

Merry Christmas!

I'm am filled with joy because you have joined us for the second Sunday of Advent here at Shepherd of the Valley as we celebrate the incarnation!

Our message today is taken from Adam Hamilton's book, Incarnation.

### **Announcements:**

Please join us on Zoom for our study of that book on Monday evenings. We are reading Adam Hamilton's book Incarnation. It's not too late to join in. Please log in or call in at 6:30 using the link in the email you received. Don't worry if you haven't read the book. Our discussion will be based the video we will watch.

Our **Advent Kits** have been distributed. If you didn't get one and would like one, please contact us. If you think there is a piece missing, let us know that too. When we were done stuffing envelopes there were a few extras, so I'm guessing we accidentally left a few things out, so please let us know and we will get the missing pieces to you. Also, the gift for December 25<sup>th</sup> is tiny and could get stuck in the bottom of the envelope.

**Fun Friday** is this week. Friday December 4<sup>th</sup> at 6:00. We are having a **Nativity Fair** on Zoom. Set up your favorite Nativity Scenes near your computer camera and be ready to share a little bit about what makes them special to you.

We plan to have our **window displays** ready for viewing in the evenings beginning next Sunday December 6<sup>th</sup>. They will be available through January 6<sup>th</sup>.

**On Christmas Eve, we will have an Outdoor "Walk Through"** featuring live piano music and lighted window displays. Masks will be required, and social distancing will be observed. Please arrive anytime between 6:00 and 7:15. We recommend avoiding the 6:00 rush and we expect the "Walk Through" will take about 15 minutes. Our worship design team will also have a special gift for each household. In addition, there will be a very special **Christmas Eve Video** posted on our website for you to enjoy instead of or after the "Walk Through."

We are looking for a few **greeters/ushers** to assist with our Christmas Eve Walk Through. Please contact us if you are interested in helping.

Our entire Christmas Offering this year will be added to the funds collected by the children's Bucket Brigade. The children of the church have not had the opportunity to pass the buckets and collect funds so that they can make a donation to a cause of their choice. This year's collection will go to Heifer International and the children will decide what animals will be donated to help the people in developing communities.

Also, you may be considering a **year-end gift to the church**. Please be sure to mark your gifts with your intentions (Christmas or Year End Gift) so that we know where to direct those funds.

Let us begin our time of worship together.

## **Opening Prayer:**

*Holy and righteous God, before you we can only admit our own unrighteousness and our world's deep brokenness. In gratitude, we praise you for giving your Son to be our Savior. In humility, we pray you will guide us now, by your Spirit, to live more fully and freely as your forgiven people. Amen.*

(Adapted from the *Incarnation: Leader Guide*, by Mike Poteet)

**Hymn:** #203 - Hail to the Lord's Anointed

## **Lighting of the Advent Candle:**

“Don't be afraid! Look! I bring good news to you—wonderful, joyous news for all people. Your savior is born today in David's city. He is Christ the Lord.”

Whether we look out to the world around us or into our own hearts, we recognize our deep need for salvation. We light the second Advent candle to signify our longing for a rescuer, a helper, one who will deliver us from sin, from despair, even from death. Jesus, you are Savior.

(Luke 2:10-11 and adapted from Matthew 1:21)

**Sing:** “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel,” stanza 2 (*UMH* 211)

## **Joys and Concerns:**

The Rummage Alternative brought in 6,673 pounds of donations. We should receive a check from Goodwill for \$667.30 in early January. This does not include furniture or the several carloads of items sent to UMOM. God is Good.

## **Prayers of the People:**

Christ our Savior,

You are our deliverer, our rescuer and our helper. For this we give thanks and praise. Hear our prayers as we lift up those people and situations that have been mentioned as well as those that are on our hearts today. Please provide healing, comfort and peace. We acknowledge the suffering in the world. Allow your joy to enter into our hearts and be our strength throughout this time of Advent. Help us to be the incarnation of Christ as we serve your people.

We now recite the prayer that Jesus taught us to pray:

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 trespasses

As we forgive those who trespass against us.

Lead us not into temptation,

But deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power

And the glory forever.

Amen.

### **Offering:**

Thank you all for your tithes and offerings that sustain our Church and ministries.

### **Offertory Prayer:**

God of abundance,  
you fill us with good things;  
you satisfy our thirst;  
you meet our every need.  
From your rock,  
our blessings flow.  
Accept what we give in return:  
our hearts, our hands, our gifts, our love.  
Use them to answer the cries  
of a world in need. Amen.

