

Welcome & Announcements

-Adult Advent Bible Study beginning on Wednesday! All are welcome, no matter how experienced or inexperienced you may be in your faith-journey.

-Hometown Christmas events on December 4th: We are hosting a free movie at 2:00 pm, and will be doing a Carol-sing at 4:00 pm.

-Lexy Klinkhammer announcement.

Lighting of the Advent Wreath - The Alderson Family

Leader: We begin the season of Advent with expectant and believing hearts.

People: We wait upon the Lord and place our hope in God's word.

Leader: During Advent we confront the darkness that so often exists around us.

People: We wait upon the Lord and place our hope in God's word.

Leader: During Advent we confront the doubt that so often resides within us.

People: We wait upon the Lord and place our hope in God's word.

Leader: During Advent we confront the division that so often occurs between us.

People: We wait upon the Lord and place our hope in God's word.

Leader: This morning we light the first candle. The first candle reminds us of the ultimate hope that comes through our Savior's birth. In a world where we often get overwhelmed by our circumstances, Advent comes as a gentle whisper offering us hope to heal the broken, befriend the lonely, and share the good news of the Gospel. This morning let us begin this Advent season with expectant and believing hearts.

[One candle is lit]

Light of Hope
A Candle Lighting Ceremony for Advent

Words and Music by
JOEL RANEY

Congregation:

The musical score is written on four staves of music in a single system. The first staff begins with a treble clef, a key signature of one flat (B-flat), and a common time signature. The melody consists of quarter and eighth notes. The lyrics are written below the notes. The second staff continues the melody and lyrics. The third staff continues the melody and lyrics. The fourth staff concludes the piece with a double bar line.

Light of life, Mak-er of day, gath-er our
sha-dows and cast them a-way, Bea-con of
truth, gleam-ing and bright, shine in our
hearts, shat-ter our night.

Sharing of Joys and Concerns

-Those in our Church and families fighting cancer, addiction, depression, and other illnesses.

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-War in Ukraine, and for safety for the refugees and others who are caught in the midst of the conflict. Ukraine has made progress in forcing Russian forces to retreat, but they will have to work hard to hold it.

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Pastoral Prayer

Lord's Prayer

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 trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

Children's Moment

-One second, I need to go over my Christmas to-do list... I need to finish up those cards, get my list to Santa, decorate the house, wrap my gifts, bake up some cookies... There's so much to do to get ready for Christmas! This is a great time of year, but there's so much to do to be ready! I have to make sure I have all my supplies, I need my Christmas sweaters, lights, decorations, shopping list, and get the house cleaned up!

-What do you do to prepare for Christmas? Do you help your parents, or put together a Christmas list for presents? Do you have special traditions? It's always good to know what's coming and prepare for it...

-But how do we prepare our hearts for Christmas? You know, before Jesus came, there were prophets who announced his coming arrival. These special messengers announced that a Messiah would be coming to save them. People didn't always understand what they meant, but they knew something special was coming. One of those prophets was named John. He encouraged people to turn away from their sins, and prepare for Jesus to come.

-That is a good message for us, too. We can prepare our hearts and minds for Jesus. It's easy to get caught up in the decorations and presents and forget the importance of Jesus life. We can get ready for the fun parties, but we want to make sure we thank God for sending us Jesus. And as we consider the importance of Advent, and look to the future, we can start preparing not just our homes, but our hearts.

-Dear God	Thank you for	the greatest gift in Jesus.	
Help us to prepare	For him in our hearts and minds.		
Remind us to focus	on the most important things		
At Christmas	and the rest of the year too.		
We love you	And we praise you	For all that you are	
And all that you do.	It's in your name that we pray.		Amen.

***Song**

Blessed Be the God of Israel

UMH 209

Scripture

Luke 3:1-8 (NRSV)

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Tachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'" John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Therefore, bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.

