

Straight from the "Hart"

Worship Service from December 6, 2020



Call to Worship -- Advent Candles - Peace (R1: = Reader 1, R2: = Reader 2)

Our Call to Worship reminds us that our Creator designed everything to work in harmony, and since sin entered the picture and disrupted his design, he has been working with us and through us to restore our world.

Music Verse 5 of O Come, O Come, Emmanuel

*O come, thou Key of David, come, and open wide our heavenly home.
The captives from their prison free and conquer death's deep misery.*

R1: We lit candle the candle of hope because we know God will come into the world with comfort and healing. God created the universe and all that is in it.

R2: He called it good.

R1: He beautifully weaves together this wide variety of life in peaceful unity.

R2: All creatures that walk, swim, crawl, or fly sing praises to him.

R1: God created in love. He recreates all who revere him, restoring with us a right relationship with him -- and we with others. We light the candle of peace.

R2: Because love, truth, goodness and peace belong to God's people. The God of Creation calls us home to live in peace with all that we meet.

Music Refrain of O Come, O Come, Emmanuel

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

Theme

Another adapted Pedro Pablo Sacistran story introduces our theme today.

Once upon a time, there was a world so full of life that even stones could live. They didn't talk, and they did nothing that people would notice. A kind princess lived in and cared for the stone palace which protected her in return.



But they lived in a dangerous area and the princess needed a person -- a prince who could protect their land. The princess married a strong, brave warrior prince and he moved into the stone palace. It didn't take long to discover that the prince was not only a strong and brave defender, he had a terrible temper. At what he perceived as the smallest inconvenience, he would slam doors and windows and throw things against the stone walls. The stones remained still. They tolerated because the prince was often away protecting the land in battle, and for the sake of their beloved princess.

One day the prince returned from a victorious battle, but the terms of surrender remained unfinished. The princess traveled to a distant meeting place to negotiate the final terms of peace. The meetings were long and difficult, and the princess was away from the palace an extended time, which meant the prince and his temper remained alone the palace for a long time. The prolonged isolation frustrated the already high-strung prince and the stone palace cringed in fear and grew in annoyance as it became more and more dirty with neglect and dented with abuse from the now out of control prince.

The stones decided they would have to act even though it would be noticed. One day the prince went out for a long ride in the countryside, the living stones of the palace picked itself up and went and hid behind a hill. But it was a large building and the prince was able to find it. Every excursion that took the prince out of eyesight, the palace would move and hide. The prince would search and find it, and each time the prince became more incensed and caused more and more damage.

Eventually, the stones had had enough. So instead of waiting for him to leave, one night while the prince slept inside, the palace locked all its windows and doors and ran north for days and days, and ignored the destructive acts that the prince was unleashing inside. Finally, it came to a rest and opened its doors. The prince rushed outside to freedom only to find he was freezing in land of snow and ice. He explored this new land, looking for a way to return home, but all he could see was an endless horizon of snow and ice blending into a skyscape of snowing clouds. Blinding white everywhere.

He wound his way back to the palace to warm up, but the doors and windows had shut and locked. He banged on the door as hard as he could with his frozen hands but to no avail. As he paced around to keep from freezing, he noticed the door had opened slightly -- he rushed toward it only to have it slam in his face. The

prince muttered that the palace was acting like it was angry with him. The palace rattled its windows in agreement.

Even not knowing what it meant, it frightened the brave prince. Nevertheless, he went from muttering to screaming. "So that's the way you want it? I have never lost a battle!"

For days, the prince did everything in his power to access the interior, while the palace did everything in its power to keep him out. They both began to suffer effects of the cold. The prince's feet and the palace walls both became brittle and began to crack. They both realized this battle was going to end in a frozen draw, and the only way either would survive was if they made peace.

The prince began to control his anger and not only stopped inflicting blows on the palace, he began repairing the external damage. In return, the palace liked the repairs and opened its doors to give the prince shelter. The prince, now warm and rested at night, was able to effectively restore repairs inside and out throughout the day. He realized he actually enjoyed making the repairs and getting the magnificent palace back to its original shape.

The palace and the prince forgave each other. One night, while the prince slept, the palace closed its doors and ran all the way back to its original resting place. They arrived just before the princess returned from her journey, who was delighted to see the palace in impeccable shape and her husband's much improved disposition. The stones returned to not doing anything in the presence of people.

