

Prepare the Way
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United Church of Strafford, Vermont
November 13, 2022, Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost, Advent Preparation Sunday
Selected verses on Advent themes, and Isaiah 40:1-11

Welcome: Welcome to the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, on this Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost and Advent Preparation Sunday. Welcome to those of you in the sanctuary and those online, and welcome especially to Sarah Cantor and The Cantornote Church Musicians. Thank you for being here!

Johann Olearius was a pastor and hymn writer who collaborated with Johann Sebastian Bach. Olearius wrote the Advent hymn that begins, “Comfort, comfort ye my people, Speak ye peace, thus saith our God; Comfort those who sit in darkness Mourning ’neath their sorrow’s load.”

Advent comes two weeks from now at the darkest time of year, when our loads and hearts can feel heavy. The Advent way leads through darkness to transformative light, but we all need comfort along that way.

The church provides comfort with beautiful words, rituals and music, and most of all, with company for the journey. Let us practice being here for one another again today, extending our care and support especially to those we do not know and those we know are struggling, and let us savor the comfort of this loving community, both in person and on Zoom.

Call to Worship: Our competitive consumer society puts expectations on our holidays, but for over fifteen hundred years Advent has been a time for connecting to the spirit, seeking the light that shines in the darkness, finding hope and peace.

Advent invites us to be like shepherds who wait and watch and pray, like Mary who brings the Holy Spirit to birth to change the world, like Magi following a star and bearing gifts, like angels singing.

Advent can be beautiful and transformative, but we need to plan and prepare or else other agendas will take over. Let us worship together, paying attention to what our deepest heart is longing to experience in the coming season...

Children’s Time: All the good that comes from Advent and Christmas can happen only if we wait, but waiting for things can be hard for all of us, so I want to talk about it with you.

Last week we heard a story from the last Narnia book by C. S. Lewis. Today we are going back to *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe* where there had been a hundred years of winter. During that hundred years of ice and a wicked queen's meanness, people waited and waited and waited for Christmas but it never came. They waited also for the good lion Aslan to come and make everything right but he never came.

Waiting for Christmas is hard for any child, but imagine having to wait one hundred years! It would be easy to give up hope and despair.

Eventually the long winter and force of evil were overcome, and the Narnians who helped Aslan make things right were the ones who had succeeded in not giving up and who had waited well. They didn't let their looking forward and disappointment make them bitter or distract them from making the best of their lives as they were. They found comfort in being loving and kind and enjoying goodness while they waited.

Advent or the weeks leading up to the solstice make for a long time waiting for the light, but it does not have to feel bad. In fact, the key to having a happy Christmas is learning to use the waiting time to love as much about Advent as we can—candles and Christmas trees, beautiful music and good food, and giving gifts and meals to people who do not have enough. We can even grow to love the darkness, and the feeling of longing and eagerness. They are necessary parts of a wonderful life, and if you learn how to love that kind of time, then it will not feel like such a huge bummer when you have to wait for things, and when they finally arrive you will be in the right mood to savor them.

There is something else that can help enormously to get through any time of waiting... Prayer can calm our impatience and remind us of how we want to be and remind us that our source of hope is the higher power to whom we pray. Let us pray the Lord's Prayer...

Prepare the Way

For thousands of years people have used the growing darkness leading up to the solstice to prepare themselves to open wider to the coming light. I hope you will follow this ancient wisdom and use the time between now and Christmas to prepare your consciousness to be transformed.

I believe more than I believe anything else that the same thing that sparked the first single cell into life, the same thing that evolved human consciousness and led it through awakenings and enlightenments over the ages, whether you call that thing survival of the fittest or a sacred way or

an intelligent spirit or just dumb luck, I believe that it is at work now trying to evolve human consciousness through one more transformation in order to help us and the earth survive our human powers of consumption and destruction.

Prophets, spiritual teachers and philosophers have long seen this moment of crisis coming. They taught that humanity needed to change and showed the path humanity needed to follow. Today we are blessed by a tremendous increase of scientific and spiritual insights and tools so that we have what we need to make this transformation. All that remains is to prepare ourselves to open to it and follow where it leads.

I have studied and love Buddhism, Taoism, Hinduism, Sufism, Judaism and some Native American traditions, plus Dialectical Behavioral Therapy, that all point in this path's direction, so as I talk about Christian understanding of how to prepare the way for transformation and where the path can lead, I trust you will be able to translate it into whatever your frame of reference may be, religious or secular.