This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Sermon*Practicing Advent: Preparing the Way*

Good morning, Church, and happy Advent! This season reminds us of the simple, yet amazing salvation story, *our* story, the good news of God's love for all. The season of Advent is a gift, one that gives us space to remember God's salvation for all creation in Christ. It is a time of anticipation and preparation, where we ready our hearts and lives for the coming of Christ, not just as part of the Christmas story, but also the second coming of Christ in the time to come. Much like Lent, it is a season of discernment, discipline, and self-examination. And so as we begin our Advent worship series, and learn what it means to practice Advent and prepare the way of the Lord, will you please pray with me once more? O Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each and every one of our hearts be holy and pleasing to you, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Whenever I think of Advent, and hear the text we ready this morning of John the Baptist, going throughout the region of Israel echoing the words of the prophet Isaiah: "Prepare the way for the Lord", for whatever reason the image I get in my head is the game hide-and-seek. John is moving throughout the area, pursuing those who are hiding, or neglected, or forgotten, sharing God's message that, in essence, says "Ready or not, here I come." It's a fun way to think about this season of Advent, and to prepare to Christmas. And John's message of preparation itself is a reminder that Advent begins with acknowledging that we need and desire God... That we want to be found.

This season marks a time and space for us to prepare to receive God's presence in the birth of Jesus Christ, a presence that overcomes the separation that sin continues to inflict upon our world. Way back in the beginning, as Genesis narrates, God created the earth and all its creatures, including Adam and Eve. After eating the forbidden fruit,

Adam and Eve realize they are naked, realize their shame, both in body and in soul after committing that first sin, that first disobedient act against God. This was the Fall, the story of sin entering the world. And it's a story that continues throughout the Bible.

That same story unfolds time and again in different scenes with a range of characters from Noah, to King David, to Paul. God creates goodness. Humanity sins. God invites relationship, offering forgiveness and salvation. And now, with Advent, we see the climax of that story line. God sends the ultimate invitation in Jesus Christ, who is both fully human and fully divine, born into the world to establish God's reign and redeem all of creation from the power of sin and death. And Advent allows us to participate in that salvation story, as we bear witness to the embodiment of God's love for all creation.

And especially here, on this first week of Advent, we reflect on God's love and grace in Jesus Christ, and begin or begin again the practices of receiving and sharing God's grace. It is a grace that includes God's love and forgiveness in Jesus Christ, experienced by us all through the Holy Spirit. That theme of grace echoes throughout the stories of Advent and Christmas, and that grace was a fundamental piece of John Wesley's ministry and theology. For those who may not be familiar, John Wesley was the founder of the Methodist Church, just as Martin Luther was for the Lutherans. And for John Wesley, "grace" is God's presence and power to save and transform us as individuals, but also the power to transform societies and the whole of creation. It is a power that we can participate in as we practice the "means of grace."

It may be helpful to think of grace as a garden. The gardener prepares the soil, distributes water, plants seeds, and daily supports the seeds through germination,

growth, and fruit. However, the gardener does not have the power to create the seed, the sunlight, or the water, or to even cause the seed to grow and bear fruit. The gardener *participates* in the growth and fruit, but the miracle of the seed, its growth and fruit, come from *God*. In this way, gardening is similar to practicing the means of grace. When we read the Scriptures, pray in silence, worship and serve together, we participate in God's reign while God pours out divine grace and love into our lives and the world.

Practicing the means of grace requires balance and discipline. For that garden to produce fruit, it takes a different sort of discipline and balance than, say, a swamp. Both gardens and swamps contain an abundance of life, but the garden produces fruit that nourishes and sustains creation. Life in a swamp, though certainly beautiful in its own way, does not nourish or sustain in the same way as a garden. Swamps consist of excess, even flooding, rather than a disciplined balance. A garden requires balance and discipline in participation with God to produce fruit. And during Advent, we have the opportunity to practice this balance and discipline in preparation for Christ's coming.

This discipline can consist of simple, daily practices. They can be a helpful way for us to reflect on the meaning of Advent as we prepare ourselves for the coming of the Lord. But the goal is not to accomplish a task through the practice, but rather to open a space — a means — to receive God's grace and formation in God's image. For example, it's great to try and read the entire Bible over a year, but the practice loses its meaning if you do not gain a deeper relationship with God and the world through the practice of reading. Through simple, regular spiritual practices in Advent, we can build habits that nurture our relationship with God and others all year long.

