

ZION UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST OF TREMONT

December 17th, 2023

The Third Sunday of Advent

A Service of the Word



Advent 3 Candle

By Stushie Art

Church bulletin cover Stushie art unique crayon and digital worship art

A Scottish pastor, ministering in East Tennessee

<https://stushieart.com/2016/11/29/advent-3-art-for-churches/>



UNITED CHURCH
OF CHRIST
a just world for all

December 17th, 2023
Third Sunday of Advent
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WE GATHER IN COMMUNITY

"God isn't asking you to figure it out. God is asking you to trust that God already has."
www.pinterest

Welcome and Announcements

Prelude – Adam Petrosino

***Call to Worship** (*Psalm 34 in conversation with the Magnificat*)

Leader: O magnify our God with me and let us exalt God's name together.

All: Our souls magnify the Lord.

Our spirits rejoice in God our Savior!

Leader: We will bless the Lord at all times;

God's praise shall continually be in our mouths.

All: Our souls magnify the Lord.

God's mercy endures from generation to generation.

Leader: Let our souls make their boasts in the Lord;

Let those who are humble hear and be glad.

All: Our souls magnify the Lord

for the Mighty One has done great things.

***Invocation Prayer** (*Inspired by Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11*)

**God of Mary, mother of Jesus –
and all of those who are lowly
who seek to be lifted –
God of Isaiah,
who felt the Spirit upon him
calling him to bring Good News—
Let your Spirit
fall upon us in this hour.
Out of the ruins,
remind us of**

your everlasting covenant.
Anoint us as we seek to share
and experience your Good News.
Bind our broken hearts.
Awaken us to the liberation
within and among us.
Embolden us
to proclaim your favor
As we seek you more deeply.
Amen.

***Opening Hymn: NCH 126 - Angels from the Realms of Glory**

A READING OF THE WORD

First Reading: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

The prophet sometimes referred to as Third Isaiah speaks with the spirit of God upon them in these verses from Isaiah 61. God has called the prophet to bring good news to the people who have returned from exile. For those that have mourned, they are now celebrating. Instead of feeling defeated, they will sing out praise. In the midst of the ruined buildings of the city, the people are to be called Oaks of Integrity. The people will rebuild, repair, and restore what was destroyed in ancient times. God loves justice, and will make a covenant with the people that will never end. God is doing something new, like a garden springing up, and how the earth provides in spring. All nations will see what God has done for the people of Israel and will turn to God in righteousness and praise.

61 1 “The Spirit of Exalted YHWH is upon me,
God has sent me to bring good news to those who
are poor;
to heal broken hearts;
to proclaim release to those held captive
and liberation to those in prison;
2 to announce a year of favor from YHWH,
and the day of God’s vindication;
to comfort all who mourn,
3 to provide for those who grieve in Zion—
to give them a wreath of flowers instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of tears,
a cloak of praise instead of despair.
They will be known as trees of integrity,
planted by YHWH to display God’s glory.
4 They will restore the ancient ruins,
and rebuild sites long devastated;
they will repair the ruined cities,
neglected for generations.

8 For I, YHWH, love justice;
I hate robbery and sin.
So, I will faithfully compensate you,
and I will make an everlasting covenant with you.

9 Your descendants will be renowned among the
nations;
and your offspring among the people;
all who see you will acknowledge
that you are a people blessed by YHWH.

10 I will joyfully exult in YHWH,
who is the joy of my soul!
My God clothed me with a robe of deliverance
and wrapped me in a mantle of justice,
the way a bridegroom puts on a turban
and a bride bedecks herself with jewels.

11 For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
and a garden brings its seeds to blossom,
so Exalted YHWH makes justice sprout,
and praise springs up before all nations.

Psalm Response: Psalm 126 (Responsively)

Psalm 126 is a song of praise for God from the people who have returned from exile, for it has been like a dream. They left in mourning and are returning in praise. They left with only seeds, now they return with arms full of the harvest. God has not forgotten the people, and God continues to provide for them.

126 1 When God brought us captives back to Zion,
we thought we were dreaming!

