



Leura Uniting Church
6 December 2020
Advent 2
Gail Hinton

Welcome

Acknowledgment of country

Before white settlement ...the Spirit was already in this land revealing God to the people through law, custom and ceremony. The same love and grace that was finally and fully revealed in Jesus Christ sustained the First Peoples and gave them particular insights into God's ways. With respect and gratitude, we acknowledge the Darug people and honour their Elders, past present and future.

Announcements

Advent Wreath.

Reader One: Our to do lists are long, even in this strange mess where we live these days. And we want to do it right, we want to be safe, but we want to be able to enjoy the season. We've got work to do to put right what has gone wrong, to heal what is broken, to mend the relationships, and to prepare for the company that will come.

Reader Two: The prophet Isaiah reminded us that there is work to be done. "Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God." When God comes in, then healing is to be found, but we need to make the way; we need to open the door into our lives.

Reader One: So, we light these candles as a sign of our faith that the God we worship is not far from us and that we can clear the way for that God to come and dwell with us. We light these candles in faith that company is coming.

Reader Two: O Come, O Come Emmanuel.

Verse 1 and 2 below

Here's a little Advent candle song based on Isaiah 2:5

words: Jennie Gordon © 2019

tune: Twinkle, twinkle, little star

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| <p>1. Come, let's walk the path of light
through the darkness of the night.
Now the lost don't walk alone,
hungry ones are welcomed home.
Hope in what we do and say,
hope between us on the way.</p> | <p>2. Come, let's walk the path of light
through the darkness of the night.
Now the lost don't walk alone,
hungry ones are welcomed home.
Peace in what we do and say,
peace between us on the way.</p> |
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Call to Worship and Opening Prayer

Let us worship God. I invite you pray the call to worship with me, silently or perhaps mouthing the words gently.

Prepare the way for the Lord.

Make straight paths for him.

Let us pray...

Lord, your thoughts are not our thoughts.

Your concept of time and space is beyond is beyond our understanding.

Your love for all creation, each life, billions of us, is impossible to grasp.

Your love reaches out abundantly as far and deep and as wide as the immeasurable cosmos.

You who made the heavens and the earth through your Word, can hold all that exists like a speck of dust in your palm of your hand.

Your love for all the world brings righteousness and justice. Your love makes everything right and the paths straight.

Your love shines brightly into the darkest places of our lives, turning despair into hope, frustration into peace, hatred to love and sorrow into joy.

We praise you Lord,

Amen.

Hymn **Tis 152 Joyful, joyful. We adore you**

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| <p>1. Joyful, joyful, we adore you,
God of glory, God of love;
hearts unfold like flowers before
you
opening to the sun above.
Melt the clouds of sin and sadness,
drive the dark of doubt away;
giver of immortal gladness,
fill us with the light of day.</p> | <p>3. You are giving and forgiving,
ever blessing, ever blest,
well-spring of the joy of living,
ocean-depth of happy rest.
You our Father, Christ our brother,
all are yours who live in love;
teach us how to love each other,
lift us to your joy above.</p> |
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| <p>2. All your works with joy surround
you,
earth and heav'n reflect your rays,
stars and angels sing around you,
centre of unbroken praise.
Field and forest, vale and
mountain,
flowery meadow, flashing sea,
singing bird and flowing fountain
call to praise you joyfully.</p> | <p style="text-align: right;">CCLI Song # 25321
Edward Hodges Henry Van Dyke Ludwig
van Beethoven
© Words: Public Domain
Music: Public Domain
For use solely with the SongSelect® Terms of
Use. All rights reserved. www.ccli.com
CCLI Licence # 300742</p> |
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Prayer of Confession and Declaration of Forgiveness

Righteous God,
 We confess our near-sightedness.
 We often fail to notice the needs of others,
 we justify our response and at our worst turn a blind eye.

We confess we try to avoid your call
 to live holy and godly lives.
 We often prefer an edited version of discipleship
 one that fits in with our plans, our life, our agenda.

We confess we forget your wonderful and gracious promise of abundant, eternal life.
 Turning our focus instead towards the busyness of life,
 Day to day concerns, our interests and our passions.

In this moment of silence Loving God,
 we open our hearts and minds to your Spirit
 laying bare all that needs to be brought to your gracious light.

Brothers and Sisters in Christ,
 hear Christ's word of grace to us
 Your sins are forgiven,
 Thanks be to God.

Readings: Mark 1:1-8 and 2 Peter 3:8-15 Denise

Sermon based on 2 Peter 3:8-15a.

Maryanne was halfway through her presentation when she noticed things were not going as well as she had expected. She had asked a friend if she could be invited along to her Bible study group in order to proclaim the wonderful truth about the Second Coming. The small group were a tough crowd and instead of being awestruck they continually interrupted, asked questions, and cited Bible verses contrary to the facts Maryanne was producing. Maryanne's passion and love for her presentation topic was obvious and her knowledge of complicated mathematical formulas that apparently pointed to the exact time and hour of Christ's return was mind boggling. Maryanne also knew every end time biblical text by memory and could quote them word for word. She was clearly devoted to her mission and more than happy to go anywhere and speak to anyone. Yet her audience on that particular evening concluded privately that the presentation was a bit of a waste of time. Maryanne was thanked for her time and the group ended in prayer.

