



Welcome!

First Congregational Church
of Webster Groves
United Church of Christ

Seek Christ in each. Serve God in all.

December 13, 2020
Third Sunday of Advent



*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.*

Order of Worship

PREPARING THE WAY

PRELUDE

Once in Royal David's City

Chancel Choir

WELCOME

Erick Falconer, *Announcer*

Hello and welcome to worship with the First Congregational Church of Webster Groves. We are a member church of the United Church of Christ, located near St. Louis, Missouri.

This is our worship for Sunday, December 13, 2020. Today is the third Sunday of Advent – the season in which we prepare for the coming of Christ.

Today, we will light the candle of Joy on our Advent wreath. Fittingly, we will also observe our annual Hanging of the Greens. That verb, *observe*, is especially fitting this year, since we are unable to be together in the sanctuary, and that is exactly where most of us want to be, for the Hanging of the Greens! This service usually involves every worshiper here taking part in parades of decorations and preparations for Christmas.

You see, Christmas actually begins with Advent. And with our annual Hanging of the Greens, our church building begins to wear its Christmas apparel. We don't want to get ahead of ourselves and ignore this preparatory season, but some of the trappings cannot wait.

Today, the lights of our Christmas tree will shine; bells will ring; wreaths will be mounted; candles will glow; and the crèche and poinsettias will grace this hall again.

As we make ready for the birth of the Christ Child by preparing this sanctuary, let us make ourselves ready the sanctuary of our own hearts. As we decorate the church, with praise let us not only consider the history and meaning of the symbols of this special time, but also rededicate these symbols – and ourselves – to the service of God.

I'm your announcer for this morning, Erick Falconer. I will also be taking part in leadership of the service from here at my Indiana home. I am joined in leading worship, this morning by Student Pastors Merrimon Boyd and Elston McCowan, Music Director Leon Burke the third, and Pastor Dave Denoon. Ian Didriksen is leading our team of technical volunteers.

This service is being conducted as a Zoom meeting with a live stream duplicated on YouTube, although you may be viewing this later, on our YouTube channel or Facebook page. It includes spoken responses, and songs to sing. To participate with us, you are encouraged to download a copy of this morning's order of worship, which is available from our website.

Let our worship begin...

TOLLING OF THE BELL

LIGHTING OF ALTAR CANDLES

INTROIT AND PROCESSION

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel

Bells and Men

O come, O come, Emmanuel,
And ransom captive Israel
Who mourns in lowly exile here Until the Son
of God appear: Rejoice, rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel!

O come, thou Dayspring, come and cheer Our spirits by
thine advent here!

Bid envy, strife and sorrow cease,
And fill the world with heaven's peace:
Rejoice, rejoice! Emmanuel Shall come to
thee, O Israel!

AT THE ADVENT WREATH

SECOND CANDLE: **JOY**

The Pastors

Preparation (Responsive – Leaders; **People**)

In times like ours, joy can be hard to summon.

In times like ours, joy can be hard even to imagine.

And still the season beckons us to make merry.

And yet the scriptures tell us to “rejoice always.”

It sounds almost ludicrous.

It borders on outrageous.

How can we rejoice under the burden of so much injustice?

How can we rejoice under the pall of sickness and death?

It is enough to make those who are alone feel lonely!

It’s enough to make the grieving or depressed feel sadder still.

But ours is not a joy dependent on circumstances.

Our joy is not derived from measurable outcomes.

Advent invites us to rejoice in God’s goodness.

Even as we watch and wait and aren’t sure what’s coming.

Advent invites us to rejoice in all the ways God’s love is with us.

Even as it empowers us to be true to all we feel.

It won’t be long now ’til the blessed Babe is born.

We rejoice in the true light shining its way into the world.

The Advent Candles are lighted.

ALL: FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS, MAY OUR JOY BE FULL.

RAISING THE COVENANT

Covenant of 1977

As an affirmation of our oneness in the Spirit, let us raise together the covenant of our church:

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.

HANGING OF THE GREENS

THE HANDBELLS

Poem

Christmas Bells

H. W. Longfellow

Read by Bob Moody, December 10, 2017

I heard the bells on Christmas Day
Their old, familiar carols play,
 And wild and sweet
 The words repeat
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

And thought how, as the day had come,
The belfries of all Christendom
 Had rolled along
 The unbroken song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

Till ringing, singing on its way,
The world revolved from night to day,
 A voice, a chime,
 A chant sublime
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

Then from each black, accursed mouth
The cannon thundered in the South,

And with the sound
The carols drowned
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

It was as if an earthquake rent
The hearth-stones of a continent,
And made forlorn
The households born
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

And in despair I bowed my head;
“There is no peace on earth,” I said;
“For hate is strong,
And mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!”

