



## **At-Home Worship Woodfords Congregational Church Advent & Christmas 2020**

*“Raise your voice ... raise it; don't be afraid!” ~ Isaiah 40:9*

The history of humanity is fraught with pain, which often gives rise to fear and encourages people to mistreat one another. Like us, Jesus was born into this imperfect world. This Advent, as we close out a difficult year, we will seek inspiration in the words of an anonymous Jewish poet who wrote “I believe in the sun, even when the sun is not shining” on a wall during the Holocaust. We will explore powerful music and narratives that promote transformation and reconciliation through hope, love, joy, and peace. This Advent and Christmas, let's fill the night with music and light and affirm and act on the reasons why we can still believe, even when we are discouraged.

We hope that you enjoy this at-home worship resource. If you are unable to make it to Zoom worship over Advent and Christmas, this booklet will help you stay connected with what we are doing. Feel free to share these rituals with family and friends. Perhaps you will start a new Sunday-morning tradition of reading and lighting Advent candles over breakfast.

May God be with you, and may the universe hold you gently, during this season of birth and new beginnings!

## **Advent 1 – November 29, 2020**

### **"I Believe in the Sun: Hope for Tomorrow"**

*"Prepare the way..."*

*"Change your hearts and lives, and trust this good news."*

*"Raise your voice ... raise it; don't be afraid"*

*~ Selections from Mark 1: 1-15 and Isaiah 40: 1-11*

This Advent, we will hear some comfort, some challenge, and some good news. The prophet Isaiah and the four Gospel authors wrote at other times in history when people needed desperately to hear all of these, as well. This week, the prophet Isaiah and the gospel writer who published first – Mark – reassure people that good news is beginning ... and yet they also both say, "Make yourself ready!" Raise your voices, change your hearts, get ready to be transformed, because now is the time! Today, let us embrace the hope that we can do what needs to be done to bring more light and goodness into the world this season.

#### **Opening Prayer**

Holy One, we thank you for the glimpses we catch of your gift of untiring hope. Even in the midst of fear, of challenge, of struggle – even when our view is obscured by clouds of doubt – ignite the flame of hope within us, that we might glow with its brilliance from the inside out. Amen.

#### **Light the Candle of Hope**

#### **Scripture Readings**

Isaiah 40: 1-11 & Mark 1: 1-15

#### **Carol of Resistance**

#### **Sing or Listen to "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day"**

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote this poem at Harvard on Christmas Day in 1863, during the heart of the Civil War. His wife had died tragically in a fire, and he had just found out that his son had been injured as a Union soldier. Longfellow heard the sound of bells and began to write, spurred on by his sorrow at the state of humankind:

*And in despair, I bowed my head:  
There is no peace on earth, I said,  
For hate is strong and mocks the song  
Of peace on earth, good will to [all]."*

And yet hope wins out as he pens the fourth verse:

*"Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:  
"God is not dead, nor doth [not] sleep;  
The wrong shall fail, the right prevail,  
With peace on earth, good will to [all]."*

### **Blessing**

Like a bell ringing out the news that the sun still shines even on cloudy days, fill the night left by sadness with messages of hope. Go into life humming the tunes that keep hope alive in you and spur you on in your work of justice and reconciliation. Raise your voice and say, "Do not be afraid!" May God bless you and accompany you. Amen!

## **Advent 2 – December 6, 2020**

### **"I Believe in Love: Daring Right Relationship"**

*"Look! A virgin will become pregnant and give birth to a son,  
And they will call him, Emmanuel ('God with us')."  
~ Mark 1:23 and Isaiah 7:14*

In both the Gospel of Matthew and Isaiah, a messenger appears as a sign from God, heralding a new era. In each passage, the words "do not be afraid" appear, offering a clue that the messenger – whether prophet or angel – was referencing something that induced fear in the recipient. A new way of being, of relating and loving takes courage. It means eschewing the present order of things so that a new and better day can be born.

### **Opening Prayer**

Holy One, we thank you for the glimpses we catch of your gift of daring love. Even in the midst of fear, of challenge, of struggle – even when we cannot yet see a better day when we will act like the human family we are – ignite the flame of love within us, that we might glow with its brilliance from the inside out. Amen.