As legend has it, many years later the palace was carefully dismantled stone by stone and distributed around the world, so some of the stones could be a part of your house today, so be careful to keep the peace within your home, or you might end up in a cold war.

(<https://freestoriesforkids.com/children/stories-and-tales/runaway-palace>)

Special Music Intro

As we prepare for prayer, listen to Donna and Kathy accompany the angels joyfully singing their announcement of the newborn king and calling us to come and worship him on bended knee...

Instrumental Duet Medley *Angels We Have Heard on High - The First Noel*

Prayers

Most gracious God, we come with gratitude that you are ever with us as we journey home with you and to you. Help us as we travel to stay on the path and

keep us focused on the purpose of our mission. We tend to stray from the holy day and the holy life, so we ask that you continue to graciously guide us back on course.

As we see the Christmas lights, remind us of your light, your Son that leads us. As we see our the evergreen trees and wreaths that decorate our homes, churches, and community, remind us that it is your unending love that decorates our hearts. As we shop for gifts, keep us mindful of the birthday we celebrate and the gift we are given in the manger. When we eat the foods of the season, let us think of your sweetness and provision. Let all that we do reflect the great gift of your presence.

And we request that your presence be especially felt by those in need, specifically since last Sunday we have heard that Bruce Harton's brother Doug is responding to covid treatments, but his wife Barbara is not faring as well. For Pastor Chuck's mom who is having outpatient surgery Tuesday, for John and Lynette McCallum, as he has a tumor on his kidney and is scheduled for surgery (in Florida) on Tuesday. And for Jan Martin's sister-in-law Sharon, who is an LPN but seeking work, and for all those who are caring for covid-19 patients world wide, and in a moment of silence we lift up others that you have placed on our hearts and minds.

SILENCE Now direct us how to not only make room in our hearts for you, but may it be the master suite -- for our desire is for you to be more than an acquaintance on the edge of our lives; more than an honored guest that we take want to offer hospitality; we want to serve you as the king of our lives just as you are King of all, a king who came to be among us, with us, for us, and in us; and who taught us to pray... **Lord's Prayer**

Bible Reading

On this Advent Sunday of Peace, our Bible readings remind us that bringing shalom, the peace of a full, harmonious life, of wholeness; has been God's intent from the beginning. The prophet Malachi reminds the priests of his day that God promised to bless their ancestors, the Levites, so that they could carry out God's mission of bringing people to God and God to the people in a harmonious relationship. Malachi speaks God's words when he says,

“The purpose of my covenant with the Levites was to bring life and peace, and that is what I gave them. This required reverence from them, and they greatly revered me and stood in awe of my name. They passed on to the people the

truth of the instructions they received from me. They did not lie or cheat; they walked with me, living good and righteous lives, and they turned many from lives of sin. The words of a priest's lips should preserve knowledge of God, and people should go to him for instruction, for the priest is the messenger of the Lord Almighty.

The prophet Isaiah describes the ultimate priest and king -- giving emphasis to his rule, but with the same purpose of bringing God's blessing of well-being to his people when he writes...

For a child is born to us, a son is given to us. The government will rest on his shoulders. And he will be called: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His government and its peace will never end. He will rule with fairness and justice... for all eternity. The passionate commitment of the Lord [Almighty] will make this happen!

Jesus came at Christmas and began the work that brings wholeness. When that first phase of the work of was about to be completed on the cross, he told his followers,

But when the Father sends the Advocate as my representative—that is, the Holy Spirit—he will teach you everything and will remind you of everything I have told you. “I am leaving you with a gift—peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give is a gift the world cannot give. So don't be troubled or afraid.”

