

Community United Church

An Open and Affirming Congregation

Affiliated with the United Church of Christ & The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)



Journey to Bethlehem: The First Sunday of Advent

December 1, 2024

11:00 AM

Pastoral Team:

Rev. Dr. Rich McCarty & Pastor Joy Johnson

Welcome & Announcements

Invocation

One: Holy and loving God, your people now enter the season of Advent. The word Advent means to await.

All: We once again find ourselves on the journey to Bethlehem. Doing so, we remember how our spiritual ancestors *awaited* the coming of a Messiah—a king—who would bring the power of the Reign of God upon the earth.

One: But the journey to Bethlehem reveals an unexpected Messiah, one who was announced through angelic visitors and ordinary human beings, and one whose birth redefined the kingdom of God.

All: As we remember the story of Christ's birth, let us also be attentive to angelic voices and Spirit's present in our midst—as we are a people who are still in *waiting* for the fullness of the reign of God, and as a people who still dare to believe. Amen!

*Opening Prayer

First Reading

The Book of the Prophet Isaiah 40:1-11

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. ² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins. ³ A voice cries out: "*In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.* ⁴ Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. ⁵ Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

Responsorial

Psalm 141:1-3, 8

One: I call upon you, O LORD; come quickly to me; give ear to my voice when I call to you.

All: Let my prayer be counted as incense before you and the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice.

One: Set a guard over my mouth, O LORD; keep watch over the door of my lips.

All: But my eyes are turned toward you, O God, my Lord; in you I seek refuge; do not leave me defenseless. Amen!



*Gospel

Luke 1:5-25

⁵In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was descended from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. ⁶Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. ⁷But they had no children because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

⁸Once when he was serving as priest before God during his section's turn of duty, ⁹he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord to offer incense. ¹⁰Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. ¹¹Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹²When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified, and fear overwhelmed him. ¹³But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. ¹⁴You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. ¹⁶He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." ¹⁸Zechariah said to the angel, "How can I know that this will happen? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." ¹⁹The angel replied, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. ²⁰But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur."

²¹Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering at his delay in the sanctuary. ²²When he did come out, he was unable to speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. ²³When his time of service was ended, he returned to his home.

²⁴After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, ²⁵"This is what the Lord has done for me in this time, when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people."

One: This the Gospel of Christ for the people of God.

All: Come Holy Spirit! Thanks be to God!

Advent Candles: Week I

Message

*Journey to Bethlehem I: Preparing the Way
Gabriel, Zechariah, Elizabeth, and John*

Pastor Rich

Pastor: This morning as we gather online, due to the snowstorm, I will admit this is not the way I would prefer to celebrate the First Sunday of Advent. Even so, there is something right about having to *wait* to be together. After all, the word *advent* means to *wait*—and waiting requires us to live in faith and hope. In this temporary setback, I am reminded of the Apostle Paul’s words to the church in Rome, when he wrote, “*affliction produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.*”

So, as we wait to be together again, I invite us to reflect and meditate this morning on a few guiding questions from the scriptures and from the season of Advent itself. After each question, I will offer us a time of silent reflection.

- First, as we enter the season of waiting, of Advent, what are deep and meaningful things that you have been waiting for in your life?
- Many times in the scriptures, the people of God had to wait long periods of time for deliverance, healing, liberation, and for the fulfillment of God’s promises. When you are in a time of waiting, what keeps your faith alive? What keeps your hope aflame?

In our Gospel reading this morning, we meet Zechariah and Elizabeth. These two will become the parents of John the Baptist, whom God set apart to prepare the way of Christ. One lesson we learn from this story is that God often moves through (seemingly) ordinary human beings; and does so months and years before God’s promises come to fruition.

- Think back on your life, now. Have there been people or situations in your life that seemed ordinary but ended up leading you to something wonderful?
- Have you ever considered that, right now, something seemingly ordinary might be preparing you for something great?

