

Interactive lesson



picture from personal photo

So far this Advent, we have talked about why we decorate with evergreen boughs and trees, why we place candles and put lights on the trees, and about decorations that we put on the trees, especially Chrismons. What else do we put up during Advent? <Let them respond; if mentioned, agree poinsettias, there is a lovely story about them, but that is not our focus for today>



picture from personal photo

Most churches put up a nativity scene. Do you know when the first one was used and why it was put up? <Let them respond>

St. Francis of Assisi is credited with the first display of the nativity scene. In 1223, much as now, people were focusing more on the material gift-giving instead of the birth of Christ. With permission from

the pope, Francis set up a manger with hay and two animals (an ox and a donkey) in a cave. Villagers were invited to come look at it while he preached about “the babe of Bethlehem.”

The visual medium worked and captured people’s hearts. Over the centuries, additional figures were been added, many different materials have been used to construct them, and sizes varied depending on the display area.

What do you notice about this nativity set?

<Let them respond >

This set does not yet have the Christ child displayed. For many, it is tradition not to display the baby Jesus before Christmas Eve. It is part of our Advent anticipation, awaiting God to be among us once again.

So, how many days are left until Christmas? Are you all ready for it? <Let them respond>

Everything in this manger scene is ready, awaiting Jesus. As the church, we have been preparing for a month for His return, and now we are counting down the days to His birthday. May you stay ready to receive Him with joy and love.

<Hymn “To a Maid Engaged to Joseph” UMH #215 >

Gospel lesson

Today's Gospel comes from Luke, a beautiful interlude of good news accepted in an open heart.



picture from <https://nicemyLife365.blogspot.com/2019/05/1-26-38-marys-faith-resolution-26-in.html>

Luke 1:26-38 (NRSV)

²⁶ In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth,

²⁷ to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary.

²⁸ And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."

²⁹ But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

³⁰ The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.

³¹ And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.

³² He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David.

³³ He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

³⁴ Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?"

³⁵ The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.

³⁶ And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren.

³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God."

³⁸ Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

The word of God for the people of God

Message: Waiting on the Threshold



picture adapted from <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/companys-coming/fourth-sunday-of-advent-year-b-lectionary-planning-notes/fourth-sunday-of-advent-year-b-graphics>

Please pray with me?

Beloved Christ, as we take time now to further consider today's scriptures, please

- speak Your words through my mouth,
- open our ears to hear Your message, and
- abide in our hearts,

that we may prepare for Your glory with better understanding of who we are and how best to welcome You. Amen.



Company's Coming



- ♥ November 29 – This Place is a Mess!
- ♥ December 6 – Clean-up Crew
- ♥ December 13 – Deck the Halls
- ♥ **December 20 – Waiting on the Threshold**
- ♥ December 24 – Welcoming the Guest
- ♥ December 27 – Enjoying the Company
- ♥ January 3 – Living the Celebration

This week we are “Waiting on the Threshold.”

“It’s the fourth Sunday of Advent, and the tug of war is over. Christmas now takes center stage. It won’t do to keep to the Advent theme of anticipation of the second coming of Christ; we need to relive the first, to live into the first.

We are on the threshold of a new world. Never mind the fact that we’ve been on this threshold for over two thousand years. We are standing on the brink. We need to proclaim what is on the other side. What does it mean for Christ to take up residence in our world?”

Are you ready for Christ's coming? What does that look like for us?



picture from <https://espanol.ucq.org/miembros/bajo-el-lente/117-2-samuel-11-12-las-consecuencias-del-pecado-de-david>

It is easy for us to be confused about what God may want us to do. Look at King David from the Old Testament reading today: He thought he should be honoring God by building a temple, and his spiritual advisor Nathan encouraged him to go ahead, but that was not what God wanted from him at all.

David valued a comfortable stronghold from which to rule and assumed that God would want something like that too, but the Creator of everything does not require anything material from us. Furthermore, God has always moved among the people. Yet David's intent was rewarded with God saying that David would be the house where God would dwell.

God made it clear that we are to live in Him and He in us, that we live with Him and He with us. To make it more plain for people to understand, He took on the physical form of a human - and not starting as a fully-formed adult, but starting as all human lives

have started since Adam and Eve left the Garden of Eden.