**2 Our mouths were filled with laughter then,
our tongues with songs of joy.
And from the nations we heard,
“Their God has done great things for them.”**

3 Yes—God has done great things for us,
and we are filled with joy.

**4 Now set our captive hearts free, God!
Make them like streams in the driest desert!**

5 Then those who now sow in tears
will reap with shouts of joy;

**6 those who go out weeping as they
carry their seed for sowing
will come back with shouts of joy
as they carry their harvest home.**

Second Reading: 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

These verses in 1 Thessalonians 5 contain words of encouragement near the end of apostle Paul's letter. Believed to be one of the earliest letters of Paul, he urges the church in Thessalonica to be patient in their waiting. He encourages the church to rejoice always and pray without ceasing. Instead of a passive waiting, Paul urges an active waiting for Christ's return with prayer and steadfastness. They are to remember the teachings of the prophets, to hold fast to what is good and to resist evil, for God remains faithful.

5 16 Rejoice always, 17 pray constantly, 18 and give thanks for everything—for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

19 Don't stifle the Spirit; 20 don't despise the prophetic gift. 21 But test everything and accept only what is good. 22 Avoid any semblance of evil.

23 May the God of peace make you perfect in holiness. May you be preserved whole and complete—spirit, soul, and body—irreproachable at the coming of our Savior Jesus Christ. 24 The One who calls us is trustworthy: God will make sure it comes to pass.

Gospel Reading: John 1:6-8, 19-28

The Gospel lesson turns to these verses in John 1 with John the Baptizer seen as the witness to the light, referring to Jesus. Only in John's account does John the Baptizer associate himself with the voice crying out in the wilderness of Isaiah 40 (see last week's Revised Common Lectionary readings). In John's account, the baptizer is questioned by the religious authorities because he either must be Elijah, a prophet like Moses that would come before the Messiah, or the Messiah himself, but because he is none of those three, the religious leaders don't know what to do with him, and question why he is baptizing. John the Baptizer came to prepare the way, but in John's account, the leaders and most of the people were set in their understanding of how the Messiah was to come. Scholars think that John's account was later than the others - and that the divisions between Jewish followers of Jesus and other Jews were at the point of completely separating, whereas with Mark, that had not occurred to the same extent. It is important to remember all this as we read these stories. We are called to be ready and to prepare through repentance and baptism, because Christ is at work in our world and in our lives in ways, we are not ready or expecting. Perhaps any of us might be the ones to question or doubt what God is doing, if we are not prepared for something new.

1 6 Then came one named John, sent as an envoy from God, 7 who came as a witness to testify about the Light, so that through his testimony everyone might believe. 8 He himself wasn't the Light; he only came to testify about the Light—the true Light that illumines all humankind.

19 Now the Temple authorities sent emissaries from Jerusalem—priests and Levites—to talk to John. "Who are you?" they asked. This is John's testimony: 20 he didn't refuse to answer, but freely admitted, "I am not the Messiah."

21 "Who are you, then?" they asked. "Elijah?" "No, I am not," he answered. "Are you the Prophet?" "No," he replied.

22 Finally they said to him, “Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you have to say for yourself?”

23 John said, “I am, as Isaiah prophesied, the voice of someone crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight our God’s Road!’”

24 The emissaries were members of the Pharisee sect. 25 They questioned him further: “If you’re not the Messiah or Elijah or the Prophet, then why are you baptizing people?”

26 John said, “I baptize with water because among you stands someone whom you don’t recognize—27 the One who is to come after me—the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy even to untie.”

28 This occurred in Bethany, across the Jordan River, where John was baptizing.

Advent Candle Lighting Liturgy: Third Sunday in Advent (December 17) - JOY

One: Hope is assertive, and peace is subversive. But joy? Joy is rebelliously provocative. How dare joy makes its way into our dreary, despairing world? How dare joy show up in all its flashiness—it even gets a pink candle for crying out loud! How dare we, in the midst of war and hate and despair, deep division and grief and violence, come together and rejoice? How dare some shepherds start speaking of good news and the heavenly host declaring peace on earth in the midst of a violent Roman occupation? But if they did it, why can’t we? Why can’t we sing for joy that God is breaking open into our world again? Why can’t we be rebellious against the politicians and news anchors and doomsday sayers that there is joy for the world—no—joy to the world! We light this candle because God is provoking us to sing for joy, to sing and dance and laugh so hard we have tears, because there is peace and hope in this world.