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
“God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;
The Wrong shall fail,
The Right prevail,
With peace on earth, good-will to men.”

Handbell Anthem

Winter Poem

Canterbury Bells

THE WREATHS

The Green Circle

Merrimon Boyd, *Student Minister*

Wreaths have been used symbolically for centuries. The circle or ring shape is symbolic of eternity or eternal life, because the shape has no beginning or end. Putting plants into the symbolic circular shape symbolizes the strength of life overcoming the forces of winter.

Ancient Druids considered holly sacred, believing that, with its glossy, shiny, prickly leaves of green adorned with red berries, holly remained green all year due to magical powers.

Combining the symbolism of the wreath with those perceived magical powers of holly, the Romans exchanged holly wreaths as gifts. Once Christianity took hold in Rome, holly wreaths became Christmas wreaths as part of popular holiday decorations. But in 575 A.D., one German bishop forbade all Christmas greens and condemned them as “dangerous and heathen.” Churches did not see their likeness again for centuries.

Hidden forces were at work, however, and by the 17th century, holly had made a full recovery, reassumed into our annual Christmas celebrations and decorations once again. The shape, color, and texture of the wreath symbolized the crown of thorns put atop the head of the crucified Christ, as well as the resurrection and eternal life.

Evergreen branches are a part of our preparation, our waiting: a symbol of hope, a symbol of eternity, a reminder of love received and transformed. Evergreen is a symbol of the eternal promise of renewal, a symbol of the eternal and everlasting God.

Anthem

The Holly and the Ivy
featuring Mark Cereghino and Leon Burke III

Java Jived

WE SHARE OUR BLESSINGS WITH OTHERS

Mission Moment

The Christmas Fund

Rev. David Denoon, *Pastor*

The theme of our Christmas Fund offering, this year, is “For Such a Time as This,” a line spoken by Mordecai, encouraging his niece Esther in the book that bears her name. Mordecai suggested that Esther had come into the king’s court “for such a time as this,” when conditions were grim. The king of Persia, prompted by his evil aide Haman, had issued a royal decree for the massacre of all Jews in the land. In the end, Queen Esther risked her life to save the lives of her people. Things aren’t as bad for the beloved clergy and staff retirees of the United Church of Christ, but for many, times are hard. The Christmas Fund is a lifeline for retired servants of the church who need help paying health insurance premiums, regular bills, and emergency

expenses. For just such needs, at just this time, we have the opportunity to give to the Christmas Fund special offering. Inspired by Esther and motivated by love, let's be generous.

We all are enabled serve and support our community and communities all over the world through our ministries of love, as well as these blessed and inspired individuals who have served as lay and clergy ministers of God's Good News. While the current health crisis continues, we aren't passing plates or collecting in person. If you are able financially, and you would like to support First Church with a monetary donation, we invite you to send a check to

First Congregational Church 10 West Lockwood Avenue
Webster Groves, Missouri 63119

If you would like to designate your offering for the Christmas Fund, please write the phrase "Christmas Fund" in the memo line of your check.

You can also give by going to our website – FirstChurchWG.org – and to our "Donate" page. The pulldown menu on that page will help you direct your offering.

**Prayer of Dedication (Unison)*

We come with joy, O God, rejoicing in our capacity to give, grateful for the ministries and the ministers of the United Church of Christ. Take our gifts, and make blessings of them. Take our gifts, and make them instruments of life. To the One who can do much with little, to the One who can do more than we can ask or imagine, we offer our thanks and praise. Amen.

THE CANDLES

Reading

Significance of Candles

Elston McCowan, *Student Minister*

Candles have always been an important part of Christian worship. How could they not, representing as they do the refining fire of the Holy Spirit! A Christmas-y version states that the candles should be made from pure beeswax, because the worker bees who produce it are all virgins... like Jesus' mother Mary.

In Luke when Jesus' parents present him at the temple for his dedication, the prophet Simeon refers to the Christ child as "a light to lighten the Gentiles." Our candles thus also symbolize the light of Christ shining as a beacon of God's word, for a world alienated from its Source. Indeed, the gospel according to John has Jesus pronouncing himself, "the light of the world."

