



# Welcome!

First Congregational Church  
of Webster Groves  
United Church of Christ

*Seek Christ in each. Serve God in all.*

December 6, 2020

Second Sunday of Advent | Feast of Nicholas of Myra

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PREPARE YE THE  
WAY OF THE LORD



*We respond to God's call by welcoming everyone  
regardless of ability, age, ethnicity, race, gender identity,  
sexual orientation or socio-economic background.*

*To proclaim in word and deed the love of Christ, we affirm that  
all may share in the full life, ministry, fellowship, responsibilities  
and blessing of our congregation.*

*No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey,  
you are welcome here.*

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## Order of Worship

PRELUDE

*Wachet Auf (Sleepers, Awake)*

Gottfried Walther

WELCOME

Marilyn Davis, *Announcer*

TOLLING THE BELL / LIGHTING OF CANDLES

RAISING THE COVENANT

*Covenant of 1977*

**We who are called of God into this Christian community covenant together:  
to seek to know the will of God, to experience the joy and struggle of  
discipleship, to proclaim in word and deed the love of Christ, and to work for  
peace and justice among all people. We trust God's promise of grace and  
forgiveness and the presence of the Holy Spirit in our trials and rejoicing.**

AT THE ADVENT WREATH

*Scripture Reading*

Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13

Elston McCowan, *Student Minister*

O God, you were favorable to your land;  
you restored the fortunes of Jacob.  
You forgave the iniquity of your people;  
you pardoned all their sin.  
Let me hear what the God Yahweh will speak,  
for God will speak peace to the people,  
to the faithful,  
to those who turn to God in their hearts.  
Surely God's salvation is at hand for those who fear God,  
so that divine glory may dwell in our land.  
Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;  
righteousness and peace will kiss each other.  
Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,  
and righteousness will look down from the sky.  
Yahweh will give what is good,  
and our land will yield its increase.  
Righteousness will go before our God,  
and will make a path for God's steps. Amen.

*Responsive Reading* (Responsive – One; **Many**)

Even now, the Peaceful One is drawing near.

**Even now, the day of our salvation is at hand.**

The God who comforts us speaks tenderly to her people.

**The Shepherd who feeds us longs to take us into his arms.**

While we watch and wait for steadfast love and faithfulness to meet,

**While we wonder if justice and peace will ever kiss,**

We can prepare the way of our God.

**We can clear a path for him in our hearts and in our world.**

In these days of setback and struggle, we choose to prepare and not to despair.

**In a world drunk on wealth and power, we choose to walk the path of  
peace.**

For such a time as this, the Holy One comes speaking peace.

**For such a time as this, we are called to make peace.**

Get ready! Our savior comes.

**Get ready! The peace of Christ is given for one and for all.**

*The second candle is lit.*

**ALL: FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS, FILL US WITH YOUR PEACE.**

**HYMN**

*Now Bless the God of Israel*

Ruth Duck

based on Luke 1:68-79, the Song of Zechariah

who, Luke says, sang this upon the birth of his son John

Now bless the God of Israel who come in love and power,  
Who raises from the royal house deliverance in this hour.  
Through holy prophets God has sworn to free us from alarm,  
To save us from the heavy hand of all who wish us harm.

Remembering the covenant, God rescues us from fear  
That we might serve in holiness and peace from year to year,  
And you, my child, shall go before, to preach to prophesy  
That all may know the tender love, the grace of God most high.

In tender mercy, God will send the dayspring from on high,  
Our rising sun, the light of life for those who sit and sigh.  
God comes to guide our way to peace, that death shall reign no more.  
Sing praises to the Holy One! O worship and adore!

**AT THE JESSE TREE**

*Manna and Quail*

Rev. David Denoon, *Pastor*

**THE WORD SHARED**

Merrimon Boyd, *Student Minister*

*From the Gospels*

Mark 1:1-8

New Revised Standard Version, ad.

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.”

*Response.*

Reader: Hear what the Spirit is saying to the people.

**People: Thanks be to God.**

**ANTHEM**

“Comfort Ye / Every Valley” from *Messiah*  
Mark Cereghino, tenor

G. F. Handel

**MESSAGE OF THE DAY**

*“People, Get Ready”*

Rev. Denoon

What were people thinking when they went to John the Baptist?  
They might have been watching to see who else showed up.

