

Straight from the "Hart"

Worship Service from November 29, 2020

Advent Begins

 HARTLAND

Sharing the journey
to know, love, and serve God

Welcome It is the first Sunday of Advent and the beginning of the Christian New Year. With the new season comes a new worship series. This one is entitled "Coming Home" and ties into the season when, at least in normal years -- we long to return for homecoming reunions and traditions in home and church that fills us with good memories. In a closely related parallel to our spiritual journey, the Advent Season looks forward to the final homecoming of Christ's return to redeem



and renew the face of the earth, a work that he began when he came the first time over 2,000 years ago when he came to a manger. Each week we hope to unwrap something that will help us prepare our hearts, lives, homes, communities and world to welcome Christ to his world just as we normally prepare to open our homes to friends and family for a joyful gathering.

Call to Worship – Advent Candles

Collectively, we have a way to go... and we need to call out for God's intervention. Our Call to Worship is a prayer in song and word that Emmanuel (which means God with us) would come and bless us with his help and his presence among us.

Music O Come O Come Emmanuel (verse 1)

O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel,
that mourns in lowly exile here, until the Son of God appear.

Responsive Reading

God of justice and peace. We see so much wrong, and wonder where you are.

People are broken. We cannot see a common good.

Nations are filled with conflict and violence.

The earth suffers and cries out for help.

People, long for God's presence. Say with Isaiah the prophet:

"We wish you would tear open heaven and come down!"

We light this candle of hope. **[Light candle one].**

Because we have a certain hope that God will come into the world with comfort and healing.

Music O Come, O Come, Emmanuel (Refrain)

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.



Theme Today's theme is introduced by a fictional story designed to make a point. It is adapted from a story by Pedro Pablo Sacistran.

Once upon a time, Mickey was a cheerful, optimistic boy. No one could remember him ever getting angry, no matter what people did or said to him. Even his teachers admired his self-control and good disposition. It was so unusual that a rumor began that he must have some special secret, and as you know, secrets create curiosity, and no one could think or talk about anything else. They even began to cross-examine Mickey about his "secret". And even though the questioning got heated, he simply smiled and said nothing.

But the discussions became so frequent and so intense that one of Mickey's favorite teachers, Mr. Anthony; called his parents and set up a home visit. After a short conversation, the topic came up. The parents and Mickey escorted Mr. Anthony into a room where Mickey studied and played. On the far wall was an intriguing collage of colorful shapes and sizes. It had filled the wall and was beginning to move around the corners to the adjoining walls.

The teacher was really impressed by its beauty. He got up close and saw that some of the small pieces had a date and negative word on them, such as stupid or mad. And others had no date, but a positive word - like gift, or good dinner. The parents encouraged Mickey to explain the meaning of the collage. He said, "People at school think I have some secret power that keeps me from getting angry or feeling sad when people don't treat me well. But I feel just like anyone else. In fact, I coped with it worse than most. But a long time ago my parents and I devised a plan. Every time someone treated me badly I'd cut out a piece for the collage, Then in real small writing I'd put in the corner of it the date it happened and a word on it that described how I felt. Then I'd cut out two more pieces and write down a word that describes something good that I could remember. Then I would paste them on to the wall. I got the bad "out of my system" and replaced it with good memories instead." Now I've been doing it so long that when someone treats me badly, I can't help think that I get to add to my work of art... and that makes me happy.

Mr. Anthony went home and secretly designated one of his rooms an art room and began his own collage. He recommended it to so many students that the town became nicknamed “Art Town”, for almost every house with a child had an “art room” with wonderful art created by happy, optimistic children. (Modified from “Art Town” by Pedro Pablo Sacistran <https://freestoriesforkids.com/children/stories-and-tales/art-town>)

I’m not sure how well that would work in practice for how many of us, but the point is -- focusing on good memories can help carry us through difficult times. Not long ago I tried to encourage someone who was feeling overwhelmed by the tasks laying in front of them. I knew what they were capable of and that they were simply venting their frustration at the many plates they had to keep spinning. I tried to encourage them by saying “I believe in you” and when I received a somewhat skeptical response to that, I began to list that person’s track record -- reminding them how many times they had experienced similar times and come through with flying colors...