And until he returns, he reminds us through Paul to

Let the peace that comes from Christ rule in your hearts. For as members of one body you are called to live in peace. And always be thankful. (NLT)

Music *O Little Town of Bethlehem*

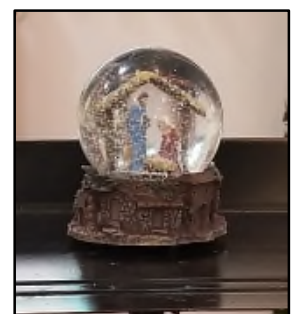
Message

“Home is Where We Meet”

Psalm 85

Each week we are unwrapping a symbolic gift that helps us prepare to welcome Christ home to our hearts this season. Let's see what we have this week. [\[Open present\]](#)

They used to call them snow globes, now they call them water globes. It is a little manger scene - that reminds us of the peaceful part of Christmas. When we think of the old traditional



Christmas, we might imagine a snow globe with gently falling snow outside. We peek through the candle lit windows of a home and see the extended family gathered around a warm fireplace, a cat or dog comfortably curled up on either side of the hearth. At a safe distance, the sole source of light in the room is the tree in all its décor. A delicious meal has been finished, the dishes put away... the presents have been opened with much gratitude, and all the wrappings also put away. There is lots of laughter and love and deep, but positive conversation by completely contented people. It is the feeling greeting cards try to capture, a script of *classic* Hollywood, where the reality that interrupts such scenes are left on the editing room floor.

The reality for some, if not many of us – is that the preparations are exhausting, families often live at longer distances, and work schedules push deeper into the weekends. Individuals in our reunions don't understand how to follow our idealized script for the day and interrupt our season with stresses – and we have no editing room floor on which to leave them.

Modern Hollywood, on the other hand, likes to pick up those scraps off the floor and use that as the focus. What used to be the edited-out bits have now become the feature. One TV detective described to a friend his family's disappointment with each other and concludes his conversation by saying, "There in a nutshell, is many an uncomfortable family dinner". (Death in Paradise: "The Man with the Golden Gun" S3Ep7). In a comedic TV episode, a family experiencing Thanksgiving for the first time and unaware of all the traditions, discussed the aftermath of their tragic attempts. The teenage boy says to his father, "You know, I found out something pretty cool. You know how we tried to make this a special day but all the resentment I have for you came spewing out and we ended up spending the whole day avoiding each other? It's normal!" The father replies, "I was going to tell you the same thing! The screaming, the fighting, the exploding resentments – that's what Thanksgiving is!" "So we did get it right." Then they happily concluded, "Nailed it." (Third Rock from the Sun: "Gobble, Gobble, Dick, Dick" S2Ep10) For them, maybe for some of us, certainly for many in the world – circumstances make meeting "home for the holidays" something more of a dread than a dream.

There is usually both dream and disappointment in every event. Psalm 85 was written for just such a tension. In their case, the tension is between - on the one hand, a faith in the abundant riches God's grace which ushers into us confidence and an experience of God's presence; and on the other hand, the personal and

national circumstances surrounding them which ushers into us worrisome uncertainty, and a sense of separation from God.

The Psalmist wrote this song for worship during a time of personal and national distress which is not named, perhaps intentionally, making the song valid for any difficult situation. If not initially, it became associated with the annual fall harvest festival. In Old Testament days, their very survival depended on God's granting a good harvest. The writer begins with a congregational prayer reciting God's wonderful gracious deeds for them in history.

You showed favor to your land, O LORD. You restored [your people]. You removed the guilt of your people. You covered all their sin.

(Psalm 85:1-2 (EHV))

This tension between the human reality of struggle versus the divine reality of forgiving grace and restored wholeness is not just one of timing. It was not like: "Times are good. We feel close to God. He is blessing us." OR "Times are hard. We don't feel close to God." and in their day, even, "God is punishing us". Then it becomes a waiting-on-God-game for our circumstances to change so that we can feel close to God again. No, the tension between God's gracious presence and the human condition are often (always, really) present at the same time -- Just ask the man who asked Jesus, if you can, to heal his son who had been deeply troubled since a child. Jesus said everything is possible with belief. The man trusted Jesus, but also lived with years of frightening circumstances. He captures the tension between concurrent spiritual and physical realities, when he says, "I do believe, help me overcome my unbelief".

Recounting their national history in this opening prayer is not just about the people longing for a better day like their ancestors had sometimes enjoyed. It is about changing their perspective in the conflicting realities of their present life.

Last week I mentioned the train, the track, and the rerailers that realigned the train wheels to the track. And how easy to get caught up in the distractions and disappointments of life and the world that surrounds us; and advent is designed to get us back on track by fine-tuning our priorities and focus on what is most important.