### **The Written Word:**

### **Matthew 1:18-21**

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. 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.

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. 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.”

### **The Spoken Word:**

### **Jesus as Savior and Our Need for Saving**

Shortly after learning from Gabriel that she was to become pregnant by the power of the Holy Spirit, and that she would give birth to the Messiah, Mary shared this news with Joseph. Joseph became the first person in history to doubt the story Mary told; he would not be the last.

Incarnation. If you think about it, this really is a radical idea. The God that created the moon and the stars, the sea and the animals, plants and human beings was actually born and lived and walked the earth! He was crucified for our sins, was buried and rose from the dead! It sounds like the plot of a Sci-Fi Fantasy. Yet, as Christians we believe that the Bible reveals this history as truth. Last week we talked about Jesus as King. The long-awaited messiah. Christians who embrace the concept of the Trinity believe that our King chose to walk among us. The father sent the son so that the world might know who this King of the universe really is, and that they might hear his call, know his will, and live as his people. The son, in turn, sent the spirit to empower us to Incarnate the love of Christ.

That night, Joseph undoubtedly tossed and turned in his bed, probably feeling hurt, angry, and disappointed at what he believed was Mary's infidelity. But after finally falling asleep, he

had a dream. In that dream, an Angel of the Lord appeared to him saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”(Matthew :20-21)

If you recall the verse we read last week, the angel Gabriel tells Mary, too, that her Child’s name should be Jesus. The name Jesus is rooted in the Greek language, but the Hebrew version of his name is Yeshua. It comes from the personal name for God in Hebrew, Yahweh, and the word for “to save” or “to deliver,” yasha. Yeshua therefore means “God saves,” “God delivers,” or “God helps.” Jesus name points to his role and the purpose of the Incarnation. Every time we speak his name, we recognize him as our savior, deliverer, rescuer, and helper. With each mention of his name, we are reminded that he is our savior and deliverer. In those moments, when the pain is so deep that you can’t find the words to pray, just say His name. Jesus.

The Angel speaking to the shepherds on that first Christmas night announced to them, “I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.” (Luke 2:10-11)

**Let’s open the next gift in our Advent kit.**

**Here is a reminder for you to put on your refrigerator that Christ our Savior is born.**

What does it mean to call Jesus a Savior? Why do we need a Savior?

What do we need saving from? How does he save us?

These are questions we should ask as we journey through the season of advent. I remember having a conversation with a coworker. The subject of religion came up and she shared with me enthusiastically, “I’ve accepted Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior.” It caught me off guard. Being raised in the Methodist Church, that’s not a statement I heard very often. It was when she asked, “Are you saved?” that I became uncomfortable. I sort of knew what she meant, but I had never really thought about it or said it like that. I knew deep down that I am saved, but I felt like I had to explain, “Well, my church doesn’t really say it like that.” We talked about this in our class on Monday. For some, our comfort level regarding the use of the language “being saved” aligned with whatever faith tradition we were brought up in. Others had experienced an event, a spiritual awakening of sorts, and they could remember the moment they were saved. One person said she was saved when Jesus died on the cross. Pause and ponder that!

So, what does it mean to be saved? Most people would agree, being saved means receiving forgiveness for our sins and the guilt and from the punishment of hell. However, the salvation Jesus offers is far more expansive than simply forgiveness and deliverance from hell. Here’s where it is helpful to remember that His name means **saved** and can also be translated as **delivered, rescued or helped**. When we speak of Jesus as savior, we are also speaking of his work to deliver, rescue or help us right now.

It seems odd to talk so much about sin during advent. Adam Hamilton says this, “I want to be clear: if all you ever hear about in church on Sunday is sin, you’re probably in the wrong church. But if you never hear about sin in church, you may also be at the wrong church. The

good news of Jesus is not that we are sinners, but that he is our savior. But we can't appreciate his role as savior if we don't know that we need to be saved.

Let's define sin. The Hebrew and Greek words most commonly translated as sin mean to stray from the path or miss the mark. This implies that there is a right path, a mark, or an ideal that we are meant to follow as human beings – yet we routinely struggle to stay on the path or to hit the target. As it says in the great hymn, Come, Thou Font of Every Blessing, we are by nature, “Prone to wander,” and, “prone to leave the God we love.”

The ideals are laid out throughout scripture. They include practicing justice, demonstrating loving kindness, and walking humbly with God. It includes sharing your food with the hungry, clothing the naked, and having compassion for the sick, the stranger, and the prisoner. It is captured in the 10 commandments, Jesus teaching, the words of the prophets and the apostles, and much more. Jesus summarized the ideal path with two commandments that Moses had been given: love God with your entire being and love your neighbor as you love yourself.

