

Bethel Church Worship Guide – November 29, 2020
First Sunday of Advent: “On the Road ... to Readiness”

Preparation: If you have candles available, set up an advent “wreath” in your home with five candles, one for each of the four weeks of Advent, plus a 5th candle that is lit on Christmas to represent the birth of Jesus.

Peace verse: I Corinthians 1:3 & 9 (CEB)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ...
God is faithful, and you were called by him to partnership with his Son,
Jesus Christ our Lord.

Welcome:

We are gathered this morning, not in the same place, but by the Spirit of God who has joined us together as one body in Christ. As you begin this time of worship, it’s okay to acknowledge feelings of sadness, longing, frustration, hope ... Take a moment to tell God what you are feeling. Look at the attached photo of Bethel’s sanctuary. Perhaps imagining yourself and others in that space will help you worship this morning. May God’s Spirit guide and speak to us, and to Christians around the world, as we worship in our homes, and in all kinds of places today!

This year’s Advent theme, “On the Road ...” invites us into a spiritual journey of deepening our relationship to Jesus Christ, moving closer to the desires of God. We begin the journey to Christmas by getting ready. What do we need to know or do in order to be prepared to meet Jesus in this season? What’s on your list? Are you ready? What are we waiting for?

Gathering song: We Come (by Jim Croegaert; performed by Reba Place Church musicians & dancers). Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mCkL8lPhAMo&pbjreload=101>

V. 1. Our hearts are empty without you;
barren and cold, but for the bold hope that you yourself planted within.

Refrain: In the mighty name of God, in the saving name of Jesus,
in the strong name of the Spirit,
we come, we cry, we watch, we wait, we look, we long for you.
We come, we cry, we watch, we wait, we look, we long for you.

V.2. Sometimes we long for the morning, for a refrain from etchings in pain,
yet our loneliness draws us to you. (refrain)

Lighting the Advent candle: (light one candle in your wreath)

One: We light this candle as a sign of our waiting and hope for the coming of Christ.
Hear the word of God.
In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth,
God said: “let there be light” and there was light.
And God saw that the light was good.

All: ***The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness shall not overcome it!***

Object lesson for young & old; told by Ellen Steiner:

Today we begin the journey of getting ready for Christmas. At church we call this journey Advent. That's a bit unusual. How do you travel to Christmas? How do we get ready for Christmas?

When my children were little, I would give them a list of what to pack in their suitcase. I would even write how many of each item they would need. That way they got to choose what they wore and I didn't have to pack three suitcases! One summer we traveled to West Virginia for a trip and when we arrived discovered Alex had forgotten to pack shirts to wear. We couldn't understand how he could forget his shirts. They seemed pretty important. But he had, so for four days he had to wear my extra t-shirts I had packed. And as he says, no one has let him forget!

Over the next four weeks, keep checking your list for traveling to Christmas. Make sure you are doing the important things. Being kind to others. Sharing a smile. Reading the Christmas story. So that by the end of Advent, the journey to Christmas, you are brought closer to Jesus.

Activity: Attached to this email you'll find a page you may color. (There will be a new page every week! Let Miriam know if you'd like a copy printed for you.) Feel free to share a photo of you with your completed page!

Hymn: Beloved, God's chosen – SJ #38

Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7jfOrMlNoTI>

V.1. Beloved, God's chosen, put on as a garment compassion, forgiveness,
and goodness of heart.

Above all, before all, let love be your raiment that binds into one every dissonant part.

V.2. Within, call forth Wisdom, to dwell in you richly;
let peace rule your hearts and that peace be of Christ.

And from the heart's chamber, beloved and holy, let singing thanksgiving to God ever rise.

V.3. Beloved, God's chosen, put on as a garment compassion, forgiveness,
and goodness of heart.

Above all, before all, let love be your raiment that binds into one every dissonant part.

Prayer of Confession:

God, sometimes you feel far away and hidden,
and so we fall asleep and stop watching for your presence.

**Forgive us when we pay more attention to gaining power and status,
rather than seeking You and your will.**

Forgive us when we become preoccupied with things we own, or want to own,
rather than desiring your spiritual gifts.

Save us from falling prey to false messiahs or to despair.

Help us be alert so that we recognize the signs of your presence
in our lives, homes, and the world.

We pray in the life-giving name of Jesus. Amen.

Words of Assurance: (based on I Corinth. 1:5-8)

Hear the good news: In Jesus Christ we have been enriched in every way. Through God's grace we do not lack any spiritual gift as we wait with anticipation for Jesus to be revealed. He is the one who will keep us strong to the end, so that we shall be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. **Thanks be to God!**¹

Offering and prayer: consider what you will offer to God this week.

Holy One, this Advent season we wait in hope.

And we give in hope.

Hope for your coming reign; hope because of your presence with us even now.

Receive these generous offerings,

and use them for your work of healing and hope in our world. Amen.

Scripture reading: Mark 13:24-37

Questions & Thoughts for Reflection on the Scripture:

Traditionally, the 4-week season of Advent "begins at the end" so to speak – with a scripture passage that points us to the second advent of Christ (Latin *adventus* which means *coming* or *visit*). In these weeks leading up to Christmas we are to keep in mind both "advents" of Christ – the first in Bethlehem, and the second yet to come. What emotions or thoughts do you have when you think about Christ coming again?

My personal answers to that have at different times included eagerness, worry/fear, and confusion. What sources have most strongly influenced how you understand the 2nd coming (ex: preachers, movies, Bible passages)? How do you think Jesus' disciples (and later the first readers of Mark's gospel) responded when they heard Jesus say what's in this passage?

