



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

The Worship of God

Christmas Reflections

November 30, 2014

THE FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Eleven O'Clock

The Hanging of the Greens

ORGAN PRELUDE: Sleepers Wake
The Holly and the Ivy

J.S. Bach
Herbert Sumsion

WORDS OF WELCOME AND CONCERNS OF THE CHURCH

ORGAN MEDITATION: Noel Tendrement

Louis Daquin

CHORAL INTROIT

French Melody, 15th Century

O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here
until the Son of God appear. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.

PROCESSIONAL 119: "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel"

VENI EMMANUEL

LIGHTING OF THE ADVENT WREATH

Jan, Andrew, and Will Robillard

Today, as we prepare our sanctuary for the worship of the season, we feel somewhat like the Hebrew prophets who received the promise from God, proclaimed it to the people, and then waited. The evergreens and poinsettias, the white and gold and dancing light, and the music of the season stir feelings of excitement and anticipation within us. It is sometimes difficult to wait and to keep our hope alive, even when our hope comes from God. The Prophets remained steadfast, however, trusting God to be faithful in every way.

Today we light the candle of hope.

As we enjoy this Advent season and move toward Christmas, may we take time to think about what the coming of Jesus into our lives means for us and the world. As we once again receive the Christ Child, may our lives reflect the hope that he brings to us and to the world.

LITANY OF PREPARATION

Elizabeth Edwards

Minister: How shall we prepare this house for the coming of the King?

People: With branches of cedar, the tree of royalty.

Minister: How shall we prepare this house for the coming of the eternal Christ?

People: With garlands of pine and fir, whose leaves are ever living, ever green.

Minister: How shall we prepare this house for the coming of our Savior?

People: With wreaths of holly and ivy, telling of his passion, death, and resurrection.

Minister: How shall we prepare our hearts for the coming of the Son of God?

People: By hearing again the words of the Scriptures foretelling the saving work of God.

Minister: For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved.

People: Glory to God in the highest!

THE GLORIA PATRI

GLORIA

Glory be to God the Father, Glory be to God the Son,

Glory be to God the Spirit, Ever three and ever one.

Gloria in excelsis Deo. Gloria in excelsis Deo.

THE INVOCATION AND LORD'S PRAYER

Rev. Edwards

Come, O long-expected Jesus, in your mercy receive the hopes and fears we bring and listen for the deepest longings of our hearts. Grant that we, like the prophets of old, might possess an enduring hope, and that we, too, would watch and wait for signs that your light has come to dispel our darkness. May our lives reflect the wondrous news of Emmanuel, God with us, as we hold fast to the hope that is ours through the coming Christ who is our hope for today and for all our days to come, and who taught us to pray together, saying:

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 for ever. Amen.

CHILDREN'S ANTHEM: "Let Every Heart Prepare a Throne"

Mark Patterson

Let ev'ry heart prepare a throne for soon the Child of Light will come. Let ev'ry voice prepare a song to welcome Christ the Promised One. Let ev'ry hand reach out with love to greet this gift from God above. Make ready now, the Savior comes, the Prince of Peace, the Promised One. So let the flame of Advent glow, each candle shines that all may know the hope we need, so long foretold will soon be here for us to hold

THE GOSPEL LESSON:

Mark 1:1-8

Jerry Carter

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'"

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

PRAYER

Anne Chappell

O God, you sent your Son to be King of kings and Prince of peace. Grant that this Christmas he may be born not only in our memories but anew in our hearts. Help us to come to this festive season seeking him, as did the shepherds of old, that we may go home a new way — new creatures in Christ. O Lord, we stand before you as one from whom no secrets are hid.

May your beauty transform our ugliness.

May your love drive out our hate.

May your goodness penetrate our evil.

May your mercy forgive our unworthiness.

May your hope calm our fears.

May your humility shame our arrogance.

May your joy invade our sorrow.

O God, may the star which first pointed the way be the light that will lead us out of darkness. Amen.