Candles affirm for us Emmanuel, God-with-us, whose transforming power heals the world of sin and evil, war and strife, stress and turmoil, suffering and despair. Jesus is hope and help for those held captive by oppression. And on a personal level Christ guides us to personal peace and joy through the illumination of his message of the love of God.

Anthem

Candlelight Carol

John Rutter

THE CRÈCHE

Reading

History of the Crèche

Linda Kopetti

Historically, the crèche is recognized to have been the invention of Francis of Assisi, an ascetic monk who lived on the outskirts of the Italian village of Gubbio. Living during the middle ages of Europe, this creative monk was known for adapting rituals so that they could be entertaining as well as reverent.

It is said that the first use of a crèche was in one of Francis's communion rituals at Gubbio. To Celebrate the birth of Christ, and to invite worshipers to identify with that event as fully as possible, Francis decided to conduct mass from a small shed filled with local animals, including a wolf that he had tamed. The idea caught on... except for the wolf part.

Eventually, Christians would be encouraged to use figurines to decorate not only their churches but their homes so that parents and children could re-tell our familiar story of Christ's birth, reminded of the humble state in which were found Jesus and his earthly parents, Joseph and Mary.

Anthem

Mary, Did You Know

Java Jived

THE POINSETTIAS

Reading

A Natural History of the Poinsettia

Erick Falconer The most popular flower of the Advent-and-Christmas season is the bright red poinsettia. Actually, the red petals are not the blossoms of the plant. The blossoms are the small yellow cluster found at the center. This attractive flower was discovered growing wild in Mexico, by Dr. Joel Roberts Poinsett, who served as the first Foreign Minister from the U.S. to that country in 1825. In Mexico, the plant was referred to as the “Flower of the Holy Night” or the “Flaming Leaf.”

Dr. Poinsett brought several of the plants to America, where a Philadelphia gardener developed them into the type of flower we see today. The poinsettia speaks to us symbolically, in several ways. The star-shaped formation of red leaves calls to mind the star which shone at that first Christmas. And the color of those red leaves symbolizes for us the fact that the Babe of Bethlehem became the Savior of the world, as he shed his blood upon the cross of Calvary.

Interlude

Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming

Java Jived

LIGHTING OF THE CHRISTMAS TREE

Reading

The Significance of the Christmas Tree

Merrimon Boyd

Why do we have a decorated Christmas Tree? In the 7th century a monk from Devonshire, St. Boniface, went to Germany to teach the Word of God. He did many good works there, and spent much time in Thuringia, an area which was to become the cradle of the Christmas Decoration Industry.

Legend has it that he used the triangular shape of the fir tree to describe the Holy Trinity of God – our Creator, Redeemer, and Comforter. The converted people began to revere the fir tree as God’s Tree, as they had previously revered the oak. By the 12th century it was being hung, upside-down, from ceilings at Christmastime in Central Europe, as a symbol of Christianity.

The first decorated tree was at Riga in Latvia, in 1510. In the early 16th century, Martin Luther is said to have decorated a small Christmas Tree with candles, to show his children how the stars twinkled through the dark night.

Carol

The First Nowell

Chancel Choir

The first Nowell the angel did say
Was to certain poor shepherds in fields as they lay, In fields where
they lay keeping their sheep
On a cold winter’s night that was so deep:
Nowell, nowell, nowell, nowell, Born is the
King of Israel!

They looked up and saw a star Shining in the East
beyond them far, And to the earth it gave great ight,
And so it continued, both day and night:
Nowell, nowell, nowell, nowell, Born is the
King of Israel!

PRAYERS OF THE DAY

Lifting of Joys and Concerns

Elston McCowan

Prayer of the Day

Rev. Denoon

Open our eyes, God, especially if they are half shut because we are tired of looking, or half open because we fear to see too much, or bleary with tears because yesterday and today and tomorrow are filled with the same pain, or contracted, because we only look at what we want to see.

Open our eyes, God, to gently scan the life we lead, the home we have, the world we inhabit, and so to find, among the gremlins and the grayness, signs of hope we can fasten on and encourage.

Give us, whose eyes are dimmed by familiarity, a bigger vision of what you can do even with hopeless cases and lost causes and people of limited ability.

Show us the world as in your sight, riddled by debt, deceit, and disbelief, yet also shot through with possibility for recovery, renewal, and redemption.

