

ADVENT 2024 ON THE WAY TO BETHLEHEM



Serve & Enrich
Zion United Church
of Christ

The 1st Sunday of Advent – Rome: A Place of Longing

Prelude

Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus

Gathering: Light for the Journey

A Message from our Guide—We begin our Advent journey toward Bethlehem and the manger with a decree from Rome. Needing more money to build the Roman Empire, Caesar Augustus demands a census so that all who lived under his reign could “contribute” to his expansion of power.

Advent Wreath Lighting—Our lives and stories are often shaped by that which is out of our immediate control. This was true in the moment of the Roman decree that would turn into the story of hope for the world. On this first week of Advent, we ask ourselves whether we are placing our hope in the empires of the world, or in the liberating through-line of God’s presence. What are we longing for this Advent, and how does it call us to act with hope?

Advent Wreath Song

O Little Town of Bethlehem/We’re On Our Way

*O little town of Bethlehem,
how still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
the silent stars go by.
Yet in thy dark streets shineth
the everlasting light;
the hopes and fears of all the years
are met in thee tonight.*

*We’re on our way
We’re on our way
Dream of the day
When hope holds sway
With all the earth
In all our hearts
We’re on our way
This is the day.*

Advent Wreath Reading—The journey begins, and this candle will help light our way. We are on our way to more hope. Decrees and decisions affect our world and our lives as they did in Jesus’ day. We are a people who long for Good News. There are milestones that guide us to a better day. God’s light goes before us, we are not alone.

*We’re on our way
We’re on our way
Dream of the day
When hope holds sway*

*With all the earth
In all our hearts
We’re on our way
This is the day.*

Opening Prayer and Words of Assurance—Holy and Living God, we pray for the renewal of our world. Too often, we let fear or complacency prevent us from calling out the injustices of our time. Give us courage for action, even in the midst of our longing. Call us to a “census of hope.” Call us to our senses so that we may see, hear, know, the power of your presence with us, Emmanuel. We pray this in the name of your Son, Jesus, the Christ, the Hope of Our Lives. **Amen.**

Let this be a marker of assurance that we are moving in a faithful direction: God is with us every step of our way toward the Hope of Bethlehem. Jesus is being born into our lives even now. The Spirit is transforming us in this place.

****Hymn**

Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus, 153

30 Days of Prayer for Zion UCC—Southeast Association, Indiana-Kentucky Conference, United Church of Christ, the Whole Body of Christ, For Those Who Have Yet to Find Zion, for our Zion UCC Family.

Prayer—God of Hope, we come to you today longing for your presence in our lives and with all those who suffer—in body, mind, or spirit. We pray this day for... *[continue with prayers for those in your community and around the world who are in need of healing and wholeness]*

God of Hope, we come to you today so deeply grateful for celebrations, triumphs, and even small steps toward the lives we seek and the world we desire. We pray this day for... *[continue with prayers of thanksgiving]*

Holy God, we know you are near. We know that every step along the way to Bethlehem in this Advent season is a step closer to renewed life in Jesus, the Christ. We know that your Spirit resides within us, growing day by day into the fullness of Hope. In this moment, we pause in silence, marking your presence with awe and asking you to fill us, guide us, along our journey.

The Lord’s Prayer (unison)—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 debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.

Exploring Together—Milestones

We Hear God’s Word

Greg Miller

Romans 8: 18-25—I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with

eager longing for the revealing of the children of God, for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its enslavement to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning together as it suffers together the pains of labor, and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope, for who hopes for what one already sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Luke 2: 1-3—In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered.

Meditation

Rome: A Place of Longing

Hymn

I Want to Walk as a Child of the Light, 248

We Respond to God's Word with Our Giving

Invitation—As God promises to execute justice and righteousness in the world, God invites us to help make this promise a reality. Let us offer our gifts and our lives, that all may be blessed.~

Opportunities to Serve: Angel Tree

December Benevolence—The Christmas Fund

****Doxology**

To the tune of "Away in a Manger"

*Praise God for these gifts that we offer today
and bless them for good in the world, this we pray.
Praise Jesus, the Christ-Child, our Hope and our Stay,
the Spirit, our Keeper, our Guide on the Way.*

****We Give Thanks**— We thank you, God, for the joy we feel this day. We are blessed by this community of love, this sanctuary of acceptance. We place our trust in you, knowing that you care for us. With deep gratitude for all you provide to us, we offer our gifts to you. Centered our hearts during this season of giving. Amen.~

A Message from Our Guide—We have checked the signs and markers to make sure we are moving in a faithful direction. With hope, we move on towards Bethlehem, knowing that the Light of Christ shines through the night. We are not

alone. The powers that would keep some down and out are not the final word. The story continues, and we will proclaim it in our lives. Hope, not fear, perseveres.

****Hymn**

Angels, from the Realms of Glory, 189

****Benediction**— And now as you go forth from this place, know that all the places you encounter in the world will contain signs and markers of God’s work among us. So keep your senses alert, your perception wide, and your heart open to new discoveries along the way.

Sung Response

*O holy Child of Bethlehem,
descend to us we pray,
cast out our fear, and draw us
near; be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels
the great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide with us, our
Lord Emmanuel.*

*We’re on our way
We’re on our way
Dream of the day
When hope holds sway
With all the earth
In all our hearts
We’re on our way
This is the day.*

Postlude

Watchman, Tell Us of the Night

Service adapted from www.worshipdesignstudio.com/ontheway unless otherwise indicated. ~From The Abingdon Worship Annual 2024. Copyright © 2023 by Abingdon Press. Used by permission.