THE BLESSING OF THE HOLLY AND THE IVY

Spencer Bulluck

Because holly and ivy bear their berries in the dark, cold winter months, our ancestors hung them in their homes to symbolize the hope and expectation of spring. Today we use holly as a reminder of Christ's passion during the otherwise joyous Christmas celebration. Legend has it that a shepherd brought a sprig of holly to the stable on Christmas night as a gift to the Christ child. Its leaves glistened in the moonlight, and its berries were snow white. As the Child reached to receive the gift, the berries suddenly turned a deep red. For Christians today, the prickly leaves represent the crown of thorns which Christ wore during his crucifixion and the berries represent the blood he shed for us. The ivy represents our human weakness clinging to divine strength. May God bless the holly and ivy that grace our sanctuary that we may remember his great sacrifice for us.

ANTHEM: "Sans Day Carol"

Cornish Traditional Carol/arr. John Rutter

Now the Holly bears a berry as white as the milk and Mary bore Jesus, who was wrapped up in silk. *And Mary bore Jesus Christ our Savior for to be and the first tree in the greenwood, it was the holly. Holly, holly, and the first tree in the greenwood it was the holly.* Now the Holly bears a berry as green as the grass and Mary bore Jesus, who died on the cross. Now the Holly bears a berry as black as the coal and Mary bore Jesus, who died for us all. Now the Holly bears a berry as blood is it red then trust we our Savior who rose from the dead.

THE BLESSING OF THE GREENERY AND WREATHS

Mary Jo Williamson

In many ancient civilizations it was believed that all objects possessed spirits. Since it was believed that most trees possessed kindly spirits, it became customary for people to bring home sprigs and branches of trees in order that their homes might be blessed by their presence. When Christianity came into existence, the newly converted pagans refused to give up this custom, so it eventually became part of our tradition. As we decorate our homes and places of worship, the evergreens symbolize God's eternal and everlasting love for us, even after death. The wreaths, round with no beginning and no end, symbolize the victory and glory of the fulfillment of scripture in the coming of Christ.

CAROL MEDLEY

147 (stanzas 1&3):

"Away in a Manger"

AWAY IN A MANGER

125 (stanzas 1&2):

"Come, O Long Expected Jesus"

HYFRYDOL

150 (stanzas 1&3):

"Hark! The Herald Angels Sing"

MENDELSSOHN

THE BLESSING OF THE POINSETTIAS

Stancil Barnes

Poinsettias add a special glow to the pageantry of the Advent season. This plant blooms at Christmas in Mexico, where it is known by its native name, "flower of the Holy Night." The legendary account bears out the appropriateness of the name. A small boy had no gift to bring to the Christ Child's manger bed in the village church. As he trudged toward the church, scuffing his feet in the dust of the road, he decided he could at least offer the Holy Infant the branches from a bush that grew beside the way. Quickly he stripped off some of the branches and made his way to the church where he reverently placed the green leaves at the manger. As he knelt there, the other children jeered and mocked his offering. Rising tearfully, he looked once more at the branches, only to find that where his tears had fallen bloomed a brilliant red star-shaped flower. Today the Poinsettia is the most popular of Christmas plants, for even without the legend, Christians see in the flaming star of its red bracts the star of Bethlehem. May God remind us that the sincerest gifts are those of the heart which always give birth to new life.

OFFERTORY ANTHEM: "In the Bleak Midwinter"

Gustav Holst/arr. Donald Moore

In the bleak midwinter, frosty wind made moan, earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone; snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow, in the bleak midwinter, long time ago. Angels and archangels o'er the stable there, cherubim and seraphim gathered in the air; But his mother only, in her maiden bliss, worshiped the beloved, worshiped with a kiss. O what can I give him, poor though as I am? If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb; if I were a Wise Man, I would do my part; what I can I give him: give him my heart. What I can I give him: give him my heart.