And lest we fail to distinguish vision from fantasy, today, tomorrow, this week, open our eyes to one person or one place, where we – being even for a moment prophetic – might identify and wean a potential in the waiting.

And with all this, open our eyes, in yearning, for Jesus. On the mountains, in the cities, through the corridors of power and the streets of despair, to help, to heal, to confront, to convert: O come, O come, Immanuel.

For once you did come, and we pray in another year for your arrival soon – however you may come. For once you did come, and made us one with you, so that your coming might be not only in the Word made flesh but in each of us flesh made alive by your Word. And in the coming, you invited us to say with you the words you spoke, from Child to Parent:

The 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.

CONCLUSION

Reading

Significance of the Season

Rev. Denoon

Advent is the going toward... the going toward greater love among people... the going toward greater peace and harmony among people. Advent is the going toward, as the carol says, “the dawn of God’s redeeming grace.” This is an Advent for each of us.

We can be faithful observers of a birthday that occurred nearly 2,000 years ago—and we can be loving servants to the Christ who walks among us today.

This house of God is decorated, the halls are decked, the greens have been hung. And we are ready, here, for Christmas.

Carol

Angels We Have Heard on High

Chancel Choir

Angels we have heard on high sweetly singing o’er the plains
And the mountains in reply echo back their joyous strains: Gloria in excelsis
Deo!

Shepherds, why this jubilee? Why your joyous strains prolong? Say what may the tidings be which inspire your heavenly song? Gloria in excelsis Deo!

Come to Bethlehem and see Christ whose birth the angels sing. Come adore on bended knee God our world now entering.

Gloria in excelsis Deo!

**Benediction*

The Christmas Spirit

C. T. Moody

Sweet Spirit of the Christmas-time,
Once more is heard thy joyous chime Of Heavenly bells—
the glad refrain
“Of Peace on Earth—Good will to men.” Once more the heart
of man grows kind, To faults forgiving, and to follies blind.
Ah! could this Peace abide always!
Sweet Spirit! art Thou come to stay?

Postlude

Dismissal

Erick Falconer



“For Such a Time as This.”

Esther 4:14

In the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, the United Church Board for Ministerial Assistance, which administers the Christmas Fund, experienced a 400% increase in requests for emergency grants over the previous year. Thanks to the generosity of more than 275 donors to urgent appeals for gifts to the Christmas Fund, UCBMA was able to say “yes” to each of these requests.

Most of the donors who responded to these special emergency appeals were older persons and nearly half were first-time contributors to the Christmas Fund. Many are also themselves recipients of Ministerial Assistance.

Here are just a few of the notes of thanks received from some of the Emergency Grant recipients:

“I must tell you that before I opened the envelope with the check I prayed that whatever the contents, that somehow I would make the days to come work . . . and when I opened that envelope with a great amount of trepidation, I could not believe my eyes that you and your Committee granted me even more than I had requested! I am still in shock, and still feeling so very grateful as I sit down with that fear off my shoulders.”

“Wow, what can I say but a very humble thank you. This is tremendously generous and I never, ever expected it. The best I had hoped for was to cover my recent medical bill. I am surprised and tearfully grateful.”

“The emergency grant money arrived in last night's mail. THANK YOU to all who approved this emergency grant. I will be able to pay back loans that were made to make rent. We will also be able to supplement our rent money for quite some time until greater income starts coming in. We are hopeful those days will come.”

“I'm speechless - Thank you all so very, very much! Keeping you all in my prayers. May the gift of your generous blessing spread wide and far.”

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



10 West Lockwood Avenue
Webster Groves, MO 63119
314-962-0475
www.FirstChurchWG.org

Contact Information

Moderator
Mark Edwards
marke@wustl.edu

Pastor
Rev. David A. Denoon
DDenoon@FirstChurchWG.org

Office Administrator
Debbie Tolstoi
Admin@FirstChurchWG.org

Director of Music & Organist
Dr. Leon Burke
Leon.Burke@FirstChurchWG.org

Facilities Manager
Chip Isringhaus
cti1234@FirstChurchWG.org

Custodian
Darrell Lakies

Assistant Custodian
Gus McLean

Director, Center for Counseling & Healing
Rev. Linda E. Smith, BCRN, HTCP/I
lesrhs@sbcglobal.net

Director of MICA
Rev. Cliff Aerie
cliff.aerie@gmail.com

Student Minister
Merrimon Boyd
merrimon.boyd@gmail.com

Student Minister
Elston McCowan
emccowan@eden.edu

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