By recounting God's history with them, their eyes were lifted above their circumstances, reminding them that God prefers to show mercy rather than judgment; and to take comfort that their powerful God, in his gracious forgiving

faithfulness, would provide for them just as he has always done. Now, with all hearts fixed on God, the congregational prayer continues --

Restore us again, O God of our salvation, revive us again, so that your people may rejoice in you (Psalm 85:4a,6b (NRSV))

The words of this prayer are primarily an urgent plea for salvation. Karl Barth wrote, "To be saved does not mean to be a little encouraged, [or] a little relieved. It means to be pulled out like a log from a burning fire." It has to do with rescue – and the deeper the desperation, the needier the dependence, the higher the relief and joy when God revives our lives.

That is not to say that their appeal is a demand based only on their dilemma. Such as, "If you are still the powerful God of old, then why don't you save us?" No, they were not challenging God to remember what he had done for their ancestors and do it again. Nor were they questioning his care -- "We am hurting, so if you love us, God, then why don't you save us." Nor was it a simple demand, "We're your people. We're miserable. Make us happy by fixing everything."

While I hope we understand that not all suffering is caused by God's direct angry punishment for our sins, that was the popular thought among the ancient people, and in this case, the assumption is that they knew they had done wrong. They knew they were suffering the consequences of those actions. They understood they had no right to demand anything from God, much less force him to prove himself. In affliction, it is faith that is put to the test, (not God) and faith must continually fight for what it believes. They were fighting for support and encouragement in tumultuous times, and they were to find it in God's gracious nature. The prayer is less about their physical possessions and fearful future in the land, or about their survival through a successful harvest (which is astounding, since it is the annual autumn harvest festival for which they have gathered and were singing this song) -- and it is more about a desperate desire to rediscover in their spirit a right relationship with God. There is a story quoted by William J Bennett called

THE TREE THAT WAS LONESOME

There was once an old oak tree that had stood for a long time in the forest. Many years before, a great storm had swept through the forest. This storm had left the oak only a crooked, ugly tree. It was no longer straight and beautiful like the others. Each spring it covered its ugliness with new green leaves. In the fall the leaves

turned to a pretty crimson cloak. But the winds of the forest always swept by. They carried the leaf cloak of the old oak tree away with them. Then it was left with nothing to cover its ugliness.

After years and years, the old oak tree began to feel hollow. It felt as if its heart as well as its body were hurt. The wind sighed through its bare branches one fall when it was very, very old indeed. It made the old oak speak. "No one wants me. I am of no more use in the world," the oak said.

Tap, tap, rap-a-tap-tap! That was Mr. Red-headed Woodpecker. He was hammering at the trunk of the old oak tree. Tap, tap! He hammered and drilled. He worked until he had made a little round front door. It led into his winter house in the trunk of the tree. He had found a ready-made pantry there. It was full of grubs for himself and his family to eat when the cold days came. The walls of his house were warm. It was a snug and cozy home.

"How grateful I am for this hollow tree, sang Mr. Red-headed Woodpecker.

Whisk, whirr! That was Bobby Squirrel. He ran up the trunk of the old oak tree until he came to the round hole that was his little front window. Bobby Squirrel peeped inside. Oh, how comfortable and snug was the little house that he saw! He lined it with moss. Where the bark stuck out and made shelves, Bobby Squirrel laid piles and piles of nuts. They were ready to feast when the cold days came. He would be able to live there, warm in his fur overcoat and well fed. He would be safely sheltered until spring came.

"How grateful I am for this hollow tree," chattered Bobby Squirrel.

Then a strange thing happened to the tree. The beating of the wings of the bird and the happy heart of the little squirrel inside it warmed the tree. They made the heart of the old oak tree full of joy.

Instead of sighing in the wind, the old oak tree's boughs sang with happiness. The fall rains had left tears on the ends of its twig fingers. Now they turned to diamonds until its twig hands sparkled with them. The snow covered its ugly body with a cloak of white. The starlight at night and the sun in the daytime set a crown upon its head. In all the forest there was no tree more glad, or more beautiful, than the old oak tree.

