCE and you are shown a set of scrolls that foretells the birth of a savior descended from Abraham and Isaac, Judah and David. (Genesis 12,17,28 and 48) Furthermore, this child will be born in Bethlehem. (Micah 5:2) He will be born to a virgin and named Immanuel. (Isaiah 7:14) His parents, fearing for his life, will flee to another country to protect him so he can fulfill the prophecies. And he will begin his ministry in the fishing town of Galilee. (Isaiah 9:1–2). He will suffer and die on a cross to teach people about forgiveness. He will have an eternal kingdom after his days on earth are over. (2 Samuel 7:12–13). Do you believe what is on the scrolls?

Who are these people who dare to believe what has been written? Because the scrolls have been preserved, there is a community of faith waiting for this child. They remember what has been foretold, and they recognize a society that has strayed so far off its path that the only way to redemption is through the birth and life of this Child.

If these prophecies had been written just from the wisdom of the authors, what is the probability that ALL of them would have come to pass? Theologian/mathematician Peter Stoner worked with a group to calculate the probability. Their algorithm is too complex to describe, but the results, 1: 10¹⁷, suggest that there was nothing random about the prophecies, nor were they guided simply by human hand.

Questions

What significance do you find in the fact that ALL these prophecies came to pass?

What qualities might you expect to find in true prophets, and how might they appear to differ from those of false prophets?

Let's explore more deeply the role of Old Testament prophets like Isaiah in our faith, especially around the birth of a Messiah. In about 730 BC, Isaiah was writing to a people who were self-destructing, to provide a critique of their culture as well as offer hope for the future - the coming of a Messiah. Think of him as holding a mirror up to those in the kingdom of Judah, especially to their feckless King Ahaz, who was willing to sign a peace treaty with Assyria that would include Judah having to worship their gods. Isaiah and other prophets tried to use their platform to reflect current affairs, speak about God's reaction to their behavior, and then invite the people to repent and receive God's grace. Instead of fortune tellers, think of them as truth tellers.

Scripture

Isaiah 7:13-15

13 Then Isaiah said, "Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of humans? Will you try the patience of my God also? 14 Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. 15 By the time this child is old enough to choose what is right and reject what is wrong, he will be eating yogurt and honey.

This came to pass and is recorded in Matthew 1: 18-23.

18 This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. 19 Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

20 But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

22 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 23 “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”).

Questions

How does it matter to you that the prophecy in Isaiah was fulfilled in Matthew? Does it strengthen your faith? Prophets seem to come at times of great upheaval. The true test of their validity is found in the future, when the prophecies come true. Have you noticed any prophets this year? What mirrors are they holding up?

Isaiah 9:4-7

For you will break the yoke of their slavery and lift the heavy burden from their shoulders. You will break the oppressor’s rod, just as you did when you destroyed the army of Midian. The boots of the warrior and the uniforms bloodstained by war will all be burned. They will be fuel for the fire. For a child is born to us, a son is given to us. The government will rest on his shoulders. And he will be called: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His government and its peace will never end. He will rule with fairness and justice from the throne of his ancestor David for all eternity. The passionate commitment of the LORD of Heaven’s Armies will make this happen!

Questions

What resonates with you about the language of this passage? What in this passage is mirrored in the world today?

Isaiah was writing this over 700 years before the birth of Christ. Early Christians had access to the Torah, to Isaiah and Samuel's writings, and still it was a test of faith to believe the Christ Child had come. Today, many Christians believe that Christ will come again, or is perhaps here already. Is our faith strengthened because of the birth so long ago in a manger in Bethlehem, foretold by Isaiah?

Walter Brueggemann, a respected American Old Testament Scholar, writes that the prophets' writings, collectively, are meant to inform our understanding of how to turn around the world. "The prophetic canon seeks to imagine, articulate, and evoke a world responsive to the Lord, the creator of heaven and earth."

He suggests that Isaiah, Samuel and others are still speaking to us. So our challenge, this Advent, is to read from the scriptures and imagine that God is trying to grab our attention and to encourage us to picture God's creation realized. Remember that the prophecies did not immediately come to pass. Assyria did defeat Judah, the Jews were forced into exile, and only then did they seek forgiveness and come back fully into the kingdom of God, ready to receive Him. There is no way to shortcut the process of reflecting and asking God for help, and until we do repent, we are simply in no position to receive God's perennial offer of forgiveness and grace. God's grace may not be available to us. Advent is for those who yearn for rescue; it is about our deep longing for God's grace to come.

Questions

What do you truly long for? Have quarantining and social distancing reordered any of your longings?

Think about what you could do to prepare yourself to receive God's grace this Advent.

What would it take for you to commit to this action? You might take a few minutes to journal about this.

When you see the wrongs of the world reflected in the mirror of the prophets, how do you respond?