Do you always walk this path? I know I fail too many times to count.

If everyone walked this path, we would have no wars, we would need no prisons, and we wouldn't see refugee crises or have a world where people die of malnutrition. There would be no more racism or bigotry. All marriages would survive. There would be no sexual assault, no cruelty, no dishonesty or unkindness anymore. But this is not the world we live in. Why don't we have that kind of world? The Christian answer is - sin.

As humans we all struggle with sin. From the Christian perspective, sin is the fundamental problem in the human condition. It is both the interior struggle with temptation, and the act of succumbing to temptation. The result is suffering, alienation, guilt and shame. This struggle goes back to Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. They were tempted and even though they knew the fruit was forbidden, they ate it anyway. This story is meant to teach us about ourselves. We know there is a good and right path, but we have all heard the whisper of the tempter encouraging us to turn from that path. We all know the battle with temptation, the tendency to do the wrong thing, and we've all heard the serpent whisper to us, rationalizing with us, beckoning us to leave the path.

We've been reading some of Paul's letters on recent Sundays. Paul expressed his inner battle with sin in Romans 7:18-19 when he wrote, “I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good that I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.” Later he continues, “Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” Who is it that delivers him or saves him? He says, “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” Jesus is our Savior, Deliverer, Helper and Healer.

Jesus saves us both from our inner tendency to sin, and the guilt and shame we carry with us when we do sin. When we choose to follow Christ, we find a new center to our lives and a change in our inner desire. It is not that the temptation completely vanishes from our lives, but we find a new, stronger impulse pulling us toward the right path. This is that Sanctifying or Perfecting grace that John Wesley talked about. We are works in progress. We are becoming more Christlike.

The more we seek to grow in him, follow him, love him, and serve him, the more we recognize the tempter and his fast-talking ways. James 4:7 tells us, “Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.” The devil is another topic that United Methodists don’t feel very comfortable talking about. Some Christians see the devil as a metaphor or personification of temptation and evil. For many other Christians, the devil is a literal spiritual being who plays the role of tester, tempter, and accuser in scripture. However you perceive the devil, faith in Jesus gives us strength to resist the tempter. Asking for Christ's help gives us power to stand up against what Paul calls, “the wiles of the devil.” There is a contemporary Christian song titled “Your Great Name.” Natalie Grant sings the words, “The enemy, he has to leave, at the sound of Your great name.” When I saw this performed live in concert, the crowd went wild with praise. “The enemy, he has to leave, at the sound of Your great name.” There is power over evil in the name, Jesus.

Jesus has the power to save us from our sins. We are not yet the people we hope to be, nor are we the people Christ wants us to be. But we are also not the people we would have been, were it not for his rescuing grace in our lives. That’s important to remember. We are under construction. We are works in progress. We are better human beings because of Christ. Much of the goodness, kindness, and compassion in the world today happens as a result of the way that Christ has saved his people from their sins.

Jesus doesn’t save us from the consequences of our sins. For example, if you do something illegal, you may go to jail. What Jesus saves us from is the guilt, shame, and sense of alienation from God that we feel when we sin. He forgives our sins, washing us clean and making us new. Consider the story in Luke 7 concerning the woman who wept at Jesus feet, a woman Luke describes simply as, “a woman in the city, a sinner.” she sensed Jesus compassion and love, barged into the home of the pharisee where Jesus was a dinner guest, and there she fell at Jesus feet, pouring precious ointment on his feet as she wept. Jesus forgave her sins and said, “Your faith has saved you.”

Paul notes in Romans 5:8, “But God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us.” In the crucifixion scene in the gospels, Jesus holds a mirror up to humanity. When the Incarnate God walked among us, humans crucified him. This act demonstrates the height of human sin and brokenness. The cross is also a magnifying glass allowing us to see the pain God experiences as a result of human sin. The good news is there was a plan.

Jesus was born to die. From the very beginning, this divine plan had been unfolding. Jesus was sent to save you and me. First John reads: “My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the Righteous One, and he himself is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for our sins but also for the whole world.” (1 John 2:1-2) He died once for ALL. Yes, that includes you.