Today we will hear about a nation that had begun to doubt God’s ability to help them because in their difficult circumstances because they failed to remember their history, how God had come through for them again and again. We too, build our hope and expectation as we remember God’s track record of what he has done for his people. Let’s prepare for renewed hope again this Advent season.

Prayer Chorus # 196 Come Thou Long-Expected Jesus

Come, thou long expected Jesus, born to set they people free;
 from our fears and sins release us, let us find out rest in thee.
 Israel’s strength and consolation, hope of all the earth thou art;
 dear desire of every nation, joy of every longing heart.

Pastor’s Prayer We’ve put on the projection the altar scape of our church. Use the visual to focal point for the meaning of the Advent season as we pray...

Holy God, Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer of life: We expect you to visit us again this year. Not because we deserve it, but because you promise your presence to your people, and we are your people. The story of Christ coming in Christmas is comforting in its familiarity to us. We too often forget that your promise and its fulfillment are no less extraordinary today than it was 2,000 years ago in



Bethlehem. Forgive us, for we often lose the awe of Emmanuel (of you being with us in Christ and in Spirit). We need to sense your presence among us today as much as we ever did. We need an encounter with the holy. Remind us that you will not be found in scrambling busy-ness, but in the stillness of our hearts. It is there that we hear your whispers to not be afraid. To not be afraid in the hurts that we experience in life, to not be afraid of setbacks and reversals, to not be afraid of confusing challenges and tempting vices. We don't need to be afraid because in your coming to our hearts we are more than conquerors by your gracious love. It is in this hope that we lift up our praises and concerns.

Since last Sunday we have heard about Bruce Harton's brother Doug who is hospitalized with covid, Sheila's son Joe -- with anxiety and PTSD exacerbated by the pandemic, and we pray for all who are suffering from the pandemic in any way shape and form. Also, Pastor Chuck's Dad - awaiting an appointment opening for tests in Ann Arbor, (and his mom who is also awaiting test results), Pat Harton's cousin Mary, who is responding well to treatments, appreciates the prayer quilt, but still needs prayers, and for Pat Harton's friend Cathy who is having back surgery, and also for their family situation as Cathy and her husband care for a sister with Down's Syndrome. We pause to remember these and any others we have mentioned previously or are named only in our hearts and minds in this moment of silence... (Pause in silence) Lord, it is in hope that we prepare to receive you again. Quiet us and attune our spirit to your Spirit. So that as you open the heavens to come down, we in turn open our hearts to your Word and let you lead us home. We pray this in the name of the one who taught us to pray. **Lord's Prayer**

Bible Reading Colossians 1:21-27

On this first Sunday of Advent, the Sunday of hope, it is good for us to remember why Christ came and what he did so that we can have hope. Paul writes to the Colossian Church:

Once you were separated from God. The evil things you did showed your hostile attitude. But now Christ has brought you back to God by dying in his physical body. He did this so that you could come into God's presence without sin, fault, or blame. This is on the condition that you continue in faith without being moved from the solid foundation of the hope that the Good News contains. You've heard this Good News... It has been spread throughout all creation under heaven. ... God gave me the work of telling you his entire

message. In the past God hid this mystery, but now he has revealed it to his people. God wanted his people throughout the world to know the glorious riches of this mystery—which is Christ living in you, giving you the hope of glory. (GW)

Special Music Intro Our hope of glory is “Christ in us” who prepares us for his great homecoming. But so often we connect hope *only* with stress free circumstances and tangible, temporary blessings. Mary Jo is going to sing for us a song that leads us to seek deeper meaning...

Special Music

Blessings

We pray for blessings. We pray for peace.
 Comfort for family, protection while we sleep.
 We pray for healing, for prosperity.
 We pray for Your mighty hand to ease our suffering.
 And all the while, You hear each spoken need.
 Yet love is way too much to give us lesser things.

Refrain

'Cause what if your blessings come through raindrops?
 What if Your healing comes through tears?
 What if a thousand sleepless nights are what it takes to know You're near?
 What if trials of this life are Your mercies in disguise?