Light two blue candles and the pink candle

All: God of joy, call us to sing, remind us to dance, tickle us into fits of laughter, because You are in our world and in our lives and doing something new, right now. Death and despair have nothing on You, and we rejoice in You, our Savior. Amen.

Advent Candle Lighting Song: The Holy Fire of Advent

(sung to the tune of NCH 148 - "What Child Is This")

The Holy Fire of Advent

Author: Rev. Elana Keppel Levy, 2022

Tune: GREENSLEEVES 8.7.8.7.6.8.6.7. with refrain

Source: English traditional melody, 16th century

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- 1. The fire of hope awakes our hearts when in despair we’re sleeping.
It speaks of light while through the night the shadows swiftly creep in.
Come, see the sparks of life that burn against the pow’r of strife;
Come, stand within its glow, the holy fire of Advent.**

2. The call to peace rings in our ears when all around is raging.
Within, without temptation shouts – our wrathful whims engaging.
Wait, wait, our Savior’s near: our weapons drop to the ground here.
Be joined in family, the holy fire of Advent.
3. The pulse of joy flies through our veins – the grace of God flows in us.
Its steady thrum helps us become disciples foll’wing Jesus.
Hold fast the Spirit’s way, though evil holds such a strong sway.
Embrace new life in Christ, the holy fire of Advent.

Reflection – “Who Are You, Really?” - The Rev. Scott Rosenstein

WE RESPOND

*Prayer of Response

God of All Seasons, as we approach the solstice, we give you thanks for light and dark, for the glory of the stars, the beauty of the aurora borealis, the moon in all its beauty.

We give you thanks for our nocturnal neighbors. We give you thanks for the beauty of the darkness, and we recall that our own scriptures and stories tell us it was a night long ago that you took your first breath and your first cry into this world.

It was a night long ago that the angels sang, “Peace on earth.” Help us, O God, to find beauty in the hard places, to find light in the bleakness, to find hope in the hopelessness. And help us, O God, to know that this season will shift and turn. This time of hopelessness will cease.

Your steadfast love is new every morning and we praise you for your faithfulness. As the world turns again, we watch and wait for what you are doing in our world, and how we might participate now in your beloved kin-dom on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

*Hymn of Response: NCH 128 - In the Bleak Midwinter

Invitation to Share Our Tithes and Offerings

We come in the name of the One who filled those who are hungry, who lifted up those who are lowly, and brought those who are powerful ones down from their thrones. We aim to share our gifts and resources so that we may continue the mission of God and become the Good News we wish to see.

The Offertory – *Adam Petrosino*

***Presentation of Offerings – Doxology**

**Praise God, from whom all blessings flow;
Praise God, all creatures here below;
Praise God above, you heavenly host;
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.**

***Blessing of the Gifts**

We dedicate these gifts that have been shared for the fortification of the beloved community. Let these gifts usher joy into this world and signal to the people that God is still setting captives free. Amen.

Prayers of the People

The Lord’s Prayer (using “debts” and “debtors”)

**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 debts,
As we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
But deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
and the power,
and the glory,
forever.
Amen. ☩**

GOING FORTH

***Parting Hymn: NCH 125 - Angels We Have Heard on High**

***Commissioning and Benediction**

One: The God who makes everything whole,

**All: sends us forth to bring healing to those who are broken-hearted
and to comfort those who mourn in our midst.**

One: The Christ who comes to be with us,

**All: sends us forth to stand with those who are oppressed,
to release those held captive by sin,
to invite those who are lonely into our lives.**

One: The Spirit who calls you to faithfulness,
**All: sends us forth to proclaim the gospel
that today is God's moment,
the day when all people will be blessed. Amen.**

Postlude - Adam Petrosino (please be seated for the postlude)