OFFERTORY PRAYER

Amy Shortt

During this season of waiting and anticipation, we are reminded to stay awake for the coming of your Son, O God. Jesus' love often comes into our lives in quiet, unexpected ways. Today, we generously respond to this compassion and commit ourselves to living in a manner worthy of your love. In anticipation of the coming of Jesus, the Savior, we pray. Amen.

ORGAN OFFERTORY: Noel Stranger

Louis Daquin

THE DOXOLOGY

THE FIRST NOEL

Praise God from whom all blessings flow. Praise God all creatures here below.

Praise God above ye heavenly host. Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel, born is the King of Israel.

THE BLESSING OF THE CRECHE

Tracy Corbett

After Jesus was born in the stable in Bethlehem, his parents bundled him in soft cloths and made a bed for him in a manger. What a humble beginning it was for the Son of God! That which held feed for animals also cradled the "Bread of Life." Later, as Jesus traveled about teaching and healing, he had no place to call "home" and likely spent a few nights in other borrowed stables. The manger reminds us that the Son of God was also the "Son of man," that he who was divine was also human. May all who contemplate this mystery be filled with awe and wonder and bow down in humble worship as did the shepherds and Wise Men.

ANTHEM: "A Place to Keep Your Son"

Matthew H. Corl

A watching, waiting people look for signs from above. We keep awake, expecting the coming of your love. We know good news shall be here soon, a blessed one shall come; prepare in us a warm heart, a place to keep your son. A voice cries out, "Get ready, prepare a way for God; be ready for his coming, the coming of our Lord." We know good news shall be here soon, a blessed one shall come; prepare in us a warm heart, a place to keep your son. Rejoicing in your spirit, our deepest joy in you; the world is ever changing, but you are ever true. We know good news shall be here soon, a blessed one shall come; prepare in us a warm heart, a place to keep your son. We hear the angel's greeting, "O hail, you blessed one, for you shall bear a Savior and he will be God's son." We know good news shall be here soon, the blessed one is near; we'll make for him a warm heart, we'll hold your own son dear.

THE BLESSING OF THE CHRISMON TREE

Dennis Culpepper

The most popular legend holds that the first Christmas tree was cut down by Martin Luther, who brought it home and decorated it with candles to symbolize the stars that lit the Bethlehem sky on the night of Jesus' birth.

The Chrismon Tree is an evergreen that symbolizes the eternal life which our Savior offers to us all. On it are tiny white lights that speak of Him Who is light of the World. The Chrismons (which stand for Christ monogram) proclaim the Name, the Life, and the saving acts of Jesus the Christ. May God enable us to see the entire drama of redemption and love as we look upon this tree and draw us into a life of service and witness.

ANTHEM: "Break Forth, O Beauteous Heavenly Light"

J.S. Bach

Break forth, O beauteous heavenly light and usher in the morning; ye shepherds, shrink not with affright, but hear the angel's warning. This child, now weak in infancy, our confidence and joy shall be, the power of Satan breaking, our peace eternal making.

THE OLD TESTAMENT LESSON: Isaiah 2:1-5

MEDITATION: "Christmas Reflections: The Hope of the Prophets"

Dr. Wright

In her 2013 Christmas address to the British Commonwealth, Queen Elizabeth recalled a man she had known long ago who had to spend a year in a plaster cast. All he could do was read and think and he was miserable. Once he was well, however, he realized what a gift that year had been to him. Although his mobility was extremely limited, he had time to reflect on his life and all that was important to him. The Queen noted that for us Christmas is an opportunity for reflection. Unlike the man in the cast, we are not forced into rumination; rather, we recognize the opportunity we have to take account of changes that have taken place and appreciate those things that have remained constant, chief among them: family, friends, and neighborliness.¹

The Queen got me to thinking. Not only is the coming of Christ something for us to think about today, it has always been a cause for reflection. Scripture tells us of many people who spent a great deal of time thinking about the coming of Jesus. Prophets, kings, and common folk as well as the people who were intimately involved in Jesus' birth pondered what his coming meant before and after that sacred day we know as Christmas. This Advent season we will consider the ways in which

¹Queen Elizabeth II, "2013 Christmas Message," BBC, December 25, 2013.

some of the biblical characters involved in the Christmas story might have reflected on what was happening and the ways in which their lives reflected the truths of the story itself. In the same way, we will explore how we might think about Christ's coming into the world and consider the ways in which our lives reflect God's love come to earth. On this first Sunday of Advent, we consider the prophets.