Zechariah was made mute for not believing the Angel Gabriel’s message that he and Elizabeth would have a child. Some people interpret this as a brief time of punishment for disobedience. Maybe. But what if it is something else? What if the angel struck Zechariah mute because it is sometimes better to sit in silence and let the mysterious ways of God work themselves out? What if this narrative is a message to us that sometimes words can get in the way of what God is trying to do?

- Have there ever been times in your life when all you wanted to do was vocalize your doubts or your worries, only to find out that—in the end—it all worked out?
- Have you ever tried silence and contemplation as a response to impossible situations—instead of complaints, sarcasm, or overcomplicating the situation with more words?

We are told that Elizabeth and Zechariah gave birth to John the Baptist so that John could prepare the way of the Lord; to prepare the way of Christ. John did so by leaving traditional religious practices behind and going out to the desert to proclaim repentance and forgiveness for sin. To repent means to “turn around” and go in a new direction. Forgiveness is all about “letting go” of grievances and transgressions and choosing the paths of grace and mercy. What John proclaimed, Jesus embodied.

- As a church, we are called to proclaim *and* live the way of Christ. That includes calling people to turn around from all manner of injustices and evil; things like greed, racism, sexism, prejudice, violence, and anything that does not embody love. But before we call for others to repent, what might be things in our lives that we need to “turn around” first?
- As a church, in the spirit of John the Baptist, and by the command of Christ, we are called to proclaim and offer the forgiveness of sins. Of course, we all want *our* sins forgiven. But what about the sins of others? What about the sins of those who hurt us? What about the sins of those who seem arrogant and apathetic to us or to basic human needs?
- Marianne Williamson once said, “Unforgiveness is like drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die.” Have you ever drunk the poison of unforgiveness? What if you set that chalice of poison down and chose a different response? What if we chose the cup of Christ and chose the path of forgiveness? Who comes immediately to mind?

Forgiveness isn’t forgetting. It’s not excusing wrong for right. It doesn’t mean reconciling right now, or right away. It’s letting go and making room for grace. On this First Sunday of Advent, we learn that preparing the way of God comes in usual ways, and sometimes in ways that are challenging. Our God is the Holy One who sends extraordinary angels to ordinary people, and who calls ordinary people to be extraordinary: whether that is Elizabeth, Zechariah, John the Baptist, or us. Especially as we are called to prepare the way of God by living mercy, forgiveness, and grace.

Let us pray...

Communion

Pastor: People of God, the scriptures say that Christ Jesus was born in Bethlehem.

All: Bethlehem means “house of bread.” Into Bethlehem we believe God manifested in Christ Jesus to be our living bread, to nourish us forever.

Pastor: In our time, and in our place, the celebration of Christ’s birth happens in the cold and darkness of winter.

All: The darkness requires us to seek out light, to see where we are going. The cold requires us to seek warmth for our very lives. Scripture and season both point to our need for communion with the One who can be our light, our warmth, and our food for life.

Pastor: And so, here at this Table we take bread and cup, and we ask the Holy Spirit to make it for us, communion with Christ who gave his life as the bread of heaven and as the cup of eternal life—and as the One who is the light in the darkness that the darkness cannot overcome.

All: Here at this Table, we remember that Christ was born into the world to be an outpouring of God’s Love—a love that will, one day, renew all things. Amen.

Pastor: Beloved of God, come to the Table and receive the Bread of Heaven and the Cup of Life.

Pastoral Prayer and Lord’s Prayer (“Debts and Debtors”)

One: The Lord be with you.

All: ***And also with you.***

One: Let us center our hearts now and extend the spiritual power that is within us. *Let us pray:* For the prayer requests that are on our hearts and minds today; and for everyone who has asked their name to be on the prayer list [*see last page of the bulletin*]. Holy and Loving God, in your wisdom, meet all of these needs in the perfect way of your grace.

All: God hear our prayer!

One: For all that we hold in the silence of our hearts, we come to you in the confidence of quiet, O God, and lift our petitions privately to you. (*Silent prayer*)... Almighty God, Sovereign of Heaven, shower your blessings upon all people! Move the mountains in our lives, or help to move us so that we might be fully at peace. This we pray in the name of Jesus, who taught us to pray...