When I think back to that evening, I wonder what Maryanne would have made of today's reading from 2 Peter. I imagine her heart rising to the author's confirmation of the end times and her imagination being gripped by the description of heavens being set ablaze and the

earth melting with fire (2 Peter 3: 12). There is however one slight problem in this text for anyone who thinks they can predict the date and time of Christ's appearance, that is, the author's reference to the day of the Lord coming like a thief in the night (2 Peter 3:10). I guess some people manage to gloss over anything that conflicts with their own point of view; difficult texts are pushed under the rug, ignored, forgotten or reinterpreted. Although Maryanne's passion was inspiring, her focus was incredibly narrow. Instead of possessing all of God's promises, from beginning to end, including Christ's birth, ministry, Christ's death and the promise of resurrection, Maryanne only had the ending. It's quite easy to notice this type of narrow focus in someone else but turning that same attention towards ourselves, our focus of faith and our beliefs is another thing altogether. So, I wonder are there gaps in our own understanding of the gospel message both individually and as the church.

The author of 2 Peter describes those who forget the fullness of knowledge about Jesus Christ as being near sighted and blind (2 Peter 1:9) and in forgetting, they fall prey to false prophets and false teachers who secretly bring in destructive opinions (2 Peter 2: 1). Commentators suggest that the early church believers were being influenced by teachers of philosophy who allowed their former beliefs to infiltrate the gospel. In a classic case of the more things change the more they stay the same, today we too live in a society abounding in New Age religions, philosophies and self help gurus, many of whom gladly quote Jesus, then subtly misinterpret his words. False ideas and bad theology can creep in very stealthily and 2 Peter still stands as a warning and correction for the church today. Scholar, Karen H. Jobes describes 2 Peter as "a scathing indictment of false leaders and teachers in the church, those who tell people what they want to hear"¹ so they can basically get on with their lives unchanged, unchallenged and unenlightened.

As a response to those who corrupt the gospel, 2 Peter can be described as a harsh and bitter letter, mainly due to the fact that the author does not hold back on colourfully condemning false teachers. The scathing passages however do give way to some brilliant theology and vital lessons for the church today. During 2020 the church has faced the tremendous challenge of remaining connected and vital despite the fact that for months we could not physically gather. Many of us have gained a newfound appreciation for church, as the saying goes absence makes the heart grow fonder. The break from physically being the gathered church has also prompted many of us to consider the purpose of the church, I have called this task, a little bit cheekily 'Church, what is it good for? In answer to that question 2 Peter teaches us that we need to be reminded over and over again of the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Week after week we gather to hear the gospel proclaimed so that we do not forget. This should be our focus and the place where all our ideas about God, humanity, sin, suffering, creation, the cosmos, end times, basically everything is centred.

It is easy to forget even the most wonderful things about the Christian faith. Distracted by the busyness of life we often narrow our focus and lose sight of the big picture, the big picture illustrated in today's texts. 2 Peter speaks of a time, according to God's wisdom when all will be put right; a place where righteousness is a home. The first eight verses of Mark proclaim the beginning of the good news, that through Jesus Christ, Son of God we are worthy of a living in this place of righteousness. This is Christianity 101, but it is not something we simply learn once, or leave behind us in our Sunday School days or at our conversion. We need to come to this truth over and over again. Some of the implications of this truth are startling, surprising, and challenging. There is a perfect example tucked away within today's reading. After making the argument that God will bring justice on the Day of the Lord, when all have

¹ Mark Allen Powell. *Introducing the New testament*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009).

had a chance to come to repentance, the author tells us that in the meantime we need to focus on leading lives of holiness and godliness (2 Peter 3:11).

These are not terms that we toss about in day to day conversation and we rarely describe someone these days as holy and godly. In today's world these words can sound like they might be describing someone who is "holier than thou" or someone who is impossibly religious and self-righteous, yet to become holy and godly in the purist sense means becoming Christlike. Now that sounds like a lot of hard work, so much more daunting and challenging than simply following Christ, going to church and generally being a nice person. In order to achieve this transformation, 2 Peter instructs us that we must support our faith with goodness, knowledge, self-control, endurance, godliness, mutual affection, and love and that all this is possible through God's divine power (2 Peter 1:3). In the time between Christ's Ascension and the Second Coming there is certainly a lot to be getting on with while we wait. If Christ were to come back next Thursday or next July or in June 3050 or beyond, those who wait are to be at peace with God and without spot or blemish. This is an active form of waiting; a waiting in which there is work to be done. It's the polar opposite of the dull kind we are more familiar where we wait in queues, doctor's rooms, or traffic and far more challenging. It's a lot more like the active waiting many people decided to go with during covid isolation, baking, gardening, renovating, knitting, or daily walking the dog, twice.