How do you prevent someone from giving up? How do you encourage someone to keep going when none of their dreams are realized? How do you hold onto hope?

These are questions that must have dogged the prophets as they considered the situation of the Hebrew people, the endless waiting they endured, and the promises of God they were called to deliver.

God had called Abram and Sarai to go to an unfamiliar land where they would settle into a new life and promised them a son, but they waited decades for Isaac to be born. God called them to begin a new life in Canaan and promised to make of them a great nation of people, but they waited three generations before the family began to grow large and then found themselves slaves in Egypt. God called Moses to deliver his people from the oppression of Egyptian slavery and promised they would dwell in a land of milk and honey, but the Hebrew people faced starvation and hardship and wandered forty years in the desert. Finally settled in Canaan, the Israelites were called to worship God and God alone and promised the Messiah who would establish a reign of justice, but the people waited hundreds of years and suffered under the rule of numerous enemies before Jesus was ever born.

How do you keep the attention of a restless people focused and unwavering? How do you convince them to remain faithful? How do you keep hope alive? How do you convince people that God deserves our full devotion, that God's call to righteousness and justice is the path we should all walk, that peace is preferable to war, and generosity is better than selfishness? How do you get people to believe that they have a responsibility for the poor and an obligation to protect the rights of the most vulnerable people in the community? How do you help them to understand that God desires for them a life that is full and complete when all around them it appears as if the world is going to hell in a handbasket?

Author and professor Wendy Wright reminds us that hope is elusive and often found where you least expect it.² The prophets had to convince the people that God's hope was not to be found in military victories or political triumphs. They had to help the Hebrews understand that hope was not fulfilled in riches or possessions or even in the construction of a beautiful temple. God's hope, they realized, resided in a people and in a movement on earth that truly changes the way life is experienced.

I like the way Doris Donnelly imagines that "hope thinks with big brush strokes on a giant canvas."³ That sounds like the prophets to me. God gave them an enormously difficult task and the prophets had no choice but to be forthright with the Hebrew people. They were clear about the shortcomings of the people, faults and failures all. They reminded them of the abundant blessings God showered upon them. They outlined the responsibilities of faith and the consequences of unfaithful attitudes and actions. Their work did not stop with their sermons, however. They preached with their lives. In words and in actions, the prophets embodied the hope that was before them. Jeremiah bought a plot of land during in the midst of a siege of Jerusalem in order to signal his confidence that better times were ahead. Hosea married a prostitute who repeatedly left him for

²Wendy M. Wright, "The Long, Lithe Limbs of Hope," *Weavings* (November/December 1999): 7,12.

³Doris Donnelly, "The Season of Hope," *Weavings* (November/December 1999): 17.

other lovers in order to illustrate God's steadfast love of wayward Israel. And Isaiah described God's coming as a gargantuan highway project that would bulldoze mountains and fill in valleys so that a level highway would provide quick and easy travel for God who would come as a compassionate shepherd to his people. It was a fantastical vision, a dream so unlikely that it had the power to capture the minds and hearts of the people. Listen to his familiar words:

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. 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.

A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. 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. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken." A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.

Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!" See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep. Isaiah 40:1-11

This picture of hope is of the Almighty God compassionately caring for his people in all of their frailty. In another beloved passage, Isaiah painted a picture of familiar circumstances with absurd outcomes. The images he envisioned were practically laughable for he imagined wolves and lambs sharing the same pastures, leopards and young goats as well as calves and lions napping together, cows and bears eating out of the same trough while lions became vegetarians and shared straw with oxen. And a little child would shepherd this beastly menagerie! Imagine mortal enemies doing routine things in purely peaceful ways! Yet somehow each brush stroke of this picture was tinted with hope and every phrase was intoned with the expectation that God would make it happen. Isaiah's visions, like the actions of Jeremiah and Hosea and later, John the Baptist, captured the desires, the needs, the imaginations, and hearts of the people. And they still do!