Closing Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father,
Help me to hear your voice.
Touch me once again.
Give me the courage to be your beloved.
Give me courage to choose joy.
I need you now this Christmas.
Be born in me again. Today.
In Jesus' name, Amen.

Bonnie Gray, from *Why it Takes Courage to Choose Joy*

Notes

Chapter 2: The Birth of Jesus: A Promise Fulfilled

Despite the prophecy of angels and prophets, Jesus' virgin birth was unexpected to the people of the time and may seem incredible to us.

Opening Prayer

Even now we simply do not expect
to find a deity in a stable.
Somehow the setting is all wrong:
the swaddling clothes too plain,
the manger too common for the likes of a Savior,
the straw inelegant,
the animals, reeking and noisy,
the whole scene too ordinary for our taste.
And the cast of characters is no better.
With the possible exception of the kings,
who among them is fit for this night?
The shepherds? Certainly too crude,
the carpenter too rough,
the girl too young.
And the baby!
Whoever expected a baby?
Whoever expected the advent of God in a helpless child?
Had the Messiah arrived in the blazing light of the glory
of a legion of angels wielding golden swords,
the whole world could have been conquered for
Christ
right then and there
and we in the church—to say nothing of the
world!—

wouldn't have so much trouble today.
Even now we simply do not expect
to face the world armed with love."

Unexpected by Ann Weems

Main Idea

Not unlike today, many who received the Word were marginalized people, like Joseph and Mary, living out God's word. God's voice guided the people and helped them understand the Gift of Jesus.

Questions

What impressed you about the birth story as a child? What do you remember seeing/talking about during the Christmas season? How has your understanding of that story changed through time?

It might seem like the prophets' voices and the covenant of God that we discussed last week would be enough coming attractions, but how our Lord Jesus enters the world is utterly startling and surprising.

God chooses as the mother of Jesus a humble, young woman. When the Angel comes to tell her that God has selected her, she ponders these heavenly words. God helps Mary move her own faith. Almost immediately, Mary proclaims:

"My soul magnifies the Lord
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant."

Matthew 1: 46-8

Mary's embracing of her role in this unbelievable story shows us how God can lead our faith in directions that may be beyond our imagination. Many of us have been pulled lately in directions that a year ago we might not have imagined going. We might have pondered, as Mary did, the trust that God has placed in us to carry

out his Word in such surreal and challenging times.

Mary and Joseph go to Bethlehem, a tiny town, to enter into the census. A worldly thing! The birth is humble, in a manger. One can feel the smallness of the scene. Yet, God also puts a giant, mystical shining star in the sky, as if to say, "This is the real story!" This is not the fake news. The wise men rose up to the occasion, despite the danger of Herod's persecution, moved by their faith to kneel beside the Son of God. These wise mystics traveled miles to a tiny rural town in a foreign land to witness the unimaginable. God with us! In every nation, in every time, God is always looking for and calling on people of faith, and that in times of great emergency, many hear a call and are compelled to offer what they can. God never calls upon us to be anything other than the very best of who we are.

It is hard to think how to know what to do with our own gifts when we might not see the mystical signs of angels and stars. In uncertain times, we often doubt more and believe less. But that is all part of the human process. As Madeleine L'Engle writes, "Jesus held true to the promise of the incarnation. Christ came to us as Jesus, a mortal, in order to show us how to be human."

Questions

Like now, people of the day got their news from different sources. How did Mary and Joseph and all others come to understand the "real story" and what can that teach us about the nature of God? How do you know the difference between the fake and real news of God today?

Mary uses her gift of faith to move the world. How is your faith affected when you are challenged by the unexpected?

In this historically challenging time, what are you grieving? Where do you find your hope?

Closing Prayer

Let your goodness, Lord, appear to us,
that we, made in your image,
conform ourselves to it.
In our own strength
we cannot imitate your majesty,
power and wonder;
nor is it fitting for us to try.
But your mercy
reaches from the heavens,
through the clouds,
to the earth below.
You have come to us
as a small child,
but you have brought us
the greatest of all gifts,
the gift of eternal love.
Caress us with your tiny hands,
embrace us with your tiny arms,
and pierce our hearts
with your soft, sweet cries. Amen.

St. Bernard

Notes

Chapter 3:

Possibilities of Advent

Main Idea

In these tough times of pandemic, senseless loss of black lives, climate change, a contentious election and post-election season, it is so hard to hold onto Hope. Hope for justice, kindness, healthy citizens. What do we do as Christians? What is our calling? How do we choose Hope and Optimism when the world feels like it is crumbling around us?

What we choose to focus on is key to not only our survival but our ability to thrive during this time. Focusing on our gifts, our opportunities while still honoring our pain. How might our waiting for Christ's birth (Advent) be similar to the possibility of a Second Coming?