Perhaps the most challenging thing about 2 Peter's call to lead lives of holiness and godliness is believing we are worthy of such a high calling. Can we ever be good enough? We may find ourselves asking, Me Lord, godly and holy? You know me Lord inside out, do you really think that's possible? When we question our worthiness, we forget that we are loved unconditionally, extravagantly, and abundantly by God. Through this divine love we can become holy and godly not because we believe in ourselves but because God believes in us.

Amen.

Hymn Tis 115 Behold the amazing gift of love

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| <p>1. Behold the amazing gift of love
the Father has bestowed,
that we, though sinners, should be
called
the children of our God.</p> | <p>though what we shall hereafter be
is hid from mortal eyes.</p> |
| <p>2. Concealed as yet this honour lies,
by this dark world unknown,
a world that knew not when he
came,
ev'n God's eternal Son.</p> | <p>4. Our souls, we know, when he
appears,
shall bear his image bright;
for all his glory, full disclosed,
shall open to our sight.</p> |
| <p>3. High is the rank we now possess,
but higher we shall rise;</p> | <p>5. A hope so great, and so divine,
may trials well endure;
and purge the soul from guilt and
sin,
as Christ himself is pure.</p> |

1 John 3:1–3, as in
Scottish Paraphrases 1781 alt.
probably by William Cameron 1751–1811,
based on a paraphrase by Isaac Watts 1674–1748

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Offering: retiring offering bowl on table

Let us pray...

Lord and giver of every good thing,
we bring to you our lives and gifts
to make way for transformation, righteousness, justice and peace
through your grace and love
made known in Jesus Christ our Saviour.
Amen.

Prayers of the People and The Lord's Prayer: Bev.

As we come together today in prayer our collective response will be;

MAY JUSTICE ,PEACE AND HARMONY PREVAIL.

Loving God

We give thanks for our renewed fellowship as we meet here today. We know for many across the world this privilege is no longer possible due to the severity of the prevailing pandemic and the scourge of war.

We are aware of the heavy weight of grief for families who have lost loved ones and the variety of ensuing mental health problems during lockdown. We are thankful for the wise leadership in our country in so many health situations and ask for greater understanding in our own endeavours.

Our hearts are heavy as we pray for those countries where the lack of safety and sane leadership is continuing to cause unnecessary illness and deaths through seeming denial and unbalanced power.

We pray for open journalism and honest distribution of resources in our own country so that a just and democratic nation may ensue.

MAY JUSTICE,PEACE AND HARMONY PREVAIL.

We give thanks for those in this congregation whose families are working overseas for the Red Cross and the World Health Organisation and in the Northern Territory Health Care System and pray for their safety and wellbeing.

We bring our deepest gratitude for these and all Health and Research programs which have taken on the enormous task of bringing peaceful solutions forward in an often hostile environment.

May the Christmas Bowl appeal serve to augment vital Act for Peace Programs where developmental programs can bring people in strained circumstances to a more sustainable future.

MAY JUSTICE ,PEACE AND HARMONY PREVAIL.

May we find avenues to give support to those advocating for better jobseeker payments .Where dwindling chances for immediate work prevails may new initiatives be embraced and unfair judgements laid aside.

We pray for wise diplomacy in trade agreements . For those who produce goods with no present hope of export may wise and innovative solutions be found.

We are mindful of the enormous task of volunteer groups working to regenerate our bushfire ravaged landscape and wildlife population and are thankful for their hours of dedication. May

we each stay committed to leave a lighter footprint in our own way.
As we reel at the enormity of our prayers in such an ever changing landscape.

MAY JUSTICE, PEACE AND HARMONY PREVAIL.

Finally, we pray silently for those of our church family on our prayer list. Our constant prayers are with Shona, Kirsten and Alexander as they lovingly support Gwen in her journey. We pray especially for the pastoral carers and clergy and for all laity that Christ's example of love may be sustained and sustaining in our daily endeavours.

Although our world seems beset by numerous challenges.
We bring these prayers with a sure knowledge of Your Peace which passes all understanding.

Amen

Hymn Tis 687 God gives us a future

1. God gives us a future,
daring us to go
into dreams and dangers
on a path unknown.
We will face tomorrow
in the Spirit's power,
we will let God change us,
for new life starts now.

2. We must leave behind us
sins of yesterday,
for God's new beginning
is a better way.
Fear and doubt and habit
must not hold us back:
God gives hope, and insight,
and the strength we lack.

3. Holy Spirit, teach us
how to read the signs,
how to meet the challenge
of our troubled times.
Love us into action,
stir us into prayer,
till we choose God's life,
and find our future there.

Elizabeth J. Smith
1956–

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Blessing *followed by gathering outside in the garden to sing as below.*

Brothers and Sisters in Christ go now to love and serve the Lord, leading lives of holiness and godliness assured that God's goodness will give you all you require.

The blessing of God Almighty,

The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,

Be upon you and remain with you always.

Amen.

Hymn Tis 699 A new commandment. *Sung outside wearing masks.*

A new commandment I give unto you
that you love one another
as I have loved you,
that you love one another
as I have loved you.
By this will others know
that you are my disciples
if you have love one for another;
by this will others know
that you are my disciples
if you have love one for another.

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