We pray for wisdom. Your voice to hear.
 We cry in anger when we cannot feel You near.
 We doubt your goodness. We doubt your love.
 As if every promise from Your Word is not enough.
 All the while, You hear each desperate plea,
 And long that we'd have faith to believe.

Refrain

When friends betray us. When darkness seems to win
 We know that pain reminds this heart
 That this is not, this is not our home.
 It's not our home

Refrain (- last line)

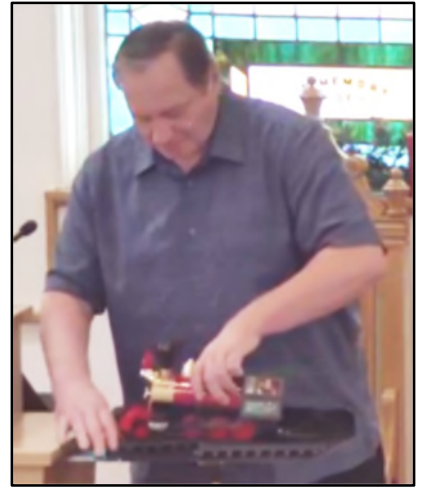
What if my greatest disappointments Or the aching of this life
 Is the revealing of a greater thirst this world can't satisfy
 What if trials of this life The rain, the storms, the hardest nights
 Are your mercies in disguise.

Message Remember: The Advent Track

Note: Unless otherwise indicated, the Bible readings in the sermon are a blended paraphrase inspired by the NIV and MSG

I mentioned earlier that each week we hope to unwrap something that will help us prepare our hearts, lives, homes, communities, and world to welcome Christ this season. We are going to do that literally, opening a gift -- a symbol for the week. Let's see what we have this week. [Open present of train engine and pieces of track].

There was a time, and still is at least in some circles, when Christmas and model trains went together. Long ago, when *certain* people told me that I *had* to have a hobby, and being the people pleaser that I am, I thought it'd be fun and relaxing to try my hand at building a model city with an elaborate train track winding through it. I started by setting up the track on piece of 4x8 plywood which I had thrown on an old, discarded dinner table in the basement. I'd screw track sections down. I put a bridge down on the edge of the board I had envisioned a river would be flowing into the town. I'd come back to the project a day or two later to find somebody that was too young to know better had grabbed the track -- especially the bridge -- and ripped it right off the board. Even without that issue, I've heard that some models are particularly difficult to keep running on the tracks. Every wheel, especially of the engine, must line up on the track just right -- or it doesn't get enough power to even begin moving. And then, even with a carefully and properly fastened track, imperfections in either the track or the wheels of the cars, or the heat of the electricity and friction expanding and contracting the rails, it takes very little for a car wheel to derail, and then all the cars after it. It is a metaphor for our spiritual journey.



Years fly by and our lives move in many directions, hopefully, mostly good directions. But there is also the chance that something has ripped our path to God away from us. More likely, there is a chance that giving in to a temptation to do wrong has turned our wheels a bit one way, and a giving in to a temptation to skip doing a good has twisted our wheels another way -- and in the course of pursuing distractions all around us -- we find ourselves in danger of losing our bearings and even derailing our faith journey.

Such was the case of God's people in the days of Isaiah. They were way off track. They had no idea how to get back on. And now the consequences were upon them. And the people saw it all as God's anger at his derailed nation. Isaiah voices the words of the people...

But how angry you've been with us! We've sinned and kept at it so long! Is there any hope for us? Can we be saved? We're all sin-infected, sin-contaminated. Our best efforts are filthy rags. We shrivel up like autumn leaves— sin-dried, the wind sweeps us away. No one prays to you or strives to reach out to you. Because you've turned away from us, and given us over to stew in our sins. (Isaiah 64:5b-7)

They blamed God for the effects of their own sin. Granted, much of the Old

We sin because - who forgot who?

Testament says correctly that God will not look favorably on evil, that he will have nothing to do with sin. But while not real clear in the version I read, they took it a step further, turned it around, and said that God had forgotten them, and *that* is *why* they were sinning.

