

“ADVENT FOUR”
Micah 5:2-5a Luke 1:39-55
Fourth Sunday of Advent, Year C, December 19, 2021
First Presbyterian Church, Sandpoint, Idaho
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Hope, love, joy, peace. Although there’s nothing official telling us what to say when we light Advent candles, these four things, hope, love, joy, and peace, are traditional aspects of preparing for Christmas. The scriptures during Advent are apocalyptic, telling us the world as we know it changes as awareness of Christ emerges. Hope is the energy of trusting that message, that leading of the Spirit.

Love is also a core belief for people who trust God’s creative power and presence. Love is the reality shaped by grace, or maybe grace is reality shaped by love? Either way, love in Divine form takes shape, is Incarnate as spirit and matter merge. In Jesus we are shown that this is trustworthy. As Jesus invites us to “come and follow” Love takes on its quality as a verb rather than a noun. Love is active and ongoing, even as it’s already been and always will be.

Joy is traditionally the third Sunday. We light the pink candle rather than the purple ones. Purple is a color of royalty, but also a symbol of

repentance, which can have a weighty tone, a heavy feel, a serious vibe. Pink is lighter, more festive, which points to the dance of joy that is not dependent on circumstances, doesn't equate with happiness that comes and goes. Joy is deeper, everlasting, and no one can take it away. Sometimes it is hidden, obscured by suffering or pain. Sometimes God weans us off things we thought we needed, and joy is no exception. Yet even in these stark times joy holds through roots unseen, grounded in the very God who holds all things together. Joy to the World! is a wonderful title to that Christmas song, because joy is for the world, for everyone, all things. Joy cannot be lived in isolation, but the very energy of joy links us together with the Risen Christ, that great cloud of witnesses, and all things seen and unseen, held in the mystery of God, even to the foundations of the world.

This fourth Sunday of Advent we light the candle of Peace. Peace has multiple aspects. Peace affects us and invites us to change our limited assumptions of how life is. Peace at its core challenges our perceptions on how we think things work. In terms of qualities, we see Peace is a gift. It's given, offered, shared. It's important, coming as the very next thing,

connected to the Glory of God in the heavenly heights. Mention of God's glory, then mention peace: these go together.

The Hebrew Scriptures, reading from Micah, echoes this dynamic. This passage comes from a context of violence and destruction as the world goes about predictable conflict as people struggle for power and control, seeing others as objects to dominate or exploit. This is a mentality that is still around in our own context. But in Micah's day, the Hebrew people are under siege and Israel's king is humiliated by the Assyrians. In this trying time is when this message of hope, promise, redemption, and peace comes from God. God uses the voice of this prophet to help the underdog. Though Bethlehem is tiny and obscure, a humble place, this is where a leader will come from. This is where peace is proclaimed.

Eugene Peterson's translation, *The Message* says, "He will stand tall in his shepherd-rule by GOD's strength, centered in the majesty of GOD-Revealed. And the people will have a good and safe home, for the whole world will hold him in respect – Peacemaker of the world!"

Again, God's strength and majesty are linked, interwoven with peace, and this peace is a person, the "Peacemaker of the world!" This peace

involves goodness and safety, the respect of everyone, and is held together not by force or coercion or bullying. Peace is guided in the style of a shepherd who leads, cares, provides, and grounds their strength in GOD Almighty.

Often, we equate peace with non-violence, or the absence of strife or war. That is one form of peace, but a peace beyond understanding is not dependent on circumstances, for this peace resides in the heart, established in the depths of our soul, connected to the Living Christ through the Spirit of God.

This is the type of peace Elizabeth, Mother of John, and Mary, Mother of Jesus sing about in their greeting to each other. This peace rests on the actions of God, the Saving Presence of the Merciful One who does great things even for people who are oppressed, which is a prominent theme in Luke as outsiders are brought in because boundaries simply dissolve through the holiness of God.

Mary sings and her spirit rejoices and even as she claims this special gift, she expands God's Mercy to all who are in reverence and awe of God. God "scatters the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. [God] has brought

down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.” This highlights God’s preferential treatment of the poor, even as it reminds us of the importance of those thoughts of the heart. Hunger for God, in the depths of the heart, this shall be filled. The path of self-emptying is honored by the very God who promises a Presence that comes to the humble.

This Advent comes to a close. Christmas Eve is this Friday. Songs, scripture, peaceful moments in candlelight all celebrate the birth of Jesus, the fullness of Christ’s Incarnation. To claim peace, to clear out room in our hearts to receive this gift, is an important spiritual discipline which can be practiced as peace is put into action in a world that struggles as the proud still rule. The voice of the prophet, the Good News of the Gospel, echo into our Advent Season the message of Christ who comes to generate goodness, love, non-violence, healing, and Mercy.

We participate as the biblical story continues. May we have eyes to see and ears to hear God’s glory ring out, along with deep peace ushered in through Christ. And may God be glorified, now, even as forever, Amen.