

Shepherd of the Valley United Methodist Church
December 13, 2020
Pastor Janet Culbertson
Incarnation – Jesus – The Light of the World

Merry Christmas...

And Welcome to Shepherd of the Valley United Methodist Church in Phoenix Arizona. Today is the third Sunday of Advent and we are celebrating the Incarnation; the fact that God became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood.

We continue our study of Adam Hamilton's book, Incarnation. I had originally planned to preach on the chapter titled, Emmanuel in the Midst of a Pandemic today, but a unique opportunity has come up. This is brand new material and Rev. Hamilton is making a video of his own Emmanuel sermon available for us to view, but it won't be available until next week. He is a great preacher, his message is current, and he knows this material so well, so our worship team decided to switch things around a bit, so we can take advantage of his offer. Today we will talk about Jesus as the Light of the World, and next week Adam Hamilton will be our guest preacher (on video of course) the rest of our service will have the same format we usually do... We will also send a written copy to those who get their worship by mail.

Because of this change, one thing that is mixed up is the gifts in our Advent kit, so today, we will open the one marked Light of the World (but not yet), and next week we will open the one marked Emmanuel.

Speaking of light... our **windows** in the Education building are lit up. Thank you to all of the people who created the displays, they're wonderful! Feel free to stop by any evening between now and January 6th to see them.

On Christmas Eve, we will have our Outdoor "Walk Through" featuring live piano music and those wonderful windows. 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 to take home. 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.

Blue Christmas: Our Desert Southwest Conference will be providing a special Blue Christmas service on Monday December 21st. (It is also known as The Longest Night). The service is a video, and it is designed for persons who are feeling blue at Christmas time due to having experienced suffering or loss. It provides a time to grieve and offers hope. We will post this on our worship page and send you a link by email as we do for our regular services.

Our entire **Christmas Offering** this year will be added to the funds collected by the children's Bucket Brigade. 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**. If that's the case, please be sure to mark your gifts with your intentions (Christmas or Year End Gift) so that we know where to direct those funds.

My virtual office hours are cancelled this week only. I am attending a seminar on Zoom all day on Tuesday, so I won't be available for office hours, but as always, please feel free to call or text some other time during the week if you'd like to talk.

Let us begin our time of worship together.

Opening Prayer:

Creator God, in the beginning you called light from darkness, and you have made your light to shine in our hearts by displaying your glory in the person of Jesus Christ. We call him by many names, but they all point to your presence, power, and love. May we shine with your light not only at Christmas but at all times, in all our words and deeds. As Jesus took on human flesh so long ago, may we your followers incarnate your love for others, so that all might give glory to our Father in heaven. Amen.

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

Advent Candle Lighting

“The true light that shines on all people was coming into the world.”

We light the THIRD Advent candle as creatures eager to meet their Creator. The Word, the life that was present in the beginning is coming down to us, to make God known. Jesus, you are the light of the world. (John 1:9)

Joys and Concerns:

From Betty & Hiro 1) Betty's test came back good, 2) she has developed cellulitis in her broke foot so needs continued prayers for healing, 3) Hiro fell on Monday and was taken to E.R. & they couldn't find anything wrong so sent him back home. The guess is that he was dehydrated. Prayers that he can regain his strength and stability.

From Art & Sally, their Daughter's Mother-in-law was exposed to Covid, she is in her 80's. Prayers that she was not infected.

From Pastor Janet, her group Sister Melinda is very sick. Prayers for a quick recovery with no lasting effects.

For Pastor Deb and Skip, Deb was rushed to E.R. on Sunday. They found several blood clots, one had traveled from lungs to heart and had to be removed. She was released to home on Thursday.

From Deb G., her mother Ruth is 95 in care home in Ohio and has tested positive for Covid. Prayers for healing for Ruth and protection for those who take care of her.

Praise for Jean, she is improving every day. Continued prayers for healing, especially for the wrist.

From Tweedy, stepson Daniel is in hospital with pneumonia and a blood infection (not Covid).

From Susan H. her sister Lori and family have been exposed to Covid. Lori's son Anthony and his wife are both infected and need prayers for healing.

From Janice, Nikki's husband Bill was in hospital in Amarillo. He had 4 blood transfusions, They are now back in Phoenix, trying to see a Dr. here. Please pray for healing and strength.

From Wanda C. her friend's family all have Covid. Both parents, Rubin & Margarita are in the hospital. Please keep whole family in prayers for healing and comfort.

Lynn Oemler's granddaughter-in-law's grandpa Jack has been in the hospital on a ventilator for four days with covid and is no better. He also has COPD. Please pray for comfort and healing for grandpa Jack.