* * * * *

Credits

- (1) The Call to Worship, Invocation Prayer, Invitation to Share our Tithes and Offerings, and the Blessing of the Gifts, are adapted from *Ancient Ruins...Everlasting Covenant: Service Prayers for the Third Sunday of Advent Year B*, written by The Rev. Mia M. McClain, Senior Pastor of Riverside Baptist Church in Washington D.C. She is an ordained UCC minister. Permission given for use in services of worship and education programs..
- (2) The Advent Candle Lighting is adapted from *Advent 2023 Year B: Traditional themes of Hope, Peace, Joy, Love*, by the Rev. Mindi Welton-Mitchell. Posted October 28, 2023, on her blog, Rev-o-lution. <http://rev-o-lution.org/new-advent-candle-lighting-liturgy-for-2023-and-12-days-of-christmas/>
- (3) The Prayer of Response is adapted from *Sunday Worship Resources for December 17th, 2023*, written by the Rev. Mindi Welton-Mitchell, posted December 8th, 2023, on her blog, *Rev-o-lution*. <http://revo-lu-tion.org/>
- (4) The Commissioning and Benediction are adapted from *Liturgy and Communion for December 17th, 2023, Advent 3-B*, written by Thom M. Shuman, and posted December 11th ,2023, on the blog, *Lectionary Liturgies*, <http://lectionaryliturgies.blogspot.com/>
- (5) Permission to stream the music in this service obtained from ONE License #A-736636. All rights reserved

Ministers, All of Us

Scott Rosenstein, Pastor

Adam Petrosino, Music Director and Pianist

Keith Konet, Council President

Beverly Wurm, Administrative Assistant



NEWS AND UPCOMING EVENTS

God is Still Speaking...

No matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey, you will find a spiritual home in this United Church of Christ congregation. WELCOME!

Tithes and Offerings - Checks and Money Orders can be made payable to: "Zion United Church of Christ" and placed in the offering basket or mailed to:

**Zion United Church of Christ
c/o Keith Konet
1039 Bridlewood Drive
Copley, OH 44321**

Questions: Contact Keith Konet at 330.604.6939

Welcome to Adam D. Petrosino, Our New Music Director/Pianist

We are so pleased to welcome Adam, and his partner, Kiel, to our community of faith here at Zion United Church of Christ of Tremont, Cleveland, Ohio. We're grateful to you sharing your presence, faith, and musical gifts with us.

Adam can be reached by e-mail at A.D.Petrosino@gmail.com and by phone at 234.205.9397.

Administrative Assistant, Beverly Wurm

Beverly is keeping some limited Office Hours at church (2700 W. 14th)/home. The days and hours are:

Fall Schedule:

Tuesday– 9am – 1pm

Wednesday – 10am-2 pm

Thursday – 9am – 1pm

Beverly can be reached at: zionchurchtremont@gmail.com or by phone at: 216-273-7561 (church) or 216-310-6810 (mobile).



Advent Sundays at Zion Church

- Sunday, December 17th, 11:00 AM – Third Sunday of Advent
- Sunday, December 24th, 6:30 PM – No Service Sunday morning – but we'll gather at 6:30pm for a brief Fourth Sunday of Advent service followed by Christmas Eve Service of Carols & Candlelight

Third Sunday of Advent

Gaudete Sunday (/gaw'detɛ/ gow-DET-eh) is the third Sunday of Advent in the liturgical calendar of Western Christianity, including the Roman Catholic Church, the Anglican Communion, Lutheran Churches, and other mainline Protestant Churches. It can fall on any date from December 11 to December 17.

On this day, we light the third candle of the Advent wreath, which is rose-colored (or pink). The word "Gaudete" is Latin for "Rejoice." This celebration is a reminder that God who loves us is still in charge and that we await Christ's coming not with fear, but with tremendous joy.

While the theme of Advent is a focus on the coming of Jesus in three ways: his first, his present, and his final Advent, the readings for Gaudete Sunday deal with rejoicing in the Lord – Christian joy – as well as the mission of John the Baptizer and his connection with Advent.

Today, the Spirit of God urges us to rejoice because we know that those who are hungry can be fed and those who are brokenhearted healed. We rejoice because, like John the Baptizer, we can point toward a road that leads to something unimaginably wonderful. With Paul, we can proclaim the message: "The One who calls us is trustworthy" and will lead creation into fulfillment.

Isaiah describes what God is working in our midst, John announces that it's coming and Paul reminds us that God does great things, not just "once a long time ago," but today, among and through us. That's divinely subversive!

A Christmas Eve Candlelight Service

Will be held on Sunday, December 24th at 6:30pm. We invite you to share the light in a service with beautiful music and a message that reminds us of that night long ago that continues to transform our world and our lives. The Christmas Eve worship service will include carols, a relevant Christmas message and our cherished tradition of passing the candle light and joining in the singing of Silent Night. You can also join the service via the Zoom platform online at 6:30 PM on December 24th.