It is kind of like the mom who baked the top-secret ingredient 4th generation Christmas cookies (like you would have brought to the Cookie Walk). She put them in the cookie jar on top of the fridge and expected them to be saved for the Christmas feast. A child (and by that, I mean the husband) sneaks one cookie out of the jar and into his lunch box each day. Christmas arrives, and the main course is completed. The mother proudly brings the cookie jar to the center of the table, takes off the lid and discovers that her top-secret 4th generation Christmas cookies have "vanished".

The husband says, "It's your fault! (I sinned), you weren't in the kitchen guarding the jar!" The wife says, "I was in the house loving you the whole time, how could you do this to me? How can you forget all the things I've done for you! I can't even look at you..." Do you get the parallel? We forget that God is in his house, working for us in his world all the time. We not only forget what he has done for us in the past, we forget that he's here and working now. The year was 1958. It was a male-female counterpoint duet sung in a movie entitled *Gigi*.

(**M** = male **F** = Female)

M: We met at nine

F: We met at eight

M: I was on time

F: No, you were late

and again. Isaiah hopes these reflections will come to the surface and they will remember and adjust their lives -- if God will come now and save his people from their enemies one more time. He voices it in his prayer:

Oh, that you would rip open the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you! As when a forest catches ablaze, as when fire makes a pot to boil, come down to shock your enemies into facing you, and cause the nations to quake before you! For when you did awesome things that we never expected, you came down, and made the mountains shudder at your presence. (Isaiah 64:1-3)

He desperately wants them to remember because when we remember – and I don't mean “remember” in the sense of simply knowing the stories as if they were some disconnected history about some other people long ago and far away – but to remember in the sense of knowing that as God's people, that history is our history, those stories are our stories, and God is continuing the story right up to the present with us each new day. As Isaiah continues in his prayer, he says it is amazing...

Since before time began no one has ever imagined, no ear has heard, no eye has seen a God like you who acts on behalf of those who (trust and depend on you) who wait for you. You come to the help of those who happily do what is right, who remember the way you work. (Isaiah 64:4-5a)

So remember! Remember how God sent Jesus not to simply save us from the consequences of sin, but to **He acts for his own** deliver us from the power of sin so that we do not need to sin and suffer its effects anymore. Remember that we are created to enjoy and serve God. That is so easily forgotten in the humdrum - or the mayhem - of everyday living. Remember that we were created to reverence and worship God. This is more easily done when we notice the awesome power and uniqueness of God's will and God's ways.

He dramatically acts on behalf of those who are on track with him, and if we can really remember who God is and what he is doing for his people, then as his people we will want to follow the power of his rails, and somehow over time, temptations to do wrong and temptation to neglect doing good; and all sorts of potential distractions will never deter us from our focus on being the kind of people he would want us to be. We will stay on track.

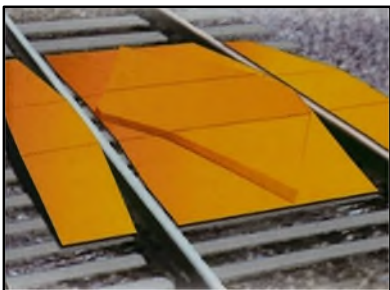
But if the story of God's people is our story, then Isaiah is also teaching us that human beings always and everywhere struggle with failures. There will always be periods when it *feels* like God is angry or absent. But he isn't the one who failed.

We are off track

In a popular crime show, a thief who has a long criminal track record is arrested again at the end of the episode and is saying goodbye to his mom through the police car window, she tells him, "We will be here when you get out." He says to the policeman standing next to the mother: "This will be the last time we meet like this detective." The car drives off and the detective says, "Hope so." The mother, who has been disappointed by her son too many times, says "Hope is for suckers." (Criminal Intent S4:Ep8 - *Silver Lining*)

If anybody should have lost hope, it would be God who has been there to watch our track record -- we live in an environment that is always sin-infected, sin-contaminated, and prone to push us around like dry, crispy, fallen leaves on a blustery day. We must intercede for forgiveness for ourselves, for individuals and for communities for as Isaiah made clear earlier during his call to be a prophet (in Isaiah 6:5 in a Children's translation) "Oh no! I will be destroyed. I am not pure. And I live among people who are not pure. But I have seen the King..." (ICB) If he, the king, hasn't lost hope in us who fail time and again, then how can we lose hope in the ever faithful God of grace and love and forgiveness who yet again "waits for us when we get out"?