Thousands of years later, we still look for hope in familiar places, but that may not be where we find it. As the prophets remind us, we need to look behind and beyond the obvious to the places where we never before imagined God's will might be done. We need to re-read the prophets in a twenty-first century context and hear their outlandish pronouncements speaking hope to people who long for better days. We need to look for the least likely places to find Jesus, the stables in our world where the earthiness of life takes place in ways we would rather ignore. Hope is not merely lip service to a yearning that something will happen. It is an expectation that the earth will change to accommodate God's coming, that enemies will become friends, that better days are ahead, and that God's love toward all of us is unflinching.

When we think about all that God has done to fulfill the hopes of his people, we become aware of the hopes that are yet to be realized. At that point, we understand our calling to reflect the hope of God by our own lives. We have the opportunity to live the hope of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in bold, creative, daring, outlandish, and transformative ways. Perhaps we will hear the cries of people

in places like Ferguson, Missouri and work for a day when all people are recognized as God's children and judged by character rather than skin color or ethnicity or prosperity or nationality or religion or sexuality or any of the other "beastly" distinctions that divide us. Perhaps we will hear the cries of people who long to be accepted for who they are and work to make it possible for them live life to the fullest. Perhaps we will hear the cries of people longing for freedom and opportunity and work to provide places where all people are welcomed and offered a fresh beginning. Perhaps we will hear our own deep yearnings and claim the vision of a new day when we are transformed into the likeness of Christ.

This Advent let us take the time to think prophetically about Christ's coming and reflect by our lives the hope which Jesus embodies for us all. Amen.

CONFESSION OF FAITH

Leader: Let us decorate this tree with symbols of our faith.
The Chrismons we use represent the life and inspiration of the church in times past, the witness of the church today, and the hope of the church for generations to come.

People: As we share these symbols, let us confess what we believe.

Leader: We believe in God.

People: Father, Creator, Sustainer.

Leader: And in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord.

People: Alpha and Omega, Light of light, Prince of Peace, King of kings, Lord of lords. Immanuel: God with us.

Leader: Jesus! Born of the virgin Mary, born in Bethlehem, cradled in a manger. Heralded by shepherds, Magi, and angelic hosts.

People: Glory to God in the highest and on earth . . . peace.

Leader: We believe in the Holy Spirit.

People: Comforter, Heavenly Dove, Spirit of Love.

Leader: We believe in the church.

People: The Body of Christ, the communion of the saints, the people of God.

Leader: We believe in the Word of Life.

People: Sent from God: living, transforming, and challenging.

Leader: We believe that Christ has conquered life and death.

People: That he was crucified, dead, and buried: the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

Leader: We believe in the resurrection.

People: Offering life everlasting!

Leader: Bursting forth with hope!

People: Hallelujah!

Leader: Let us offer our lives to God.

People: In gratitude for the gift of love and life, we offer ourselves to God. Amen.

RECESSIONAL CAROL 144: "O Little Town of Bethlehem"

ST. LOUIS

BENEDICTION AND CHORAL RESPONSE

ORGAN POSTLUDE: In Dulci Jubilo

J.S. Bach

*The poinsettias and wreaths that adorn the sanctuary and the doors of the church
are given to the glory of God and in memory or in honor of loved ones.
Please see the memorial brochure for a listing of these gifts.*

THE MINISTRY OF WORSHIP

Jody C. Wright
Senior Minister
Connor Evans
Acolyte

Elizabeth Edwards
Associate Minister
Mark Gansor
Organist
Michael Waters
Torch Bearer

Amy Shortt
Minister of Music
Beth Seagroves
Crucifer