The congregation's prayer, recalling God's past actions, and praying for God's present action; now rerailed (realigned) to what was most important in life, are now silenced by a solo voice, a prophet, who stands in their midst and based on their

understanding of God's reputation and his relationship with his people, sings to the congregation what God is most certainly about to do...

Let me hear what God the Lord will speak, for he will speak peace to his people, to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts. Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him, that his glory may dwell in our land. Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other. Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky. The Lord will give what is good, and our land will yield its increase. Righteousness will go before him, and will make a path for his steps. Psalm 85:8-13 (NRSV)



In a potential turning point in their faith journey, where they were in danger of doubting God, God himself intervenes and revives their strength as they hear his salvation is at hand. As we turn to God, we discover his character: Steadfast love, faithfulness, righteousness, peace, and goodness, intertwined and mutually supportive. Together they also make up the ideal conditions for living with others. You can't have peace when relationships are not right. You can't have steadfast love and be unfaithful at the same time. The Psalm writer draws for us a powerful image -- Artur Weiser describes the image as "personified spiritual powers of divine love and faithfulness..., of righteousness and peace as God's messengers and servants at his advent, [all] are at work to fashion the end of time." And especially poignant in a harvest festival, "Just as the sun shines down from the sky and draws forth new budding life from the earth... God bows down from heaven to earth, and [evokes (he draws up) the faithfulness of humanity to reach] up towards heaven, to God..."

As we reach for God, we will discover that we may never realize the extent to which God has already been reaching for us. It is seen most clearly in God's giving himself to us in Jesus at Christmas. He offered himself even before we knew the news, even before we turned toward him. But as we listen, we hear him speaking peace to us who faithfully and consistently open our hearts to him.

It is by God's grace that in the journey toward him and his traits, taken into our hearts and lived out in our world, that we begin to discover his salvation from the fires of our life, even while we endure its heat.

As we try to put all these traits together in our life, life doesn't necessarily become easy or perfect. For one, we don't always get it right, and two -- we cannot script the lives of others and their choices. We will not always fully experience his peace this side of the Lord's coming. But that doesn't mean it is not worth the journey toward it, any more than the anxiety of preparation for (or the potential stress of) family gatherings should make us too easily give up on meeting together. And when I say that, the point is about attempting to positively connect in all our relationships, not whether or not that should happen in person, and face to face in these covid-19 days. The way we bolster relationships best may have to be different for a while.

Bennett commented on the Lonely Oak Tree in a single sentence: "Home is a shelter from storms -- all sorts of storms." That may have been fine in his context of story gathering and placement in his book. But to me, that makes the story sound like it is all about the woodpecker and the squirrel, and yet it seems to me that the real story is about how the essence of life is not about isolated outer conditions, such as the old, ugly, cooked, hollow tree who felt empty and useless; but how our lives become full of purpose and joy as we intersect with the lives of others and help each other, and in my context, I'll add: and how our lives intersect with Jesus. Home is the assurance that God sent his Son to a manger, and then to a cross to prove his love for us. Home is knowing that we are saved by his grace. Home is where, as great and close, or as struggle-y and distant people are, we have opened our hearts. Home is where we meet God and people and feel welcomed and welcome others in love and faithfulness, in right relationships and peace. Home may never be a peaceful snow globe, but it is where we welcome each other in the name of Christ.

Let's pray. Our heavenly Father, in these days of Advent, you stretch us beyond our imagination. You have chosen to connect to us and to your world in more ways than we can comprehend. Your glory radiates across the heavens, yet you choose to focus it in the baby Jesus. It is through him that you invite us to yourself, and a life that journeys toward joy, love, peace, faithfulness, righteousness, and goodness. In these challenging days of covid, when the desire and need to connect is met by the desire and need to keep ourselves and others safe and alive; give us

wisdom and creativity on how to navigate that path. We thank you because your forgiveness sustains us, your grace renews us, and your daily presence gives meaning and purpose to your restoration of our lives. Bless your people. We eagerly desire your shalom, your wholeness, your peace, but we also realize we can't wait for it to come to us, it only comes as each of us begins the journey toward the peace you are bringing us. We pray this in the name of Jesus, the Prince of Peace. Amen.

Music Let There Be Peace on Earth

Closing Blessing

Know without a doubt that the great mystery of our faith is confirmed by the Spirit, seen by angels, and 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. Amen.