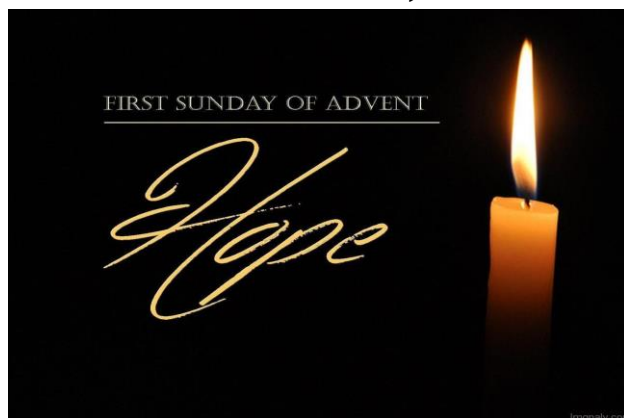


FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT DECEMBER 3, 2023



St. John United Church of Christ

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Rev. Rosemary Captain

***RESPONSIVE CALL TO WORSHIP:**

ONE: Awake, people of God, and stay alert for Christ's coming. Grace to you and peace from God who sent Jesus to us.

MANY: Make your ways known to us, O God.

Show us once more your awesome presence.

ONE: We are all God's people; no one is excluded.

Come together as God's family for worship and prayer.

MANY: Let the mountains quake before you, mighty God. Let the nations tremble in awe and reverence.

ONE: Praise the One who grants us the gift of life. Give thanks for God's continuing faithfulness.

MANY: Heaven and earth will pass away, but the Word of God is true for all times and places.

***PRAYER OF INVOCATION:** Amid threatening clouds of anger and selfish strife, come, O God, to bring light. Into our days of worry and anxiety, send a confident hope. Enrich us with spiritual gifts that transcend disappointments and spill out in generous compassion for all your suffering children. Meet us today where we are so we may be equipped for trials yet to come and for joys yet to be revealed. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***CALL TO CONFESSION:** As a new year begins in the church, we seek to leave behind our past unfaithfulness. We remember our doubts and neglect, the empty times when prayer is forgotten and our focus is narrowed to petty concerns. God is waiting to hear from us. Let us pray.

***UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION:**

Awesome God, we confess the sin of our separation from you. We have blamed you for hiding from us, rather than admitting we have failed to see you in the thousands of ways you are revealing yourself every day. We have not called on you, and we have not

listened for your call to us. Without you, we have become tiny islands of self-concern. Our links with the rest of your children are stretched and broken. O God, we long for that loving community in which your reign is acknowledged and your purposes are served. Move us to that place, we pray. Amen. Silence

***ASSURANCE OF FORGIVENESS:** God's grace has come to us in Jesus Christ. God restores us to a right relationship with the eternal, that we might rightfully value ourselves and all persons. Spiritual gifts are ours to claim. God is faithful and will strengthen us to face all circumstances. Praise God, the source of all things!

***GLORIA:**
Glory to the Creator, and the Christ and the Spirit so near. As it was from the start so it shall be forever, One God always here. (repeat two more times.) (end) One God always here. One God always here.

SCRIPTURE LESSONS: Isaiah 64:1-9

If only you would tear open the heavens and come down! Mountains would quake before you

² like fire igniting brushwood or making water boil.

If you would make your name known to your enemies, the nations would tremble in your presence.

³ When you accomplished wonders beyond all our expectations; when you came down, mountains quaked

before you.

⁴ From ancient times, no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any god but you who acts on behalf of those who wait for him.

⁵ You look after those who gladly do right; they will praise you for your ways. But you were angry when we sinned; you hid yourself when we did wrong

⁶ We have all become like the unclean; All of us wither like a leaf; our sins, like the wind, carry us away.

⁷ No one calls on your name; no one bothers to hold on to you for you have hidden yourself from us, and have handed us over to our sin.

⁸ But now, LORD, you are our father. We are the clay, and you are our potter. All of us are the work of your hand.

⁹ Don't rage so fiercely, LORD; don't hold our sins against us forever, but gaze now on your people, all of us:

EPISTLE LESSON: 1 Corinthians 1:3-9

³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. **Thanksgiving for the Corinthians**

⁴ I thank my God always for you, because of God's grace that was given to you in Christ Jesus. ⁵ That is, you were made rich through him in everything: in all your communication and every kind of knowledge, ⁶ in the

same way that the testimony about Christ was confirmed with you. ⁷ The result is that you aren't missing any spiritual gift while you wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. ⁸ He will also confirm your testimony about Christ until the end so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ God is faithful, and you were called by him to partnership with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

***GOSPEL LESSON: Mark 13:24-37** ²⁴ "In those days, after the suffering of that time, the sun will become dark, and the moon won't give its light. ²⁵ The stars will fall from the sky, and the planets and other heavenly bodies will be shaken. ²⁶ Then they will see the Human One coming in the clouds with great power and splendor. ²⁷ Then he will send the angels and gather together his chosen people from the four corners of the earth, from the end of the earth to the end of heaven.