### **Light the Candle of Love**

### **Scripture Readings**

Isaiah 7:1-14 & Matthew 1:1-25

## Carol of Resistance

### **Sing or Listen to “It Came Upon the Midnight Clear”**

This week’s Carol of Resistance was written in 1849 by a Massachusetts Unitarian minister, the Rev. Edmund Hamilton Sears. Over the decades since then, many hymnals have left out one particular verse. But a new hymnal, *Glory to God*, restores its powerful lyrics, which refer to the angels’ love-song being drowned out by our warring nature:

*Yet with the woes of sin and strife  
the world has suffered long;  
beneath the angel-strain have rolled  
two thousand years of wrong;  
and we at war on earth hear not  
the love-song which they bring;  
O hush the noise and cease the strife,  
and hear the angels sing.*

Let us remember that we are to listen to the angel chorus and then join it, raising our voices with the message that love, rather than hate, is the answer.

## Blessing

Like a bell ringing out the news that God is still with us, Emanuel, continue to fill the night left by sadness with messages of love. Go into life humming the tunes that keep love alive in you and spur you on in your work of justice and reconciliation. Raise your voice and say, “Do not be afraid!” May God bless you and accompany you. Amen!

## **Advent 3 – December 13, 2020**

### **“I Believe in God: Ode to Joy”**

*“He has pulled the powerful down from their thrones  
and lifted up the lowly.”*

*“I live on high, in holiness,  
and also with the crushed and the lowly,  
reviving the spirit of the lowly,  
reviving the heart of those who have been crushed.”*

*~ Luke 1:52 and Isaiah 57:15b*

This week, we turn to Luke’s writing, which is an account in two acts: first, the Gospel biography of Jesus, and then the story of the early church (the “Jesus community”). Whether you were a Jew or Gentile in Luke’s days, deciding to become

a part of this illegal early Christian movement could bring punishment for your allegiance. Although they were separated by centuries, Luke and Isaiah both offer inspirational promises that the downcast, lowly, and oppressed will rise up and triumph. Like the Jewish people of Isaiah's time and like the early Christians, we too may sometimes wonder where God is in our suffering. We long to hear the promise that a reason for joyful praise is the good news on the way!

### Opening Prayer

Holy One, we thank you for the glimpses we catch of your gift of the depths of joy. Even in the midst of fear, of challenge, of struggle – even when we are not sure of your presence – ignite the flame of joy within us, that we might glow with its brilliance from the inside out. Amen.

### Light the Candle of Joy

#### Scripture Readings

Isaiah 57:14-19 & Luke 1:1-4, 26-56

#### Carol of Resistance

#### **Sing or Listen to “Ode to Joy”**

Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, which is the basis of the tune for the hymn “Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee,” has been a powerful witness to the human spirit's ability to overcome adversity in many situations around the globe. British punk rock star Billy Bragg once wrote an alternative translation of the original German choral score for a teacher to share with the children in her classroom, and it soon became a popular anthem that even was performed for the Queen! In these words, you can hear a call to resist division, to raise our voices, to “furnish every heart with joy and banish all hatred for good.”

*“See now like a Phoenix rising  
from the rubble of the war  
hope of ages manifested  
peace and freedom evermore.  
Brothers, sisters stand together,  
raise your voices now as one.  
Though by history divided,  
reconciled in unison.*

*Throw off now the chains of ancient  
bitterness and enmity.  
And in hand let's walk together  
on the path of liberty.  
Hark...a new dawn is breaking;  
raise your voices now as one.  
Though by history divided,  
reconciled in unison.*

*What's to be then all my brothers,  
sisters; what is in your hearts?  
Tell me now the hopes you harbour,  
What's the task and where to start.  
... Those speak ten million voices;  
every word is understood.  
Furnish every heart with joy  
and banish all hatred for good."*

### **Blessing**

Like a bell ringing out the news that God is ever-present with us, fill the night left by sadness with messages of joy. Go into life humming the tunes that keep joy alive in you and spur you on in your work of justice and reconciliation. Raise your voice and say, "Do not be afraid!" May God bless you and accompany you. Amen!

## **Advent 4 – December 20, 2020**

### **"I Believe in Light: Illuminating Peace"**

*"What came into being through the Word was life,  
and the life was the light for all people."  
"A child is born to us, a son is given to us,  
and authority will be on his shoulders.  
He will be named  
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Eternal Father, Prince of Peace."  
~ John 1:3-4 and Isaiah 9:6*

The "great light" prophesied by Isaiah in today's text is echoed in the first strains of John's Gospel good news: The light that brings peace – that saves the people from all that would extinguish it – has been there from the beginning, The Word is made

flesh and dwells among us. God's reign is now! Will we believe it? Will we continue to put flesh on it, embodying the peace meant for all humanity?