What are we to do if we discover are off track? I had not heard of these in my very brief days of railroad modeling, even though I may have even had some



version of one without even knowing it. But these special pieces are placed in or added to the track. They are called rerailers. As the cars run over it, it re-aligns the wheels of each engine and train car, and all the train cars with each other to the track. Stubborn cars and wheels may take several passes to get them realigned.

Advent (and many of its rituals) is the rerailer of the new Christian year. If we allow it, it is a time Christ will enlighten

Come back home

us to the disjunction between where we are and where he longs and works for us to be. It is a time for taking stock of our lives, for returning more fully to God, for allowing him to straighten us out, and bring our mission and purpose into sharper focus as we prepare not only for the celebration of Jesus' birth, but also his coming again in final glory. It points us to the culmination of all things under Christ's

coming as king. Isaiah describes this process, this preparation, this rerailing, not from the imagery of the railroad, (didn't have those back then) -- but from the potter's wheel.

Yet you, Lord, are our Father. We are the clay, you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. Do not be too angry with us, O God. Do not remember our sins forever. Oh, look on us, we pray, keep in mind, please, [that] we are all your people. (Isaiah 64:8-9)

So to sum up the whole text: The people claim: God forgets his relationship with his people and only remembers their sins, which they commit because he has turned away from them.

But Isaiah says: It is the people who have forgotten their relationship with God, and therefore only remember to sin, and they suffer its consequences because *they* have turned away from *him*.

Remember that the cookie jar problem is our problem, not God's problem. Our sins are not because of God's absence, but despite His loving presence in our lives. We need to remember and come back home to the simple and familiar bonds of loving relationships with God and with each other.

On this Sunday of Advent's *hope*, Isaiah prays that God will forget our sins. After all, clay has **Remember and be restored** the tendency to break down, melt down, and shut down and is in frequent need of repairing and remolding. And he is not only the Potter of the clay, he created the clay in the first place. Isaiah prays that God will remember his dynamic (ever changing) relationship with us, his people; and remember that he has chosen us, loves us, saves us, salvages us, repairs us, remakes us, and reshapes us into something new. It is a sure and certain hope (not wishful thinking) but a sure and certain hope -- for God promises that this is his nature -- to lovingly remember **US** --- (and not our sins) --- and assures us that he freely and quickly offers forgiveness, is abounding in mercy and grace and love for his children, who then purify themselves as he is pure, because our hope is to be like him.

Closing Prayer

Let's pray. Dear Lord, you require of us a pure offering of ourselves to you. You want us to be at peace with you and with others. But we are too easily derailed by sin's contamination. Our good deeds wear us out and they fall flat. We forget to call on you and excuse ourselves by saying it is you who have hidden from us. Our spirits fade like fallen leaves and the winds of our culture sweep us away.

Have mercy on us. Give us life and teach us again to call on your name. We ask you to forgive and forget our failures and remember that we are your people. Continue to save and restore us. And what you do for us, help us to do for each other. For you are our Father, our heavenly Potter, and we are your craftman-

Sin - who has forgotten who?

Remember rightly:
He acts for his own
even when we are off track
so we can come back home

Remember and be restored!

ship. Take the clay of our lives into your skillful hands. When we are misshapen, shape us. When we are deformed, reform us. When we are torn and broken, make us whole and the people you want us to be, for we are the work of your hand, and we yearn for your grace as we put ourselves into your hands. Amen.

Closing Music

Have Thine Own Way, Lord

Have thine own way, Lord, have thine own way.

Thou art the potter; I am the clay.

Mold me and make me after thy will,
while I am waiting, yielded and still.

Have thine own way, Lord, have thine own way.

Hold o'er my being absolute sway.

Fill with they Spirit till all shall see

Christ only, always, living in me!

Closing Blessing Know without a doubt that the great mystery of our faith is confirmed by the Spirit, seen by angels, announced to the nations, and believed in throughout the world: that Jesus Christ is the Son of God who makes his home around - with - and in -- all who will welcome him.