

ADVENT 2024 ON THE WAY TO BETHLEHEM



Serve & Enrich
Zion United Church
of Christ

The 4th Sunday of Advent – Bethlehem: A Place of Humility

Prelude

Gloria: Angels, We Have Heard on High

Gathering: Light for the Journey

A Message from our Guide—It is time we got to Bethlehem. Here's where we've been: *[counts on fingers]* First, a decree set by Rome; second, a declaration of birth for an elderly couple in Jerusalem; third, a girl surprised by news of pregnancy in Nazareth! And NOW it all culminates in our travels to Bethlehem. Bethlehem is the ancestral home of mighty King David as well as his humble and faithful descendant: Joseph, the carpenter.

Advent Wreath Lighting—Bethlehem was called “little” by the prophet Micah who recognized that something of great worth would come from a humble place. As a champion of the “least of these,” Jesus’ ministry would shine light on the worth of humble people and places. Let us ask, how will we show this kind of humble love to others?

Advent Wreath Song

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

*O little town of Bethlehem,
how still we see thee lie!*

*We're on our way
We're on our way*

*Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
the silent stars go by.*

*Dream of the day
When love holds sway*

*Yet in thy dark streets shineth
the everlasting light;*

*With all the earth
In all our hearts*

*the hopes and fears of all the years
are met in thee tonight.*

*We're on our way
This is the day.*

Advent Wreath Reading—The journey continues, and this candle will help light our way. We are on our way to more love. So many are in need of grace, in need of loving acceptance. We are a people who can bring Good News. Stories of generosity are markers and signs that goodness is the nature of God. 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 love 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 hearts and minds to open wide to merciful acts in your name. Too often, we clench our fists in fear that what we have will not be enough for us. Give us the humility to make more room. Call us to a “generosity of grace.” Call us to be generous—not to a fault—but to a future where all have a place and a home where they are deeply loved. We pray this in the name of your Son, Jesus, the Christ, your Love Incarnate. 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 Love of Bethlehem. Jesus is being born into our lives even now. The Spirit is transforming us in this place.

****Hymn**

Songs of Thankfulness and Praise, 243

Prayer—God of Love, 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 Love, 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 Love. 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—Sharing is Caring: Lessons from a Humble Beast

We Hear God’s Word

Debi Hamblet

Romans 13:8-11—⁸Owe no one anything, except to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. ⁹The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; you shall not murder; you shall not steal; you shall not covet,” and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, “You shall love your

neighbor as yourself.”¹⁰ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

¹¹ Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is already the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers;

Luke 2:1-14—In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.² This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria.³ All went to their own towns to be registered.⁴ Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David.⁵ He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.⁶ While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child.⁷ And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no place in the guest room.

⁸ Now in that same region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.⁹ Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.¹⁰ But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid, for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people:¹¹ to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.¹² This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.”¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

Meditation

Bethlehem: A Place of Humility

Hymn

O Little Town of Bethlehem, 180

We Respond to God’s Word with Our Giving

Invitation— With joy and faith, may we bring our gifts and our love before God in this time of offering.~

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**—May these gifts glorify your name, Holy One. May the ministries we support bring justice and peace to your world. May they offer faith and hope to your people. In grateful joy, we pray. Amen.~

A Message from Our Guide—We have checked the signs and markers to make sure we are moving in a faithful direction. With love, we reside here in Bethlehem, knowing that the Light of Christ shines through the night. We are not alone. Humble places can be full of abundance. The story continues, and we claim our place in the narrative. We have come to Bethlehem to see, hear, sense, and know that love, not fear, perseveres.

Hymn

Go, Tell It on the Mountain, 218

Benediction—Soon we will gather once again to sing with the angels about the love that came down to Bethlehem. We journey to the stable is this Tuesday at 11 pm for our traditional Candlelight Christmas Eve service. We hope that you, your family, and your friends can join us for this holy, sacred night.

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 joy holds sway
With all the earth
In all our hearts
We're on our way
This is the day.*

Postlude

Hail to the Brightness

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