All: “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, the Power, and the Glory forever.” Amen.

Offering

God is inviting us to serve in response to God's great love for us, so that the whole world may know the fullness of God's peace.

How is God calling you this week to give of your time, talent, and resources?

Community United Church has the following ministries opportunities and needs:

House and Grounds Team

Hospitality for socials and services

Prayer ministries

Food ministries: Liberty House & Service Sunday

Children's Church leaders

Financial gifts to cover monthly needs (every contribution helps so much)

Every gift is great. Let us all give joyfully!

If you are not in the sanctuary, online donations can be made at:

www.communityunited.church

Or, if you prefer to mail in a check, that can be addressed to the church at:

1011 West 38th Street – Erie, PA 16508

Offertory Prayer of Thanksgiving

*Departing Prayer

One: Holy and loving God, you have sent prophets and messengers throughout time to prepare the way of the Reign of God—we ask, now, that you send us out with the same message.

All: **Be our wisdom to announce the good news of Christ's peace. Be our courage to live as Christ did. Be our consolation when we cannot see the end of the road—and be our faith to follow wherever you lead us. Amen!**

*Blessing

**Thank you for worshipping with us this morning at
Community United Church!**



Next Sunday, December 8, 2024:
Journey to Bethlehem II:



The Second Week of Advent:

Isaiah 7:10-15

Psalm 131

Luke 2:26-38

Theme:

The Annunciation and Consent of Mary

***Need to contact us for prayer, conversation, or to connect
with a small group or church ministry?***

1011 West 38th Street – Erie, PA 16508

(814) – 864 – 4429

www.communityunited.church



Community United Church

**The altar flowers this morning are given to the glory of God by
Bob Martin in Memory of his Mother, Elaine Martin**

UPCOMING EVENTS

- December 10: Liberty House
December 11: Christmas Cheer – Fellowship Hall 6:30 PM
December 15: Service Sunday
December 17: Ladies Lunch – Brown Bag and Gift Exchange

Follow the Star has become an area tradition for many in the Christmas season. This show stars Tennessee Backporch, plus friends and family to present a Christmas show with spirit and fun.

- Sunday, December 1: 4:00 Our Lady of the Lake Church, Edinboro
Sunday, December 8: 4:00 Saint Gregory's Church, North East
Sunday, December 15: 4:00 St. Patrick's, Church, Erie

Tickets sold at the door. General seating. Doors open at 3:30. \$25 adult, \$15 student.

Need hearing assistance? We have four available units. Please talk to our tech crew in the back of the sanctuary.

WE REMEMBER THOSE IN OUR ARMED FORCES:

Jackson Feiock (Army), Jacob Snyder (Army), Nick Duncan (Army), Samantha McHenry (Army), Brittany Duncan (Army), Matt Duncan (Army), Tyler Anderson (Army National Guard), Shelby Wescott (Army), Matthew Anderson (Army), Jaden O'Hara (Army), Toby Charlton (Marines), Cole Poshett (Army) & Hunter Miaczynski (Army)

PRAYERS FOR:

Dorothy Moyer, Anna Silvia, Dew Johnson, Harry Lamb, Diane Walker, Ralph Kester, John M., Todd Carrier, Teddy Long, Tammy McIntyre, Laura Stone, Debra Doerfer & David Magid, Annette Minich, Dave Pakulski, Ethel Davis, Chelsea Brown, Celeste Eller & Family, Shirley Carrier, Dave Woledge, Ev Smith, Karis Fenton, Ruth Schmidt, Carol & Doug Rodgers, Jane Moran, Sharon Cooper, Josh Cook & Danny Kaeberlein, The Vadzemnieks Family, Reverend Susan Strouse & Reverend Barbara Peronteau.

Council Members:

Debbie Anderson (President), Angel Conrad (VP), Nancy Alberico (Secretary), Janice Skelly, Mike Pruzinsky, Michele Vahey, Patti Rogers, Carol Rodgers, and Bob Martin