Last week Glenn Wylie gave an answer to a question that immediately leapt to first place in my list of all time favorite replies. His answer to my question was, "No, that's not the point," but for you to appreciate how important and profound that was, I need to set the context. I apologize to those who were here last week for repeating some of what you heard.

We need to understand that the goal of Jesus was not individual salvation, it was to create a human society called the realm of God, where the highest laws that humans obey are the Golden Rule and loving our neighbor as our very own self, where we see the true oneness of all people and creatures and lay down our ego-driven self-concern and extend compassion and care and justice to all.

The traditional Christian spiritual path that leads to that transformed world has four steps, and each step has an ancient Greek name. The steps are kenosis, metanoia, agape and koinonia. Here is a brief description of each:

- *Kenosis* means self-emptying, letting go of the ego's attachments and agendas as we do in meditation, making room for the Spirit to fill us and lead us toward...
- *Metanoia*, a transformation of consciousness in the direction of having what we call the heart and mind of Christ, expanding the vision of our heart to see the true oneness of all people and all creation that results in...

- *Agape*, a compassionate, unconditional love for all, because loving actions are what the Spirit flowing through the heart and mind of Christ in us wants to do; and the direct result is
- *Koinonia*, the realm of God's beloved community forming around us as we do acts of love and justice, so earth may live as one at peace...

Each of the four steps flows naturally into the next. Ideally, we repeat these steps many times a day in small ways, and deepen in them over a lifetime. This is a path for individuals, communities and humanity as a whole, a path that leads to sustainable and harmonious life—from self-emptying of the ego, to expanded consciousness, to greater love, to a more loving community.

Last week I asked the congregation to reflect on this question: Do you see ways in which this path could help your life, or help humanity in the social and environmental challenges on earth today?

That was when Glenn Wylie said no, he did not see ways in which this path could help, and then added, “and that is not the point. The point is the process, the point is to step on the path and follow it and discover where it leads.”

That answer was perfect, because the truth is that we cannot see from a perspective that we do not yet have. We may get glimpses, but until we have evolved to a new consciousness we cannot imagine the new solutions to impossible-seeming challenges that will open up to us then.

Albert Einstein is credited with saying that we cannot solve problems with the same level of thinking that created them.

The neurologist and psychiatrist Maurice Nichol wrote, “As your being increases, your receptivity to higher meaning increases. As your being decreases, the old meanings return.”

So what I am trying to persuade you to do in the season of Advent or the darkness leading up to the solstice is prepare the way for your being and receptivity to higher meaning to increase, because your community and your planet and all that you love need you to do this.

The quintessential Advent hymn, “O Come, O Come Emmanuel,” begins with the plea to “ransom captive Israel that mourns in exile here.” This is the longing we feel when we see the violence and injustice of our world and know that this is not how it has to be, and believe that

with the help of a higher power and an evolved consciousness we could make earth the Promised Land, the lovely home we exiles long for it to be.

The first verse comes from a place of kenosis (come ransom us), letting go to prepare the way to be transformed. The second verse calls on the source of light (the Dayspring) to bring enlightenment, the metanoia that leads to the agape love that puts death's shadows to flight.

The third verses asks again for metanoia, for the gifts of wisdom, knowledge and the ability to follow their path. The fourth verse is about koinonia, the ultimate goal to create a just and peaceful world founded on the laws of love.

At the end of each verse we sing, "Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel shall come." The word Emmanuel means "God with us." It means that the higher power we need in order to be transformed and transform the earth will come to us, and this faith is our grounds for rejoicing.

Sarah Cantor sent me a brilliant technical analysis of what the music does on that word rejoice. It is exactly the opposite of the joyful tone you would expect the music to paint. It makes no sense unless, as Sarah concludes, that it is designed to color the joy a shade of grief.

That is exactly right. The most advanced level of spiritual consciousness experiences fullness of joy and fullness of sorrow at the same time, and that is where the hymn and Advent both lead us. We go into the truth of a darkening, sorrow-filled world, yet we believe that light can return, and we find along the way that light shines in the darkness—an Advent candle or star. We rejoice in hope, peace, joy and love even as we grieve their absence in a faltering world.

I hope you will use the weeks ahead to prepare the way for transformation, thinking about how you can create the conditions you need for spiritual deepening and growth.

Let us pray in silence, emptying and quieting so that the Spirit of evolution can move us to evolve...

Haiku by Mel Goertz:

Over an inch of rain.
The brook is flowing again.
Deer are drinking.