Note that God only did this with those who were willing to take on the responsibilities entailed, who would love the Lord all the more for being given it.



picture from <https://magnificatfamilymedicine.com/mission-vision-values/>

Mary did not complain about the personal cost being asked of her – her danger of being outcast or even stoned if Joseph turned her away, the challenge of parenting. She only asked “How” – a sign of willingness to do as God directed.

Remember last week I said, “You can tell when someone answers a call from God – there is a fulfillment in their lives from what they do.” Mary broke out in song – the Magnificat, that we read responsively at the start of worship today. She praised God in joy for choosing her to be part of the fulfillment of promises made to her people hundreds of years earlier.

What are you expecting Christmas to be this year?



picture from <https://kdvr.com/news/trending/too-soon-for-holiday-decorations-christmas-music/>

When we think of Christmas, most of us think of celebrating, like Mary's song. But Jesus coming into our lives is much more than that. Just as Mary had to face [risk at proclaiming her pregnancy] and the work of parenting, we need to face the risk of proclaiming our faith and the work of enabling God's love to be seen in what we do for others.

So many of us anticipate remote Christmas celebrations, contacting family only through technology instead of in person, quiet houses. We have gotten accustomed to parties and gatherings, noisy greetings and lots of hugs. How do we celebrate with that so attenuated?

Maybe we are forgetting that God works differently than we are accustomed to. David thought God needed a house – but God sought to be among the people.

Christmas traditions include a great deal of consumerism: too much food, lots of gifts, bright decorations.



picture from <https://www.vulture.com/2019/12/why-its-a-wonderful-life-came-up-short-at-the-oscars.html>

This year there is much more focus on non-material things: the people we miss, the hugs we want to share. You know the saying, “Absence makes the heart grow fonder.” Maybe this year we take a closer look at the simple manger scene and ponder how God shows love in our lives – then and now.

The early Christians pondered how God fulfilled the prophecies from hundreds of years earlier, a secret mystery they were now to tell the world. Paul reminded the Romans in the closing of his letter to them that all of it was for building our faith in God.

As we are waiting on the threshold for the coming of the Christ child, remember that we need God far more than God needs us – and God loves us, individually and collectively, far more than we can ever imagine.

We may not see the “Why” right now, but through faith in and obedience to God, be assured we and the world are blessed.

Now let us respond with
<Doxology>

<Prayer of Dedication and Pastoral Prayer>

Let us pray:

Gracious and Generous God: We know full well we have devoted so much more energy into finding gifts for our families and much less on the gifts we offer to you. You gave Mary, an unmarried girl, a Son so the world might have a Savior. Her response was so simple: "Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be according to your word." May her affirmation of faith and obedience be the gift we offer this day. In Christ, we pray.

We also ask for Your help and wisdom as we raise up these concerns on our hearts today:

- Healing touch and comfort for all who are ailing.
 - Coronavirus victims - isolated; **school**; out-of-work; health care workers (especially: Marie Curri, Laura Davis, Nicole Marshall, Vince Marshall, Heidi Newton, Jennifer Tibbens-Scalzo) & those serving critical needs
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- Thanks for
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- Hold those who cannot be with us in Your loving embrace until we see them again.

- Travelers
- Family far off
- Social unrest - dismantle racism and reform problem systems
- Guide our Leaders - local, state, federal, international, and especially of Your church.
- Help us to be fearless in talking about our faith as a normal part of daily living.
 - For the sake of this our local church, one part of Your great church, guide each one of us this week to invite someone to come know You better.
 - Help us to encourage one another toward faith in You and toward living together in true Christian community.

All these things we pray as You taught us to pray,
 <The Lord's Prayer>

<Hymn "O Little Town of Bethlehem" UMH #230>

<Benediction>



*Go now in the Joy and Peace
of our glorious Savior.*

*Keep His love foremost in your heart,
sharing it with all whom you encounter,
that everyone may prepare well
for His return.*

background adapted from <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/companys-coming/fourth-sunday-of-advent-year-b-lectionary-planning-notes/fourth-sunday-of-advent-year-b-graphics>

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 Keep His love foremost in your heart,
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 that everyone may prepare well for His return.