Lynn's son Barry who lives in Prescott also has covid and needs prayers for comfort and healing.

Randal Rudder's coworker Zandy also has covid and needs prayers for comfort and healing.

Prayers of the People:

Christ our Savior,

You are the light of the world. For this we give thanks and praise. Hear our prayers as we lift up those who have been mentioned as well as those who are on our hearts today. Lord, we ask for you to wrap your loving arms around these people and situations and to provide all the comfort and healing that is possible. There is darkness in the world, but Christmas is coming. Christmas is the celebration of light piercing our darkness. Please bring light and hope to all 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.

Offertory Prayer:

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

John 1:1-5, 9-14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being⁴ in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

The Spoken Word:

Jesus, The Light of the World

Light shines in the darkness; the Word became flesh. The one who once shouted, "let there be light!" came to us in Jesus. This is incarnation!

Today is the third Sunday of Advent. As I mentioned, the original plan was to talk about Jesus as Emmanuel, God with us. But we are switching things around a bit today so that you can hear Adam Hamilton, preach on Emmanuel next Sunday. Our message today comes from the chapter of his book, Incarnation; titled The Light of the World. Two weeks ago, we heard the Christmas story from the Gospel of Luke and recognized Jesus as our King. Last week, we read the story from Matthew's Gospel and realized that Jesus is our Savior. He not only forgives our sins and delivers us from death, He rescues us from loveless, meaningless, and hopeless lives. Mark's Gospel doesn't tell the Christmas story, but begins with John the Baptist's preaching and Jesus' baptism. Mark introduces Jesus as the Messiah, Christ, and Savior using his name, Jesus, and calls him God's son. Mathew, Mark, and Luke, though they have differences, tell Jesus's story in much the same way.

In John's account there are no stories of Mary and Joseph. There's no journey to Bethlehem, no shepherds, no wise men, no birth in a stable, but listen to how rich John's account of Christmas is. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... What has come into being⁴ in him was life,[a] and the life was the light of all people...⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it...⁹ The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.[a]

The concept of darkness and light spans from the first page of the Bible to the last. Darkness is most often but not always associated with evil, adversity, despair, and even death. Light, on the other hand, is usually associated in scripture with God, goodness, joy, knowledge, hope, and life. Last week we talked about the good path we are intended to walk. That path is described in scripture as “walking in the light.” When we stray from the path, we move toward the darkness. Christmas, the Incarnation of God, is God’s response to darkness.

John’s telling of the Christmas story is rooted in the Creation story. It clearly shows the cosmic significance of Jesus’s incarnation as God’s response to darkness. John begins with the familiar words of Genesis 1:1, “In the beginning ...” In Genesis 1, God creates all that is by speaking: “Then God said...” As God speaks, everything comes to be. In John 1, Jesus is described as the Word and, as John says, all things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.” Just as God spoke in Genesis 1 and light was created, in John 1 we read, “What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.”

Matthew captures the same idea, though he associates it with Jesus ministry, when he quotes Isaiah 9: “The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned. (Matthew 4:16)

Each week of Advent, the church lights another candle in the Advent wreath. The closer we come to Christmas, the greater the light until finally on Christmas Eve the Christ candle is lit; the Light of the World has been born!

The angels proclaimed to the shepherds that Jesus’s birth is good news of great joy for all people. God has come to us, to show us who God is, to remind us that he walks with us in our darkest hours, and to call us to walk in the light of his love. He came to embody the light that God brings to us - to demonstrate God’s compassion to the sick, to offer God’s mercy to sinners, and to teach us by his words and example how to live as children of the light.

And then, in his death, he gave himself for us, demonstrating God’s self-giving love; By his resurrection, he pierced the darkness of death and grief, bringing humanity the light of hope and the promise that, “The worst thing is never the last thing.”

Later in his gospel, John records that Jesus said to his disciples, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” (John 8:12). Still later in the same gospel, Jesus says “Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.” (John 11: 9b-10)

This is the point of Christmas. It is the celebration of light piercing our darkness, God’s light coming to us to enlighten our lives. We need not fear that we will stumble or become lost because we are no longer trying to find our way in the dark; we have the light of Christ by which we walk.

These verses often remind me of the times when my boys were small and, as the mom, I was usually the last one up at night. As I headed to bed, I would shut off the lights in the family room and kitchen, but I didn’t want to turn the hall light on because I didn’t want to wake anybody up. At first everything seemed pitch black. But I found if I waited a moment

and let my eyes adjust, I could see even the smallest lights penetrating the darkness. I'm sure you've experienced that. It's amazing how bright those little power indicator lights are on the TV and other electronics. The digital clocks on the stove and microwave were also a source of light and slivers of light from the streetlight outside would also slip in through the blinds. There was enough light for me to get my bearings and prevent me from walking into walls. Granted, I stepped on a few Legos, but my point is, when you seek the light, even the smallest glimmer of light can help you find your way in the darkness and give you hope.