### Opening Prayer

Holy One, we thank you for the glimpses we catch of your gift of peace on earth. Even in the midst of fear, of challenge, of struggle – even when we are not sure that goodwill among us can be found – ignite the flame of peace within us, that we might glow with its brilliance from the inside out. Amen.

### Light the Candle of Peace

#### Scripture Readings

Isaiah 9:2-7 & John 1:1-18

#### Carol of Resistance

#### **Sing or Listen to “Go Tell It On the Mountain”**

Our Carol of Resistance this week is part of the repertoire of Christmas songs that were created by people who endured brutal hardships as the result of African colonization and North American slavery. Although people of African descent were ripped from much of their cultural heritage, they maintained their heritage of group song, punctuated by West African rhythms and vocal stylings. Of course, the safest thing for oppressed peoples to sing about was the religious beliefs that initially were forced upon them by their oppressors but later offered hope to many in the midst of suffering.

“Go Tell It On The Mountain” is probably the best-known African American Christmas song, and the words “seeker” and “watchman” are thought to have been code words for those seeking freedom on the Underground Railroad. The song became widely popular in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as the college students known as the Fisk Jubilee Singers – many of whom were recently freed slaves – traveled around the country to raise money and awareness. These brave performers often were turned away from hotels, railway waiting rooms, and even some churches because of their color. As we listen and sing, let us honor them and honor *all* who have endured slavery and continued systemic racism. Let us...

*“Go tell it on the mountain, over the hills and everywhere.  
Go tell it on the mountain, that Jesus Christ is born.”*

The Prince of Peace who calls upon us to break the chains of oppression is born!  
Hallelujah!

## Blessing

Like a bell ringing out the news that the light has dawned and shines on all people, fill the night left by sadness with messages of peace. Go into life humming the tunes that keep peace alive in you and spur you on in your work of justice and reconciliation. Raise your voice and say, "Do not be afraid!" May God bless you and accompany you. Amen!

## **Christmas Eve "We Believe, Even Now"**

*"Suddenly a great assembly of the heavenly forces was with the angel praising God. They said, "Glory to God in heaven, and on earth peace..."*

*"How beautiful upon the mountains  
are the feet of a messenger  
who proclaims peace,  
who brings good news..."*

*~ Luke 2:13-14 and Isaiah 52:7*

Luke's story of Jesus' birth is the one we return to again and again on this holy night, for it contains the narrative's most beloved details. We yearn to see the Nativity Scene play out, to hear the music of the angels, to feel the rush to the manger to see what this star that pierces the night sky has come to proclaim. We so desire to believe the messengers' Good News about the culmination of humanity's pain of birth: "Don't be afraid," they say, for events are transpiring that will bring peace to all people on earth.

## Opening Prayer

Holy One, we thank you for the glimpses of heaven on earth we see in the faces and light of those around us. Even in the midst of fear, of challenge, of struggle – even when our views are obscured by clouds of doubt – You have ignited the flames of hope, love, joy, and peace within us. Let us glow with their brilliance from the inside out. Amen.

## Light the Candle of Faith and Believe

### Scripture Readings

Isaiah 52:7-10 & Luke 2:1-20



## Carol of Resistance

### Sing or Listen to “Silent Night”

We have come to the classic moment of every Christmas Eve ... the moment we light our candles and sing “Silent Night.” This year, we have wondered whether it would be possible to recreate a sense of normalcy in this moment. Having lost so much in 2020, we have questioned whether we would experience the joy we usually feel on this night.

The truth is, things are not the same. And we know that they probably never *will be* the same, because of the people we have lost and the jobs and security that have disappeared. In future years, we likely will remember this moment ... the moment when we wondered whether light and song would elude us. And yet here we are. We will light our lights and we will have our song – just like the soldiers in World War I who sang “Silent Night” out into No-Man’s land and across enemy lines. For a moment, everything stopped, as the message “all is calm, all is bright” prevailed over the violence and dark night of the world.

As a nation and as individuals, we are sorely divided on many things. We are devastated by our losses. We are tired and we are not so calm. But for this moment, this night, let us remember that we are not alone. Let us also remember that we believe that the music and light of God’s promises come again and again: hope for a better tomorrow, love that works for a more equitable world, joy that wells from a place deep within us, and peace that offers us the assurance we need.

## Blessing

Like a bell ringing out the news that Christ is born among us, fill the night left by sadness with messages of hope, love, joy, and peace. Go into life humming the tunes that keep light alive in you and spur you on in your work of justice and reconciliation. Raise your voice and say, “Do not be afraid!” May God bless you and accompany you. Amen!

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