And no few were probably there for the spectacle – all those people and so many different kinds of people!

Or they came to pass judgment on those who went to John in all sincerity. There were other ways to be cleansed ritually – sacrifices you could perform and the ceremonial bathing of the mikvah. And all of this could be done at the Temple. If you'd come this far, all the way to Jerusalem, what was the point of taking a detour at the River Jordan when the real action was happening over on Mount Zion?

You know, I don't want to talk with you about those judgmental few. There is not enough time in our brief span of life to dwell on what people like that are imagining or what they're about. In fact, if you're one of them, I want you to tune out now. I think I have nothing to say to you, and if I did, the chances are you'd only scoff anyway.

I'm concerned about those others, who I presume were people like me. And what I know about me is, *You don't do something so public about something so private unless there's some fire inside you that needs to be doused or brought under control.* Some, wild... fire raging and consuming every dwelling place within that had been a refuge, a sanctuary.

Do you know that sensation?

Some of you might have felt it, I think... that sensation that every blessed thing has turned chaotic and that, at any moment, you and all that you love might be consumed by a force without direction and without mercy.

Some of those who went to see and hear John might have been feeling as though their lives weren't amounting to what God or others, or possibly even they themselves, had hoped. They had this sense that they hadn't amounted to much so far, or they had been told this about themselves. We have come to say about baptism that it is symbolic of dying to the old self and adopting a new one. It's a ritual restart.

But I'm concerned about how we say that, because the reality is that it only does that symbolically. And we are going to have all of the old self still residing within us, no matter how many times we will try to begin again.

It's going to take more than an imagined rebirth to *actually rebirth* us. Or to rebuild us.

Some who visited John surely were people with mental afflictions. Mental illness would have been just as common then as it is now, except that the treatment was exorcism rather than counseling and medication. Nowadays, we know so much more about mental health. While it's still often a speculative science, we're getting a firmer grasp on how to develop and maintain a surer footing.

Example: A few years ago, there was this TV series on The CW Network, *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, which started off as just a story with a ridiculous premise – that a young, successful real estate attorney in Manhattan would drop everything and resettle in southern California, in order to pursue a love interest from her teenage years. That plotline worked for about a season and a half... until the writers realized that someone as emotionally damaged as their heroine seemed to be, seriously needed treatment for her condition. The maturing of the character and the story came with analysis, counseling, and proper medication – which one might imagine would remove the humor from the story. Not so, it just shifted the focus of the humor from mental illness to the human condition, of recognizing that life, like mental illness, is a lengthy process that would possibly not have a clear and definite resolution.

I'm not sure how much good baptism could have done for people needing therapy or medicine who couldn't get it, back then. But John and Jesus seem to me to have provided the communities in which such folk might be able to hang on. Kind of like this one.

And you need a supportive community, because people can be kind of hands-off when you're needy like that.

You know those yard signs that people put out with slogans like “YOU ARE WORTHY OF LOVE” and “YOU GOT THIS” or “YOU ARE NOT ALONE” and “DON'T GIVE UP”? Those signs are part of a project led by a woman named Amy Wolff who concluded, one day a few years ago, that putting such signs up might help to lower suicide rates. And the idea has caught on. And although there is no data to indicate how successful her project is being, it is

typical of people who are worried about others but not suffering through the conditions that tend to prompt suicide – and maybe who don't have direct access to people who are – that putting a sign with an encouraging message in their yard would be sufficient.

Now, I think it's important to realize that suicide is not only caused by depression or low self esteem, which these signs seem to be trying to mitigate. It is usually the culmination of a bout of severe mental illness – often including, but hardly limited to, internal and external stressors so great that the sufferer literally cannot subdue the urge to end their own life. *Where they are* is in a personal place so isolating, so isolated, that no yard sign with a positive message is going to stay their hand. The sign might encourage them as they are getting better, with proper medication and counseling.

And I don't want you to hear me belittling you or trying to prevent you, if you either have such a sign in your yard or are contemplating putting one up. Besides, in the age of COVID the interpretation of those signs' message is shifting, and they might actually bear messages frontline or other essential workers need to know. Just know, it's not the same as actually showing up for the person under such stress that they need your message.

