



The
United
Reformed
Church

The United Reformed Church in Lion Walk
Christ Church United Reformed Church
The United Reformed Church at Chappel

Sunday 20th December 2020

Call to Worship:

Spirit of Life, shed your light where there is darkness;
illuminate the dark corners of the world.
Bring your freedom to defeat oppression;
shine into the hearts of the powerful.
Let your peace overcome all conflict
so that the people of earth may live as the people of God

Prayer/Meditation:

Loving God, we remember this day how the way was prepared for your coming.
To your servant Abraham you promised blessing for all the world through his offspring.
To your prophets you spoke your word promising the Messiah would come, bringing peace, justice and deliverance for all your people.
To Elizabeth and Zechariah you promised a son who would prepare the way of the Lord, making his way straight in the wilderness.
To Mary you promised a child who would be called Immanuel, God with us, born to save his people.
And through John the Baptist you announced the fulfillment of those prophecies in the person of Jesus, the light of the world shining in the darkness.
You promise that Christ will come: prepare our hearts for his coming.

Loving God, you spoke your word to so many, yet when the time came and Jesus was born so few were ready to receive him. He was the Word, but was accused of blasphemy; he offered life to the world, but was put to death on the cross; he came to his own people and they would not receive him.
You promise that Christ will come: prepare our hearts for his coming.

Loving God, help us as we remember his birth, life, death and resurrection, to be ready to receive him every day into every part of our lives. Help us to read your word with new insight, to offer you our living worship, and to turn from all that is wrong and faithless in our lives. Help us to focus on what is central to this season and not on the trappings with which we surround it. Help us to open our hearts and minds to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and to respond to the Spirit's prompting. Help us to follow in the way of Christ, loving him as he loved.
You promise that Christ will come: prepare our hearts for his coming.

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 trespasses as

we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the Kingdom, the power and the glory for ever. Amen

Reading: **2 Samuel 7: 1-11, 16**

HYMN 136

And art Thou come with us to dwell,
our prince, our guide, our love, our Lord?
And is thy name Immanuel,
God present with his world restored?

The heart is glad for thee: it knows
none now shall bid it err or mourn;
and o'er its desert breaks the rose
In triumph o'er the grieving thorn.

Thou bringest all again; with thee
Is light, is space, is breadth and room
for each thing fair, beloved, and free
to have its hour of life and bloom.

Each heart's deep instinct, unconfessed;
each lowly wish, each daring claim;
all, all that life hath long repressed,
unfolds, undreading blight or blame.

Thy reign eternal will not cease;
thy years are sure, and glad and slow,
within thy mighty world of peace
the humblest flower hath leave to blow.

The world is glad for thee; the heart
is glad for thee, and all is well,
and fixed and sure, because Thou art,
whose name is called Immanuel!

Reading: **Luke 1:26-38**

Reflection:

In Advent, this season of preparation, we heard two stories that talk about what it means to be prepared for God's appearing. They are very different stories about very different people -- King David and Mary, the mother of Jesus -- but actually they say pretty much the same thing.

In the first story, the year is around 995 BCE. David has always been an ambitious man with big plans, and by now many of those plans have been accomplished. He has just been crowned king over all Israel.. He has also built a brand new palace for himself and is comfortably established.

Now, David thinks, it's time to build God a house -- a temple that is almost, not quite, but almost, as big as his own palace; a temple that will gain as much glory and renown for the King

who built it as it will for the God to whom it is dedicated. David had a lot of plans -- and God had a place in those plans.

The verses we heard are God's response to David's plans for God. God says "No." God says that God will not be a part of David's plans. But there is an alternative. David can be a part of God's plans. David will not build God a house -- instead God will do something for David. God will create from David a house, a dynasty, through which salvation will come to all people. David's plans, even his plans for God, were really centered on David himself. God's plans are for all creation -- and they include David.

What is to David's credit is not his grand plan to give God a pretty cathedral. What is to David's credit is his willingness to listen, to let God be God, and to surrender his own plans. David's victory is his ability to walk away from the future he has outlined -- and walk into the future God has in store. That's harder.

Almost exactly 1,000 years later, Mary was in a similar, if much less prestigious and public, situation. She was a young woman of respectable family who had made a good marriage. She was to be the wife of a skilled craftsman -- which would make her a part of the tiny middle-class of Palestine. Her hopes and plans no doubt included a quiet life, children, good health, some economic security, a little comfort, not much pain. No doubt God had a place in her plans -- she would keep the Commandments, make the sacrifices, pay the tithes, follow the rules.

The story of the Annunciation is, among other things, God saying "No" to all of Mary's plans. God is saying that Mary will have very little of what she hoped for and expected. God is saying that, instead of Mary's plans for herself and for God -- God has plans for Mary, and these plans are different, they are unexpected, they are a bit scandalous, and they change everything. Through her, the dynasty begun with David would continue, and new life will be offered to all people.