One way to practice that discipline is through keeping a journal, a diary of your participation in the means of Grace. That's something John Wesley would do, and he would often record his daily activities in hourly intervals, but would sometimes even record them in fifteen-minute intervals. It sounds excessive, but it is what worked for him. He would use as many as twenty questions to guide his self-evaluations...

Questions like: 1) Have I prayed with fervor throughout the day? 2) Have I given thanks for every good thing? 3) Did I in the morning plan the business of the day? 4) Have I shown good will towards others in my words and actions? 5) Have I been angry? 6) Have I thought or spoken unkindly of or to anyone? 7) Have I felt or approved of any proud, vain, or unchaste thought?

For Wesley, keeping a detailed journal helped keep him disciplined and prepared for the grace and presence of God. You may have another way to keep yourself disciplined, but practicing the means of grace, loving God and neighbor, is a wonderful way to respond to God's love, especially in this season fo Advent, as we prepare for Christmas and prepare the way of the Lord. But it takes intentionality. When the Methodist movement began, it was focused on mutual support and accountability through small groups of believers, hoping to fulfill the movements aim to form believers in holiness of both heart and life. What made Methodist distinct was not in its novelty or innovation, but in its simple, yet profound, integration of belief and practice, the discipline that lead to an authentic faith. It's less about having the right religious opinion or proper doctrines and beliefs, and more about the simple reality of God's love... A love embodied in Jesus Christ that invites everyone to receive God's love, and then to practice that love through holiness of heart and life.

These Methodist small groups allowed a significant number of people to be nurtured and maintained in the faith. The only condition for admission to a small group was “a desire to flee from the wrath to come, to be saved from their sins.” Continuing attendance required practicing the general rules of: 1) do no harm, 2) do good, and 3) stay in love with God, which meant living into the means of grace and works of piety and mercy. Together, in these small groups, they would encourage one another in their Christian journeys through public and private prayer, the study of Scripture, confession, and fasting, as well as praise and worship. These were means of grace through which people might come to faith in Jesus Christ and have that faith nurtured and deepened through spiritual growth. In addition to such works of piety, small groups would also share in works of mercy such as feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and visiting the sick, the imprisoned, and afflicted.

These are things we continue to do today, as a Methodist Church. We still hold bible studies, we encourage prayer and fasting, and lead opportunities for worship and praise. We also share out of our abundance to help organizations such as the Banquet, Feeding South Dakota, Lunch is Served, and the Heifer Project. But I sometimes wonder if, as individuals, our intentionality behind such acts is lacking. Perhaps we need to hear once more the words of the prophets: Prepare the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight. Bear fruits worthy of repentance.

This Advent, we have a gift... A space to prepare for God's arrival. We can seek God presence, and pursue Christian practices as a means of God's grace. Practicing these means of grace, practicing Advent, we are reminded of God's abundant love... We are reminded that there is no longer a need to play hide and seek. God's infinite

grace, abundant love, and eternal presence is offered to us all... So let us prepare the way of the Lord, let us practice Advent, and adopt the disciplines, the means of grace, that will allow us to truly make straight the pathways of God, that all may come to know the hope, the love, the joy, and the peace that is Christ the Lord. Let's pray.

Offering

Doxology

UMH 95

As we enter this time of offering, I want to encourage you to consider this an expression of worship, and a means of responding to what God is doing in your life. Give out of joy, not simply because you feel an obligation to give. If you would like to support our ministry through e-giving, that is set-up on our website, and you are welcome to make use of the pew cards to still participate in the passing of the offering plate, and to allow your gift to be recognized and celebrated. Now matter how you choose to give, thank you in advance for your generosity, and thank you for the other expressions of generosity you share outside of your finances, such as your time, your energy, and acts of service.

This is Jesus

***Song**

I Want to Walk as a Child of the Light

UMH 206

***Benediction**