Similarly, I don't want our estimate of the curative effect of baptism to be more than it could be. And I'm guessing that some who went to John thought it could.

It should be noticed that John the Baptist didn't refuse returnees, the way that I'll tell you, "Once baptized, always baptized," and "That may feel like it's your first baptism or a re-baptism, but it's really a remembrance of your original baptism."

Anyway, for some of those who went to John, baptism would serve as a reorientation or a re-reorientation... maybe even a therapy. Why would you go to him, when you had come all the way to Jerusalem already and there were established places where you could get done what he did in the middle of a wilderness and in a river? Because sometimes, while you're waiting for yourself, working on yourself to finally adopt a new direction, you find little, meaning-filled things to do. Filling one's world with religion can be one of those things, the way folks did with John. And what better way to do that than to immerse yourself in it?

Jesus had his own ideas about what was at the heart of people who went to see John. Matthew and Luke both quote the same source, were able to recite it to their scribes almost verbatim, identifying a commonly known saying of Jesus about the prophet at the Jordan. Luke puts it this way:

<sup>24b</sup> Jesus [said] to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? <sup>25</sup> What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who put on fine clothing and live in luxury are in royal palaces. <sup>26</sup> What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. <sup>27</sup> This is the one about whom it is written,

'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way before you.'

<sup>28</sup> I tell you, among those born of women no one is greater than John; yet the least in the dominion of God is greater than he." <sup>29</sup> (And all the people who heard this, including the tax collectors, acknowledged the justice of God, because they had been baptized with John's baptism. <sup>30</sup> But by refusing to be baptized by him, the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God's purpose for themselves.)

Luke 7:24–30; cf. Matthew 11:7-15

Jesus said that people who went to John knew that something brilliant and fantastic was happening there, that John helped people to realize God's purpose for themselves, to experience something even heavenly while the act of baptism itself was so earthly.

So, everyone who went to John for baptism, for their own baptism, Jesus would say, all of them... sensed that their world was unstable but that it could change for the better. John was a cosmic Elijah, Jesus said, announcing as the first Elijah did that God was going back to the

drawing board with us, with our world. Not to destroy all of us, the way the story of Noah unfolds, but to remake us, to work with the stuff on hand. The human stuff on hand. And to redeem it.

And what we've learned since then, is that this – living, growing, changing, becoming better, becoming well, becoming whole – is a long-term project, not bound to one time and place or to one prophet and people. The world is indeed unstable and ripe for change... still. And so is each and every one of us upon it.

The one thing all those people at the riverside had in common – even for how different they were – was the fact that each of them, all of them, every blessed one of them, was standing on ground that wasn't going to hold. And they needed to move from that unstable place to a firm place.

Do you see what I'm driving at?

Because that's the meaning, the purpose, behind our Redeemer. It's God's purpose for us. In this Advent time, this time in which we state again what we know always, all the time, we affirm what a crowd of needy people in the time of Jesus and John were affirming and what God was affirming in them. Basically, fundamentally, this world is transitory and all of us upon it. We're troubled, we're sick ourselves, or we're bedeviled by injustice and ill will. Everything seems constantly as though it's about to burn up or to shake loose, and indeed it is.

But God is not. There is a stable place – a *stable* place, maybe like the one Leon sang about last week which sufficed for the dear little Savior Jesus Christ – a stable for us being reborn and reborn again in the midst of our troubles. A river in an unlikely wilderness, with a prophet beckoning to us to join him in the water: "Make ready a path for God. Straighten the crooked places. Clear the rough spots."

I'm saying, it's Curtis Mayfield Time:

*People, get ready for that train to Jordan!  
You don't need no baggage to get on board;  
All you need is faith to hear those diesels humming:  
You don't need a ticket, you just thank the Lord!*

Amen.