**Tremont-Duck Island-Irishtown Bend Holiday Food Drive
2023-2024
Running now through January 15th, 2024**

lend a helping hand to neighbors - families and children - in need
in Tremont, Duck Island, and Irishtown Bend
and provide help to the 12 local Cleveland food pantries - ministries.

Three Ways to Donate:

- 1) **Give canned goods & paper products** – deliver to Zion Chapel (2700 W 14th Street).
- 2) **Donate online by Credit or Debit Card, Venmo, or PayPal** – visit:
<https://givebutter.com/HolidayFoodDrive-TRE-DI-IB>
select the Holmden-Buhrer-Rowley/Mentor-Castle-Clark block clubs or the Auburn-Lincoln Park block club and the food pantry/hunger center you would like your donation to go to
- 3) **Donate by Check** – make payable to the food pantry/hunger center of your choice ******(see list below******) – for verification purposes, deliver check to Zion Chapel and Pastor Scott will see that it gets to the food pantry you designate.

Total Collected as of Friday, December 15th, 2023 – \$15,430
Goal in Cash/Checks for this food drive: \$25,000

Food Pantries – Hunger Center Ministries:

- Immanuel Lutheran Church Food Pantry
- Pilgrim Church Food Pantry
- St. Augustine Hunger Center hot meals program
- St. Malachi Church Back Door Ministry
- The Greater Cleveland Food Bank
- Westside Catholic Center
- St. Augustine Parish food pantry services
- Iglesia Nueva Vida Food Pantry - Comedor comunitario
- Mega Church Resource Center Food Pantry
- Hunger Action Network of Greater Cleveland
- Scranton Road Bible Church Food Pantry
- St. Michael the Archangel Food Pantry - Reparto de Compras

Some Special Days/Holidays in December, 2023:

- World AIDS Day – December 1st
- Advent Begins – December 3rd
- St. Nicholas Day – December 6th
- Chanukah (also called Hanukah or Hanukkah) Begins – December 7th
- Human Rights Day – December 10th
- Bill of Rights Day – December 15th
- Winter Solstice – Yule – December 21st

- **Festivus Day – December 23rd**
- **Christmas Day – December 25th**
- **Kwanzaa Begins – December 26th**
- **New Year's Eve – December 31st**

Any questions regarding the Holiday Food Drive contact Scott Rosenstein (tremont701@gmail.com)– or call Scott at 216.577.1514 (mobile).

Please Remember in Prayer

- The Universal Church, its members and mission,
- The nation and all in authority, the leaders of our nation - federal, state, and local.
- For democracy and our democratic institutions and norms in the United States.
- The welfare of the world and the concerns of the local community.
- The interrelationship of Gospel values and civic engagement.
- Ministries of the United Church of Christ and of Zion Church.
- The leaders of our church: local, regional, and national, including The Rev. Karen Georgia Thompson, General Minister and President of the United Church of Christ. We also pray for our Living Water Association UCC, Association General Minister, The Rev. Nayiri Karjian, and Association Faith in Action Minister, The Rev. Michael Howard.
- The ministers and missionaries of the world.
- Those who are refugees and immigrants.
- For children separated from their parents at detention camps along our southern border.
- For racial and religious justice and reconciliation in the United States and around the world.
- Mother Earth and the global reflection on climate disruption.
- For peace, justice, and freedom throughout the world and particularly for the peoples of Ukraine, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, and the United States.
- Gaza is ruled by Hamas, an Islamist militant group that is committed to the destruction of Israel and is designated as a terrorist group by the US and many other powers. Hamas launched an unprecedented assault on Israel on Saturday, October 7th, 2023 with hundreds of gunmen infiltrating communities near the Gaza Strip.



At least 1,200 Israelis were killed, while around 250 soldiers and civilians, including women and children, were being held in Gaza as hostages. During a pause in military action in late November, Hamas released 81 Israelis and dual nationals and 24 foreign nationals from captivity in Gaza, according to the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. A spokesman for the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) said that around 135 hostages remain in Gaza. They include U.S. citizens.