A movie came out in 2016 called *The Finest Hours*. It's based on the true story of the Coast Guard mission to rescue the survivors of the SS *Pendleton* that broke in two during a bad storm off the coast of Chatham Massachusetts in February of 1952. My Grandpa George, my mom's dad, owned the hardware store on Main St. in Chatham, and they lived in the apartment above the store. My mom was 15 at the time and she recalls that she was babysitting and listening to the reports on the radio. Four inexperienced crewmen in a small twelve passenger lifeboat battled hurricane force winds and 60-foot waves to rescue 32 crew members from the wreckage of the *Pendleton*. There is a scene in the movie where the cars line up on the shore and shine their headlights out to sea to guide them back home. It turns out that part is embellished by Hollywood, but the actual account of lifeboat captain, Bernie Webber, indicates that upon their return, he spotted the blinking red light of the buoy, which marked the way into Old Harbor and to the Chatham Fish Pier. Also, the bright beam from the Chatham Lighthouse would have been visible from an even greater distance. Lighthouses have long been a symbol of Christian faith. Jesus is the Light of the World. A beacon of hope in the darkness.

The play between light and darkness and Jesus as the Light of the World is one reason that we celebrate Christmas on December 25th. No one knows the precise day when Jesus was born. In the 1st century, Jewish people did not typically celebrate birthdays. Parents did not obtain government issued certificates that recorded the date of a child's birth. Early Christians focused more on the death and resurrection of Jesus. Those events could be dated because they were connected to Passover, and dates for Passover can be calculated using a lunar calendar. As long as the Crucifixion and Resurrection were the emphasis, the date of Jesus birth was anyone's guess. But overtime, there was a yearning to celebrate Jesus birth as well, not simply to commemorate his birthday, but as a way of celebrating the Incarnation - the moment when God entered our world, when the light came to push back the darkness.

Not knowing the day when Christ was born, one day seemed most fitting: the winter solstice. In the northern hemisphere, the winter solstice occurred on December 25th according to the Julian calendar. Today, we use the Gregorian calendar; and the winter solstice usually occurs on December 21st or December 22nd. Why did early Christians choose to celebrate Christ's birth on the winter solstice? Some would say it was to replace the Pagan festivals as the empire was Christianized. It is true that people throughout history have celebrated the winter solstice with festivals. But I believe the real reason is that on this day, the heavens themselves proclaimed Christmas and the significance of the Incarnation. Up until the winter solstice, darkness and night increase for months, and daytime and light recede. But the winter solstice marks the turning point, where the heavens themselves declare that light has conquered the darkness. Light triumphs over darkness; daytime pushes back the

night. This is also why many Blue Christmas services take place on the Longest Day of the year. There is a promise that each and every day thereafter will be filled with more and more light and hope and healing. “The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.” God came to us, as one of us, to bring light into our darkness. He came to save us from ourselves - from our tendency to succumb to the darkness - to call us to walk in the light and to take his light into the world. And he came to save us from the darkness that at times overwhelms us. He came to show that he walks with us through the dark, scary places in our lives, even through, “the valley of the shadow of death.”

In John's gospel, Jesus told his disciples, “I am the light of the world.” But I love how in Matthew's gospel, Jesus turns to his disciples and says, “You are the light of the world.” A city built on a hill cannot be hid ...Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your father in heaven.” He is the light, and as we come to him, trust in him, and begin to follow him, we walk in His light. We bear His light within us or we Incarnate His light.

Picture a darkened sanctuary. The advent candles have been extinguished, but the light of the Christ candle remains. The pastor lights a candle from the Christ candle and passes it to the ushers. As the ushers pass the candlelight to a few people they share the light with their neighbors, filling the whole room with light. God's strategy was that those who believed in Jesus, who received his name, would have his light with them. And they would then reflect his light and live his light in acts of justice, mercy, and love. In this way, through us, each of us doing our part to push back the darkness, the world would be filled with light. This is the mission, the calling, the vision, and the promise of Christmas.

Pastoral Prayer:

Dear Jesus, we acclaim you with many titles and names, but they all point us to your presence, power, and love. May we shine with your light not only at Christmas but at all times, in all our words and deeds. As you took on human flesh in a unique and decisive way so long ago, may you, in smaller but significant ways, take it on again in our flesh, that the world may see and give glory to your father in heaven and ours. Amen.

Benediction:

Go in peace and let the light of the world shine through you.