## **WE SHARE OUR BLESSINGS WITH OTHERS**

Marilyn Davis

*Invitation            The Christmas Fund (to be collected, December 20, 2020)*

*Prayer of Dedication (Unison)*

**By the power of your Spirit, O God, may these gifts of gratitude and love be combined with others, to lift up your people and your world. By the power of your Spirit, may these gifts from our hearts bring down mountains of care and anxiety. Bless these gifts, that they may bring hope to the hopeless, joy to the sorrowful, and deep love to those who minister in your name. Amen.**

## **RITUAL FOR THE SACRAMENT OF CHRIST'S TABLE**

*We Share Our Joys and Concerns*

Elston McCowan

- Our residents in assisted living and skilled care
- People we love who are living with cancer
- All those the world regards as disabled
- People with mental illness, family, friends, caregivers, and roommates
- People living with dementia, and their caregivers
- Family and friends of Carol McCoy, who died this past Tuesday evening, and for all people who are grieving

- People who are lonely or alone
- Those whose employment and businesses are at risk
- COVID-19 patients, this week including Tracey Harris and the staff of St. John's UCC in Manchester
- Essential workers and their loved ones; with a special prayer for medical personnel who are working with COVID patients
- Peace with justice

*Invitation*

Rev. Denoon

*Eucharistic Prayer*

Holy God, as we enjoy the benefits of our tables, we cannot forget the rawness of the earth. We cannot take bread and forget those who are hungry. Your world is one world and we are stewards of its nourishment.

**God, put our prosperity at the service of the poor.**

We cannot drink from these cups and forget those who are thirsty. The ground and the rootless, the earth and its weary people cry out for justice.

**God, put our fullness at the service of the empty.**

We cannot hear your words of peace and forget the world at war, or, if not at war, then preparing for it.

**Show us quickly, God, how to turn weapons into welcome signs and the lust for power into a desire for peace.**

We cannot celebrate the feast of your family and forget our divisions. We are one in spirit, but not in fact. History and hurt still dismember us.

**God, heal your church in every brokenness.**

*Prayer of Our Savior*

**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 sins as we forgive those who sin 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.**

*Receiving the Elements*

*Prayer after Communion (Unison)*

**We give you thanks, gracious God, for the gifts of bread and cup, and in our love for one another. And now, send us forth from our tables a nourished and empowered people that we may live your love, speak your peace, and sing your hope. Amen.**

**BENEDICTION**

Rev. Denoon

**POSTLUDE**

*Variations on "Puer nobis nascitur (On Jordan's Bank)"*

Hal Hopson

**DISMISSAL**

Marilyn Davis



# “For Such a Time as This.”

*Esther 4:14*

**T**he Rev. Jeanne Tyler was called to ministry in the 1960s, and along with her husband, John, spent 33 years jointly serving congregations in Wisconsin, Nebraska, and Iowa.

Born with cerebral palsy and diagnosed with moderate to severe hearing loss in the third grade, Jeanne became a fierce advocate for the church’s awareness of, and response to, those with disabilities.

“There is a hidden cost of disability of which many are unaware,” she explains. “The financial cost – speech therapy, hearing aids, motorized wheelchairs, specialized computers – all expensive. Without these, isolation and depression can set in.”

Jeanne served with the UCC’s Disabilities Ministries and in other capacities with the national church and was instrumental in the conception and funding of the Virginia Kreyer Endowed Scholarship Fund, which provides tuition and assistive technology for ministers with disabilities.

“I’m grateful for the United Church of Christ being with me on my journey, and it’s essential that the church continue its commitment to clergy who have disabilities.” Hearing aids have been a godsend to Jeanne, from the first ones she used while still in college. “They worked well for the time – I could hear the fire crackle for the first time and it was just thrilling.”

After retirement, the high cost of newer technology hearing aids was problematic. A grant from the Christmas Fund filled the gap left by her insurance allowance, allowing Jeanne to have hearing aids that make all the difference. “As a pastor, I always asked people to support the Christmas Fund, to support those whose life work has been serving and empowering others, but I never thought I would be on the receiving end. I am humbled and grateful for this acknowledgement by my church that hearing aids are life-giving.”

## In 2019, gifts to the Christmas Fund enabled:

- Monthly pension supplementation for 350 retired clergy and lay employees (\$1,347,419)
- Health premium supplementation for 144 retired clergy and lay employees (\$374,577)
- Emergency grants for 69 individuals and families (\$123,727)
- Christmas “Thank You” gift checks to 521 retired clergy and lay employees (\$260,500)

## THE CHRISTMAS FUND

For the Veterans of the Cross and the Emergency Fund



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*Seek Christ in each. Serve God in all.*

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