Nineteen hostages are presumed dead. Israel in return released 240 Palestinians held in Israeli prisons (mostly women and teenage boys). In addition to significant air strikes Israel followed up with a ground invasion of Gaza. More than 18,600 people have been killed in Gaza and surpassing 50,000 wounded, according to the Gaza Health Ministry. The death count is incomplete because health officials can't tally the dead at two of the enclave's large hospitals

or account for bodies under the rubble from air strikes that Israel's military has carried out in response to the Hamas attack on October 7th, At that time Israel imposed a total blockade on the territory, denying it food, fuel, water, and other essentials. During a temporary pause some trucks loaded with medical supplies and food aid have entered Gaza from Egypt, some of which made it to northern Gaza — a first in the conflict. The pause ended and hostilities resumed on Friday, December 1st. Since the pause ended, Israeli troops have pushed into southern Gaza, and have taken "aggressive" action against Hamas and other armed groups in and around the city of Khan Younis. Israel has also carried out many air strikes on Rafah, near the Egyptian border, where it has told residents of Khan Younis to flee. There continues to be fierce fighting in the north, around Jabalia refugee camp and the Shejaiya district of Gaza City. Hundreds of thousands of civilians are thought to remain in the north. Israel claims to have killed thousands of Hamas fighters during the war, including many commanders. The IDF says 115 Israeli soldiers have been killed since the start of the ground offensive on October 27. In total, 444 soldiers have been killed since October 7, the vast majority of them in Hamas' attacks that day. There is a significant and growing humanitarian crisis in Gaza. The World Health Organization (WHO) says only 11 out of Gaza's 36 hospitals are still partly functional and able to admit new patients. Only one of them is in the north. Food is scarce in Gaza and prices have soared, meaning many people are unable to afford staples such as flour. A lack of power makes cooking difficult. UNWRA, the UN agency for Palestinian refugees, has said that 1.9 million Gaza's residents - about 85% of the population - have been displaced and that 1.3 million of them have been sheltering in its facilities. This includes the hundreds of thousands of people who fled the fighting in the north after an Israeli order to move south of the Wadi Gaza river valley for their own safety. UNWRA warned that the 600,000 people in southern Gaza who have been ordered to leave their neighborhoods because of the fighting have nowhere to go, since its own shelters are already beyond capacity. Israel has severely limited supplies of fuel, arguing that it could be stolen by Hamas and used for military purposes. Fuel shortages have meant that water pumps and desalination plants, waste and sanitation services, and many bakeries have been unable to function. Hundreds of foreign passport holders - including some British and US citizens - and seriously wounded and sick Palestinians have also been allowed to leave through Rafah, but many remain.

- Two significant earthquakes jolted Nepal on Monday, November 6th, just three days after a powerful temblor killed more than 150 people in the Himalayan nation. A magnitude 5.2 earthquake struck Nepal on Monday, centered in the Jajarkot district about 250 miles northeast of the capital, Kathmandu, which was hit hard by the magnitude 5.6 earthquake on Friday. At least 153 people were killed by that first quake, according to the latest official figures from Nepalese authorities on Monday, which was a slightly lower toll than provided over the weekend. More than 339 people were also injured.
- According to data from the Gun Violence Archive a total of 637 mass shooting incidents have occurred in the US as of December 14th, 2023. In 2022 a total of 648 mass shootings occurred. In 2021 a total of 693 mass shooting incident occurred across the US, in 2020 a total of 611, in 2019 a total of 417, with 337 incidents in 2018. While we pray for the families and friends of those whose lives have been taken in violent acts – and we pray for those injured in body, mind, soul, and spirit—and for their neighborhoods and communities across the United States – We know that our words and prayers are not enough. We must repent for our collective inaction and commit to tirelessly working toward meaningful gun violence prevention.