And the key to Mary's greatness, the central reason why she stands as first among the saints, and why "from henceforth all generations will call her blessed," is her ability to listen, to hear the voice of God, and to say, "Let it be to me according to your word." The key to Mary's greatness is her choice to walk away from the future she had outlined, and into the unknown future God offered her. And that is hard; that is always very hard.

As we continue, each of us, in our journey of faith, and as our faith matures and develops, one of the insights we gain, one of the truths we have to accept, often unwillingly and with some alarm, is that to be a follower of Jesus is not always an easy proposition. The joy and celebration at Christmas is just one side of the coin. The other is the sacrifice and struggle to which we may be called, the 'taking up of the cross' as we follow him. 'Take my will and make it thine', we sometimes sing, 'it shall be no longer mine'. One of the things that we offer, that we give up, is the authority of our own plans. We promise to listen, and to let God say "No", even to our best plans for ourselves, even to our best plans for God.

Of course, plans for the future, for our lives and for the direction of our lives, are very important. We are created as free and responsible people. Making plans is part of life, and making decisions, and following them through. There is nothing wrong with plans. There was nothing wrong with David's plans, or with Mary's. Nor is there anything wrong with our plans, or the plans we make as a church to engage in mission and ministry among our church community and in the wider world.

But we know that the whole of Jesus' life and teaching warns us to expect the unexpected; illustrates for us that in God's world things seldom turn out the way we think they will; shows us that even the most deeply held beliefs of our society and even of our churches may turn out to be trivial or misguided. So, as Christmas closes in, the last word Advent has for us this year is "openness." For there is no doubt that one of the hardest tasks we face in life is to be open to,

and to accept, what God has in store for us. That task can also be one of the richest, and the most rewarding.

What will Christmas be like for us this year, what will it mean? What will it look like for the Lord to be born, and for him to be reborn within us? What will it be like for us to face the reality that God has kept God's promises and come to his world-and to each one of us?

We don't know. Just as David didn't know, and Mary didn't know. We can't exactly plan for it. We can only open ourselves, and seek both the grace to hear and to respond, and the faith to persevere.

Prayer

For the coming of Jesus Christ in glory,
of Emmanuel, our hope, of peace and unity for all,
let us cry out that God may remember us.

For the Church,
still waiting,
still seeking the fullness of the revelation of our Lord Jesus [pause]:

May we be unafraid to dream,
alert to God's presence,
and awake to hear Christ's call.

We pray to the Lord.

For the leaders of the world,
still divided,
still unable to see God's face in the poor [pause]:
May they be roused from their sleep
to work untiringly for a world
where all are fed, sheltered, healed, and at peace.

We pray to the Lord.

For families,
still yearning for reconciliation,
still striving in faith through the daily struggles of life [pause]:

May they be abundantly blessed
with thanksgiving for all that has been
and hope for what is to come.

We pray to the Lord.

For those still waiting for welcome,
still searching for meaning,
still hoping for compassion, forgiveness, and love [pause]:

May we be watchful
for the many, surprising ways God comes to us.

We pray to the Lord.

For our churches in Colchester,
still growing in God's riches,
still being worked by the potter's hands [pause]:
May we be faithful servants and courageous witnesses
who show the face of Christ to the world

until the day of the Lord.
We pray to the Lord.
Lord Jesus, Prince of Peace and Lord of Life,
prepare us to recognize the coming of your Kingdom,
and make us watchful for your presence already with us.
Form us to be a Church that matters,
especially to those most in need of good news.
Hear our prayers and do not delay,
for you are Christ, yesterday, today, and tomorrow,
Lord, for ever and ever. Amen.

HYMN 192

Thou didst leave thy throne and thy kingly crown,
When thou camest to earth for me;
but in Bethlehem's home was there found no room
For thy holy nativity.
O come to my heart, Lord Jesus!
There is room in my heart for thee.

Heaven's arches rang when the angels sang,
to proclaim thy royal degree;
but of lowly birth cam'st thou Lord to earth,
and in great humility;
O come to my heart, Lord Jesus!
There is room in my heart for Thee.

The foxes found rest, and the bird its nest
in the shade of the forest tree;
but thy rest was found on the stony ground
In the deserts of Galilee.
O come to my heart, Lord Jesus!
There is room in my heart for thee.

Thou camest, O Lord, with the living word
that should set thy people free;
but with mocking scorn, and with crown of thorn,
they bore thee to Calvary.
O come to my heart, Lord Jesus!
There is room in my heart for thee.

When heav'n's arches ring and her glad choirs sing
At thy coming to victory,
let thy voice call me home, saying "Yet there is room,
There is room at my side for thee!"
And my heart shall rejoice, Lord Jesus,
when thou comest and callest for me.

Benediction

On this fourth Sunday of Advent, let us give glory to God
Who gives us the strength to stand firm
Who has shown us and all the world the mystery that was once hidden.
In the baby in the manger, the teacher, the healer,
the one who died on a cross and rose again we meet God.
To the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, be the glory forever!

And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit
go with each one of us and with all those we love, today and for ever more. Amen