Opening Prayer

Pandemic

What if you thought of it as the Jews consider the Sabbath—the most sacred of times?

Cease from travel.

Cease from buying and selling.

Give up, just for now, on trying to make the world different than it is.

Sing. Pray. Touch only those to whom you commit your life.

Center down.

And when your body has become still, reach out with your heart.

Know that we are connected in ways that are terrifying and beautiful. (You could hardly deny it now.)

Know that our lives are in one another's hands. (Surely, that has come clear.)

Do not reach out your hands.

Reach out your heart.

Reach out your words.

Reach out all the tendrils of compassion that move, invisibly, where we cannot touch.

Promise this world your love--

for better or for worse, in sickness and in health, so long as we all shall live.

Lynn Ungar 3/11/20

(UU Minister from San Francisco)

In an article by Alan Lightman, "The Virus is a Reminder of Something Lost Long Ago", Alan writes:

"Habits of mind and lifestyle do not change easily.....Some powerful force must strike to awaken us from our slumber. Now we have been struck. We have a chance to notice: We have been living too fast. We have sold our inner selves to the devil of speed, efficiency, money, hyperconnectivity, progress."

Questions

What have you noticed about the differences between how you lived your life pre-Covid and how you are living your life now?

Do you agree that a powerful force must strike us in order to change our deeply held habits?

In this time of the pandemic most of us have found that we have more free time. We are no longer commuting, traveling, going to meetings, shopping as frequently, going to the gym or meeting friends for coffee. We have been freed from the hyper scheduled world we had been living in.

We are creating a life for ourselves in this new normal. Maybe allowing more quiet time, more time with family, walks in nature, Zoom calls with distant (or even nearby) friends and relatives.

It is worth remembering that the time of greatest gain in terms of wisdom and inner strength is often that of greatest difficulty.

Dalai Lama XIV

Life isn't about waiting for the storm to pass, it's about learning to dance in the rain.

Vivian Greene

And once the storm is over, you won't remember how you made it through, how you managed to survive. You won't even be sure if the storm is really over. But one thing is certain...when you come out of the storm you won't be the same person who walked in. That is what the storm is all about.

Haruki Murakami

Questions

We are still sitting between memory and hope. As Christmas approaches, what will you miss?

When, sometime down the line, we re-emerge from pandemic conditions, what do you hope for yourself, your family, the world?

What are the gifts that have been presented to you in this current situation?

What will you want to remember about this time?

What do you want to bring forward into your life once the world opens up again?

There are many passages in the Bible that describe the state of our world before the Second Coming of Jesus as well as how we can open ourselves to this Promise:

“There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. Now when these things take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” Luke 21:25-28

Once, having been asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, “The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, ‘Here he is,’ Or ‘there it is,’ because the kingdom of God is within you.” Luke 17:20-21

“Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. So you must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.” Matthew 24:42-44

Questions

What do you notice that is positive around you in this season? If Advent is a time of waiting for the birth of Christ, how do we prepare for that?

If we think about the Second Coming in a similar way to Advent, how might we use this time of waiting in a constructive way?

Closing Prayer

Present One

I don't know what this day will bring; so I pray that by your grace I will receive it with faith and equanimity.

When people talk to me, I don't know what they will say, or what it really means to them; so I pray that I will listen with compassion, humility and curiosity.

Whatever happens, I don't really know whether it's good or bad; so I pray that I may be present without judging.

Whatever I encounter, no matter how many times I've seen it, I don't really know what is there, or how it truly looks; so I pray that I will be open, mindful and attentive.

I don't know the outcomes of my actions, what will become of me, how your grace works, or the landscape of eternal life. So I pray that I may trust without knowing, love without judging, accept without understanding.

You who Are, today may I be fully, deeply, and lovingly present.

Amen.

Steve Garnass-Holmes
(Pastor at unfoldinglight.net)

Notes



Notes

CE Committee

Leslie Ackles
Janet Lawson
Betsy Swaim

Liz Crowell
Rick Olney
Polly Vanasse

Notes

First Coming

*He did not wait till the world was ready,
till men and nations were at peace.
He came when the Heavens were unsteady,
and prisoners cried out for release.
He did not wait for the perfect time.
He came when the need was deep and great.
He dined with sinners in all their grime,
turned water into wine.
He did not wait till hearts were pure.
In joy he came to a tarnished world of sin and doubt.
To a world like ours, of anguished shame
he came, and his Light would not go out.
He came to a world which did not mesh,
to heal its tangles, shield its scorn.
In the mystery of the Word made Flesh
the Maker of the stars was born.
We cannot wait till the world is sane
to raise our songs with joyful voice,
for to share our grief, to touch our pain,
He came with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice!*

Madeleine L'Engle