A lesson from the fig tree

²⁸ "Learn this parable from the fig tree. After its branch becomes tender and it sprouts new leaves, you know that summer is near. ²⁹ In the same way, when you see these things happening, you know that he's near, at the door. ³⁰ I assure you that this generation won't pass away until all these things happen. ³¹ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will certainly not pass away. ³² "But nobody knows when that day or hour will

come, not the angels in heaven and not the Son. Only the Father knows. ³³ Watch out! Stay alert! You don't know when the time is coming. ³⁴ It is as if someone took a trip, left the household behind, and put the servants in charge, giving each one a job to do, and told the doorkeeper to stay alert. ³⁵ Therefore, stay alert! You don't know when the head of the household will come, whether in the evening or at midnight, or when the rooster crows in the early morning or at daybreak. ³⁶ Don't let him show up when you weren't expecting and find you sleeping. ³⁷ What I say to you, I say to all: Stay alert!"

These are the ancient words revealed to us anew.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

MESSAGE: "What Time is It?"

The other day I misplaced my wristwatch. It took me almost a week until I located it. In the meantime, it amazed me as to how many times a day I looked at my bare wrist wondering what time it was.

I think we live in a culture that obsesses about time. Is it time for me to clock out at work? Am I too late to get in on Cyber Monday sales? Don't forget to set your alarm clock. Even retired folks watch the clock. Is it time for the news on TV? What time is my doctor's appointment? Will I be on time for church?

What about the people in the time Jesus walked the earth? As far as I know, they did not have clocks. I don't know when sun dials were first used, but I don't think it mattered that much to these ancient people. What they did at 2 o'clock was pretty much the same as what they did at 3 o'clock.

However, the people had learned from their ancestors how to tell the weather and the seasons by observing nature; the stars, the clouds, the wind, and the plants. That's probably why Jesus talked about fig trees so often.

Have you noticed how many scripture texts we have read lately they have to do with the question of when? The "BIG WHEN". Even our text today give us another example of Jesus talking and, more importantly, warning us about the "Big When." We could call it "the end of time" but I'm not sure that's what Jesus is talking about. Jesus is talking about how to be prepared for the "Big When." Jesus admits himself that he does not know when it will happen. Verse 32 reads, "But nobody knows when that day or hour will come, not the angels in heaven and not the Son. Only the Father knows." In the next verse we hear Jesus saying, "³³ Watch out! Stay alert! You don't know when the time is coming."

The next question we might have is can we change the day or hour of this "Big When." From what Jesus is telling us, I would say NO. Then, if we can't change the time or the inevitable of this event, what should we do? Jesus says "Stay alert!"

Along with staying alert, I would add, "pay attention"; not just to try and guess or calculate when the Big When is coming, but to enjoy the beauty of the world and the people around you now, since we don't know when it all might end.

Perhaps you know someone who received a bad diagnosis from his doctor. What is the next thing the patient asks? "How long do I have, Doc?" Whatever the doctor answers, the patient is probably thinking about how he should spend the time he has left. First, he probably thinks about his loved ones. How can he spend his best life with them? Maybe there are places he always wanted to see. The Grand Canyon, the oceans. Maybe he has a "bucket list." Maybe he is thinking about all the things he put off for a later time. The perfect time would be now.

Jesus gives us warnings and signs of the time he will return. We can't change the Big When, but we can change how we live our lives before it comes. We can become "Every Day Christians" not just on Sundays. We can forgive others. Love others. We can be alert to

find ways we can help others. We can give away stuff we don't use which just clutters our lives and makes us blind to what's really important in our lives.

Start thinking NOW how you would spend the time you have left. Don't waste a moment.

SPECIAL MUSIC: "Thou Didst Leave Thy Throne" Video

PASTORAL PRAYER: God of today and of tomorrow. We are grateful that you remain with us, no matter what time it is. You send your love and compassion to us every day. You teach us to do the same while we can. Jesus warns us to not waste a single minute of our lives hating or mistreating others.

And thus we pray for all others.

We pray for those in positions in government, may they serve with compassion and wisdom. We pray for fire fighters, police officers, utility workers, laborers, heavy equipment operators, communication workers, those in the military and those who assist the military, all healthcare workers, all hospital workers from the housekeepers, to those who cook and serve the meals. The maintenance workers who keep the electricity on and the climate perfect. We could not survive without all these hard workers.

We pray for those who are ill, sick, lonely, grieving, and those in need of comfort. We pray for Becky,

Urban, Mary Lou, Roald, Dawn, Carson, Marilyn, Syd, David, Amy and Amy, Yvonne, Rosemary, and Janice. We pray all these things in the name of the one Jesus Christ . . .