- For those affected by the coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic and the various variant surges: for all those who are infected and/or sick, and those who are grieving, for all who are affected, all around the world, for essential workers and frontline workers...we pray for comfort, for safety, for health and for wholeness.
- The residents and management of the San Sofia Apartments who share a campus with us.
- Those anticipating surgery, recovering from surgery, or undergoing medical procedures, tests, or treatments.
- Those living in assisted living or in a nursing home
- Those who are homebound and those who are caregivers
- Those who suffer or are in any trouble, and the departed.
- Those on our church prayer list:
 - Patti Augustine (*health concerns*) and family. *Patti's brother Dave is recovering from recent open-heart surgery.*
 - Robert O. Bucklew (*Bob Bucklew's Dad*) is residing at Mapleridge Senior Living Willoughby, OH. Robert recently celebrated his 91st Birthday.
 - The family, loved ones, and friends of Betty Funk.
 - Marian Heffernan (*neighbor to Scott and Bob – health concerns*)
 - Ken Kauffman & friends: Nim Bryant, Isadora Almaro, Joe & Janelle Reardon, Barbara Reed, Nancy Moore's sister has passed away and prayer for Nancy's neighbor for healing.
 - Jocelyn Paulette and her parents, Kevin & Jacqui Konet - prayers for recovery.
 - Keith Konet and family.
 - Marcia Leslie (*friend – health concerns*)
 - The family, loved ones, and friends of Elaine Lukacs.
 - Patricia Matheny and family (*including prayers for her Cousin Paul Kevin McCray*).
 - Our new Music Director, Adam Petrosino, and his partner, Kiel.
 - Barbara Rossington (*Prayers for Barb for recovery of procedure - & Prayers for Barb's cousin, Robert, for tests and procedures*).
 - The family, loved ones, and friends of Henry Senyak.
 - Debbie Webb (*continued prayers*)
 - Beverly Wurm (*prayers for family*)



Christmas comes...

From Nayiri Karjian, General Minister, Living Water Association, Ohio NorthEast, UCC | December 14, 2023

The parallels cannot be missed. The first Christmas also happened in a very chaotic, messy and politically charged world, in a military dictatorship. Life was not easy. Domination and oppression were the norm. Suffering and injustice defined life itself. Religion and politics were deeply intertwined. And religions born out of those times boasted Savior Messiahs, Incarnate Divinities who would come and save the people from their misery.

Following that tradition, the people of Israel waited for their own Savior Messiah, Incarnate Divinity, who some believed, would come with force and might, conquer the ruling Roman Empire and establish a Jewish political kingdom. At the time, Israel lived under the oppressive rule of the empire where the political atmosphere was brutal, the economic tax burden excessive, with eroding poverty. Caesar Augustus was the winner of the Roman civil war, and as such, was called "the savior of the world."

Religion and politics were deeply intertwined. Divinity was implied for the Roman emperor, the Caesar claimed the titles Lord, Son of God, Bearer of Peace, and Savior of the World, while Jews would recognize only God as Lord and Savior, the Bearer of Peace, the Light of the World, etc.

It is in this messy political context that Jesus was born. 2000 years later, we can see the parallels in our own time. The world run by unjust political and economic power. Coercive force is valued over shared power, tyrant bravery over deep courage, rampant greed over generous sharing. Might makes things right, and winning at any cost is prized. Injustice and poverty, hunger and war, hatred and violence often go unquestioned and unchallenged.

We still need our Savior Messiah, Jesus the Christ, our Incarnate Divinity to save us from ourselves, our brokenness and senselessness. This salvation is not only about our individual souls but about the salvation and wholeness of all creation, and our communal life together. This salvation is not just about me or you but about all things living. This salvation is about the healing and wholeness of our hearts, our relationships, our planet earth, and all that is broken. You may remember that the word *salve* is the root of the word *salvation*. Hence, salvation is healing, liberation, freedom from the oppression we humans impose on one another. Besides, our personal liberation cannot come at the expense of another's.

Throughout history, the incarnation of the divine in human form has given humans the promise and the hope, that the earth can be touched by heaven, that the universe can be redeemed by divine presence, that we humans can discover the sacred and the holy in our lives, and a different world is possible.

It seems the world is not going to change until we change it – until Jesus is born in the manger of our hearts, until we incarnate the divine and embody Love to one another, until we give birth to Jesus walking in the path of healing and liberation, until we realize that we are one humanity, and salvation means healing and liberation for ALL and not just for some.

And, yes. "Christmas will come even at the face of hatred and warring – no atrocity too terrible to stop it, no Herod strong enough, no hurt deep enough, no disaster shattering enough. For someone will see the star, someone will hear the angel voices, someone will run to Bethlehem, someone will know peace and goodwill, and Christ will be born." A. Weems