You may not feel worthy. We all have times in our lives when we question our existence. We wonder if our lives really matter. Jesus spent most of his time with people I suspect felt that way. Let me assure you; you matter to God! Jesus life, his words, his ministry, his death and resurrection all shout that your life has value and worth. Your life has meaning. God isn't

done with you yet. As Jesus suffers and dies on the cross, he is saying to you and me and the rest of humanity your life has value. Your sins are forgiven. You are loved. And in his resurrection Christ shouted, I know you feel hopeless, but look, I have overcome, and you will too.

That is what John was saying in one of the Bible's best-known verses, John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." It was what Jesus was communicating when he said to his disciples, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." You are loved!

I conclude with Adam Hamilton's words, "Love came down at Christmas to a stable in Bethlehem, to two poor parents and a handful of night-shift shepherds. That love would be evident in the way he healed the sick, forgave sinners, welcomed children, fed the hungry, and cared for his disciples. But nowhere was that love more clearly seen than on the cross as he hung there, saying, "This much. God loves you this much."

Thanks be to God!

### **Communion** *written in part by Pastor Robb McCoy,*

**Invitation:** In this season of expectant waiting, we are invited to Christ's table here and now. Coming to Christ's table is a way to experience the grace of God. Therefore, it is open to all. The only requirement is a sincere heart. The only barriers to the table are created in our own heart. So, we come together as a people to confess our sins to God. We confess as a people because we all fall short of God's plan of perfect love. We do not confess to avoid punishment. We confess to free our own hearts and minds, so we may remove the barriers we build between ourselves, our God, and our brothers and sisters.

**Prayer of confession:** We confess that we have not loved you with our whole heart. We go about our lives as if Christmas is an event to be celebrated, but not lived. We hear the good news, but do not heed it. We turn away the holy family for there is no room in our hearts. We hear the cry of the expectant mother, desperate for care and a place to lie, but listen instead to the carols. We see the lowly children, born in manglers among the filth of the world, but we look instead to the decorations. We hear the call of the Angels to come and worship the newborn King, but we bow down to the idols of our culture. Forgive us, we pray. Forgive us and free us for joyful obedience. Remove the barriers that we construct and empower us to be a people doing the real, gritty, holy, graceful, loving work of Christmas every day. (At this time we pause for silent confession and prayer.) In the name of the Holy Spirit, we pray. Amen.

**Pardon:** And the good news is this: Out of the wilderness a voice calls out. Prepare ye the way of the Lord. Prepare ye the way of love. Prepare ye the way of forgiveness. The Christ child was born in the midst of darkness. The waiting is over. Christ our Savior may be born today in your heart. In the name of Jesus Christ, we are all forgiven. **Joy to the World.**

**Amen.**

*The Lord be with you as we lift up our hearts.  
Now let us give thanks to the Lord our God.*

It is good to give our thanks and praise. It is a good and joyful thing always and everywhere to give thanks to you, God Almighty, creator of heaven and earth.

We join in praise and come together to sing unending hymn of the saints of glory.

*Holy, Holy, Holy Lord. God of power and might adored, heaven and earth are shining bright with the glory of your light. Loud Hosannas now we sing. In the highest they may ring. Blessed is the coming one. Christ Emmanuel your son. Glory in the highest. Holy God, your name is blessed.*

**Holy are you, and Holy is your Son Jesus Christ.**

Who, on the night in which he gave himself up for us, he took bread, gave thanks to you, broke the bread, gave it to his disciples, and said: **“Take, eat; this is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”** And when the supper was over, took the cup, gave thanks to you, gave it to his disciples and said: **“Drink from this, all of you. This is my blood of the new covenant, poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.”**

And so, in remembrance of these your mighty acts in Jesus Christ, we offer ourselves in praise and thanksgiving as a holy and living sacrifice, in union with Christ’s offering for us, as we proclaim the mystery of faith. **Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again.**

Pour out your Holy Spirit on us gathered here, and on these gifts of bread and wine. Make them be for us the body and blood of Christ, that we may be for the world the body of Christ, redeemed by his blood. Make us a Christmas people, secure in what has come, and hopeful for what is yet to be. By your Spirit make us one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world.

At this time, we consume the elements with grateful hearts.

Savior God, keep us vigilant in our Advent waiting until Christ comes in final victory and we feast at his heavenly banquet. Through your Son Jesus Christ, with the Holy Spirit in your holy Church, all honor and glory is yours, almighty Father, now and forever. **Amen.**

### **Benediction:**

As you continue on your journey, know that it is because of the incarnation, because of the baby in the manger, our King and Savior, that you are indeed forgiven and loved beyond all measure.

Thanks be to God!

*Merry  
Christmas!*