THE 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 debts as we forgive our debtors. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.

OFFERTORY INVITATION: We have been enriched and strengthened in so many ways by the gifts of God. Now we have the privilege of sharing God's Word with the world. Our offerings enable our church's witness in this community and a caring outreach around the globe. Let us give as we have been blessed.

***UNISON OFFERTORY PRAYER:**

Gracious God, we give our best to you, not out of guilt or fear, but with gratitude and faith. You have been our support in times of need. Every breath we take is a gift from you. We would be awake and watchful for opportunities to make a difference, to help others be alert for your presence, to value life in all its fullness, and to learn to care. We dedicate these symbols, of

thankfulness and all the days of our lives to those purposes. Amen.

***HOLY COMMUNION:**

In this Advent of disquiet, remember God comes to us.

God approaches to be with you, as well.

Let us offer our empty hearts to our God as we begin this journey to Bethlehem.

God approaches to fill them with grace and hope.

With weary souls, and trembling voices, let us sing praises to our God.

God approaches to teach us new songs of love.

In our weariness, God-of-that-first-moment, tell us the story of how you could no longer wait, but ripped apart the fabric of chaos, to make the grass to blanket the meadows, the backdrop for all the stars flung against it, the swaddling clothes for puppies and kittens.

Each, and everyone, of your wonders were crafted for those formed in your image so we could be with you forever, but overwhelmed by the virus of sin, we chose to quarantine ourselves from you.

You sent men and women to us, so we might continue to hear your heart and discover what you do all around us, but like the scientists and health folks today, we chose to ignore them.

That is when you chose to come to us in that Child of peace who could save us.

With those who try to be cautious in these days, and those who don't seem to care, we sing your praises this day:

Holy, holy, holy are you, God who comes to us.

Creation always pours out its praise to you.

Glory to you in the highest!

Blessed is the One who is coming to us even now.

Glory to you in the highest!

In your weariness of all our foolishness, God-who-never-forgets-promises, you could have clung to your holiness and left us on our own, to find our way, but you chose to love us, coming to be one of us in Jesus. He came to a people whose anxiety about the future was high, to remind them, and the generations to come, that you are in control, even when it seems doubtful.

He came to those who struggled in the deep poverty of despair, to empty his pockets of all the hope and grace they needed, just as you do for us in these days. He came to his kinfolk who were weakened by fear, to strengthen them with the assurance that the road they walked was well known to him. And when death thought that it could defeat him with its power, he simply waited for you to bring him out of its clutches with your resurrection power.

With those who try to stay alert,
and with those who toss and turn trying to sleep,
we proclaim that mystery which is our faith:
**Christ died, giving his life for all;
Christ was raised, the light of resurrection showing the
way; Christ will come, gathering us in love and hope.**

You know how apprehensive we are in these days
which go on and on, so we pray that you would pour
out your Spirit on your fretful people and the gifts
which remind us of your love.

In Jesus, you came to know our struggles, our fears,
our worries, and in the bread which is broken for us,
we are given the life which will enable us
to be your hope for the forgotten,
to be your justice for the overlooked,
to be your light in the dim moments of this year.

You poured your life into Jesus, who emptied himself
for us, and as the Cup of grace is poured out for us,
may we empty ourselves so we might be
the companion to the weary,
the community for the lonely,
the peace for all divided neighborhoods,
the love to those who are dismissed.

And when human time has come to an end,
and you gather us around your table with our sisters
and brothers, we will sing our joyful praises to you,
Amen.

SHARING THE ELEMENTS

***UNISON PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING:**

**We give thanks, almighty God, that you have
refreshed us at your table by granting us the presence
of Jesus Christ. Strengthen our faith, increase our love
for one another, and send us forth into the world in
courage and peace, rejoicing in the power of the Holy
Spirit; through Jesus Christ our savior, Amen.**

***CLOSING HYMN: Worship and Rejoice 658 “Awesome God”**

**Our God is an awesome God,
God reigns from heaven above
with wisdom, power and love
Our God is an awesome God! (repeat)**

***SENDING:**

On this pilgrimage of uncertainty,
may we remember God has walked
this road many times before.
As we live through these endless moments,
may we remember Jesus shares hope
with us every day, every day.
In this season filled with isolation from others,
may we remember that the Spirit knows our loneliness
and cradles us in love. Amen.

***BENEDICTION RESPONSE:**

“Let There Be Peace on Earth”

***POSTLUDE: “Jubilate” Stewart Landon**

CONDOLENCES TO Sharon Banjavcic and her family on the passing of her sister, Janice Lolman.

PRAYER LIST: Becky Ballard, Urban and Mary Lou Baum, Ronald Bopp, Dawn Cipponeri family, Carson Edwards, Marilyn Paul, Syd Safriet, David Seneczyn, Amy Smith, Yvonne Weber, Rosemary Williams, Amy Iverson, all those who give care to those in need.