Mark 13:24-37 is the end of a larger section that begins at Mark 11:1.² Skim read chapters 11 – 13. What do you notice about where the action takes place, and who Jesus is interacting with in those chapters?

Most of the action takes place in (and near) Jerusalem, and more specifically, in the temple, which was the religious and political center of Israelite life. Jesus' conversations in this section are mostly with various groups of Jewish leaders (chief priests, scribes, elders, Pharisees, Herodians, Sadducees). Jesus rode into Jerusalem with joyful crowds welcoming him as a saving king, and he goes straight to the temple! But instead of taking up residence on a throne in the temple, the Servant/King Jesus spends the next 3 chapters challenging and criticizing what's going on in the temple (ex: 11:15-17; 12:38-44). Time and again the temple leaders question him (11:27 – 12:37), and in response he rebukes them for hypocrisy, exclusivism, and not understanding or following the ways of God.

In chapter 13 the conversation shifts to Jesus and his disciples, but still the topic is the temple. When the disciples express admiration for the beauty and strength of the temple, Jesus

¹ Confession & assurance adapted from Moira Laidlaw, posted on her Liturgies Online website

² Willard M. Swartley, *Mark: The Way for All Nations*. Herald Press, 1979. 177.

replies, “Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down” (13:2). Shocked and puzzled, a few privately ask him, “when will this be, and what will be the sign ...?” The rest of chap. 13 (including our verses for today) is his answer to that question. Notice that his first word is “Beware” (v.5), and he ends with “Keep awake” (v.36).

So, that’s a lot of background! But to me the passage made more sense when I read it in the context of what came before it. The lessons and warnings in Mark 13:24-37 go along with Jesus’ earlier critique of the temple establishment. Jesus predicted that era would come to an end and the Jerusalem temple would be destroyed. Such a dramatic event would understandably be accompanied by false messiahs (13:6, 21-22), persecution (13:9,11), and suffering (13:17-19). However, good things would also happen at that time and beyond. Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would speak through believers enabling them to testify about Jesus to rulers and judges (13:11) and even “to all nations” (13:10).

The lesson of the fig tree seems to be that the coming of the end will be as obvious as the signs of changing seasons. At the same time, the timing of these events is completely unknown, even to the Son and the angels (v.32-37). Thus, the importance of being alert and watchful. We, God’s servants, have been given important work to do. Part of that work, according to Mark 13:10, is to proclaim good news to all people. How does the meaning of the illustration of the man going on a journey (v.34-36) change if you imagine the master of the house as a generous, patient and loving person?

The Gospel of Mark was most likely written during or soon after the first Jewish war with Rome, which began in 66 AD and reached its climax when the temple was destroyed in 70 AD.³ In other words, it was written in a time of physical and spiritual crisis. The believers who heard Mark telling the story and words of Jesus could look around them and see Jesus’ predictions taking place. Yet they took courage from the reminder that the Holy Spirit would strengthen them in the midst of trials, and that although they didn’t know the details of how or when things would happen, they could trust God, whose “words will not pass away” (v.31). In a similar way, this passage (& the gospel as a whole) can speak hope into current situations of physical and spiritual crisis. Jesus, the master, will come again to make all things new!

Thinking about the theme for today – “On the road to readiness” – is it easy or difficult for you to get ready for a journey? What in life do you find it difficult to get ready for? Being ready can have the sense of “what are you eager to have happen”. For example, I am ready (eager) to visit you all in our homes and to share meals together again! Being ready can also have the sense of “what are you prepared for”. For example: Am I ready (prepared) to receive new believers into our congregation? Are we ready (prepared) to help make systemic changes in society so that more people can experience well-being? Am I ready (prepared) for death? When Jesus said to “beware; keep alert; keep awake” I think it is a call for us to be both prepared and eager for the fulfillment of God’s reign.

³ Adela Yarbro Collins, “Introduction to Mark” in *Harper Collins Study Bible*, Student Edition. p. 1722-1723.

Read the “Words of assurance” printed above again (top p.3). Offer a prayer asking God to help you live faithfully, with anticipation and alertness for Christ’s presence with us now and as he comes more fully in the future. Give thanks for the gifts of the Spirit that enable us to endure trials and to share the good news of Emmanuel.

Response Hymn: He came down – SJ #31

Link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3PKMuSs_OEs

He came down that we may have love; (x3)
hallelujah for evermore. (Why did he come?)
He came down that we may have joy; (x3) hallelujah for evermore.
He came down that we may have peace; (x3) hallelujah for evermore.

Intercessory Prayer: you are invited to offer your own prayers now, and/or join the Bethel group sharing and prayer time at 11:00 am by calling or logging in to GoToMeeting.

Do not worry about anything, but in everything with thanksgiving
let your requests be made known to God.

Hear now my prayers:

- for Christians everywhere, and for the Bethel congregation;
may we be faithful in bearing the fruit of the Spirit.
- for those who are overcome by violence, for those who suffer injustice, for the poor.
We pray for all who need healing and peace.
- for those who endure trials, for those who are sick or dying, and for those who mourn.
We pray for all who need comfort and hope.
- for the nations of the world, for all leaders and for those who make policy decisions.
We pray for courage, integrity, justice, truth and mercy.

Generous God, draw us into your story
so that we may follow you into the joy of your kingdom. Amen.

Benediction:

People of God, people on the road: keep awake! Keep alert and get ready!
The glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together.

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