

“Woe Is Me!”

A Sermon for Worship on the 1st Sunday of Advent
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
November 28, 2021
Texts: Isaiah 6:1-9a

Let me be the first to wish you a Happy Advent! Better yet, Happy New Year! After all, Advent is the beginning of a new liturgical year in the church and why is that, you're wondering. I'm so glad you asked! The simple answer is that the church liturgical year is oriented around the birth of the Christ Child so, when Advent begins, that new year of church seasons begins as well. Technically, the church considers Advent to be a “time of expectant waiting” (“Advent,” <https://wikipedia.org>) but it might surprise you to know what we Christians are expectantly waiting for. Of course, the most obvious answer is the birth of the Christ Child or the Nativity of Christ. But, most of us don't realize that during this season we are also anticipating the Second Coming, the *Parousia* in the ancient Greek. In the Congregational tradition we do not emphasize the Second Coming piece of Advent that much because we focus on what Christ expects of us in this life we are living right now, rather than anticipating some after life in a heaven “light years away.” (“Here in This Place,” verse 4. Words & Music: Marty Haugen. © 1982, GIA Publications)

That being said, another way of looking at Advent is to look at it as anticipating the coming of Jesus into our lives in three different ways at the same time: 1) The physical birth of Jesus as told in the Nativity Story; 2) the reception of Jesus Christ into the heart of every believer; and, 3) the eschatological or end times role of the Second Coming of Christ. (“Advent,” <https://wikipedia.org>)

So, how do we celebrate Advent in our church? You can see most of them this morning if you have been paying attention! What have you experienced in worship that is unique to Advent this morning? *(pause)* What do you see here in the sanctuary that is different? *(pause)* So, you have already been a part of the beginning of Advent here in a tangible way as we lit the first candle on the Advent wreath and hung our wreaths and decorated our Chrismon tree. Technically, our tree isn't a Chrismon tree because it does not have exclusively religious symbols on it but to me that doesn't matter because our tree represents for us the blending of the Christmas traditions of the church and the world outside our doors. And that can only be a good thing these days when so many people are turning away from the church. Our traditional Christmas Tree decorated in a style that would be comfortable in most homes is another example of the extravagant welcome our church works so hard to extend to all. We strive for inclusivity for all whose hearts call them to try to make the world a better place and at this time of year, that is symbolized in the way we choose to decorate our Christmas Tree here in the sanctuary. Pretty nifty, huh?

The Advent Wreath is another tangible symbol of this season of hopeful expectation in the church. It is also a symbol of how we are called to be ready to use our creativity to make the traditions come alive in the moment. In other words, our Advent wreath never looks the same from year to year. Other than being a circle with five candles wreathed in evergreens (fake though they may be due to the fire code), the Advent wreath is an individual creation of love each year. Usually, I put the wreath together but this year

I asked Dwayne Spurley to use his creativity to put it together and he did. Noteworthy this year is that it contains only items we were able to scrounge from around here in the church. No extra trips to Michael's needed! I am always happy when we are able to do that because to me that symbolizes our church's uncanny ability to make due with whatever the circumstances may be in the moment. And this church has a gift for doing that like no other congregation I have served. That's why we are able to steward our financial resources so well. It's also why when we need to spend money on important things, like the Cross Window and the new roof, people trust that it really is a needed expenditure. That's a good thing.

The candles on the Advent wreath are important because they illuminate, literally, different ways in which we can anticipate the birth of the Christ Child. The most common symbolism of the candles on an Advent wreath sees them as representing Hope, Peace, Joy and Love, or some slight variation on these themes. The white candle in the center always represents the Christ Child. This year, however, we are doing something slightly different with our candles. Instead of symbolizing our aspirations for the season, this year we will use our candles to explore in more depth the people who inhabit the Nativity Story. In other words, we will be looking more deeply at the people who played a part in this most amazing miracle – the coming of Emmanuel, God With Us, in the person of Jesus Christ, born as a child to poor, refugee parents eking out a living on the margins of the society in which they lived. Our focus for this week are the people who are not even visible in the Creche scenes we use to remind ourselves of

the story of Jesus' birth. That's why our stable on the altar is empty this week. These people lived hundreds of years before Jesus was born and yet we look to their words for additional understanding of who Jesus was and why he came into the world. These people are the prophets whose words we find in the Hebrew Scriptures, or the Old Testament. Ezekiel, Daniel, Jeremiah, Joel – these are just a few of the prophets whose words we study as we anticipate Jesus' birth once again.

Isaiah, however, is the prophet whose words we hear most often during the season of Advent. The book of Isaiah was actually written by several prophets over the course of several hundred years. We know this because of the period of history the book covers and by the distinctly different writing styles represented in the work. This was actually a common practice in the ancient world as ancient prophets and teachers would often found schools so they could know their work would be carried on by their students in the years after they themselves had died. This is certainly true in the case of Isaiah. So clear are the differences between the writing styles and historical periods in certain sections that scholars divide Isaiah into three sections known as 1st Isaiah, 2nd Isaiah and 3rd Isaiah.

Today's text comes to us directly from the original Isaiah himself, 1st Isaiah, and it is one of the most amazing stories in the entire Bible. It is an account of the manner in which Isaiah became a prophet. It paints a phenomenal picture of Isaiah's vision (prophets are always having visions) of being in the throne room of the Lord. Interesting in this text is that Isaiah gives an

actual historical time frame to add to its authenticity noting that it took place “in the year King Uzziah died.” Uzziah was a real king who ruled in Judah in the 8th century BC. So, for Isaiah to date this story of this particular vision of the Lord’s throne room is not only unusual but also adds some heft to the claims he makes as he recounts this fantastic vision of how he received his call to be a prophet of God.

Isaiah spends the first several verses describing how huge the divine being he was encountering was – “the hem of his robe filled the Temple!” Then he describes the beings in attendance – seraphs, strong and powerful angels known for their light and purity. His description of these multi-winged beings is fantastical, ending with an account of how they called out to each other – a sort of singing in canon. “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.” The sound of their singing was so loud it shook the foundations of the building! No wonder Isaiah was terrified as he cried out, “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!” I’m done for, Isaiah is saying. I have seen God even though I am totally unworthy to have done so. This is not going to end well for me. But, it does. A seraph flew to Isaiah holding in a pair of tongs a live coal from the altar. The seraph touched his lips with the live coal and then explained, “now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.” It is at this moment when Isaiah hears the Lord calling out, “whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Immediately Isaiah answers, “Here am I; send me!”

Here am I; send me. That right there is the most significant part of Isaiah's story. In this moment of experiencing the full magnificence and power of the living God, and realizing his own deep unworthiness, Isaiah still finds the courage to answer God's request for help. Isaiah literally moves from "Woe is me!" to "Here am I, send me!" in a matter of seconds. How is that even possible? Well, there is that odd intervention with the seraph and the live coal blotting out any guilt or sin Isaiah worried made him unworthy. This does sound like something that would happen to a great prophet like Isaiah. A dramatic theophany – a personal experience of God – including the blotting out of guilt and sin so that the prophet can respond to God in the affirmative – of course this would happen to a prophet. How else would he – or she – know he was a prophet, that he, or she, was worthy?

This really gets to the heart of the matter for us on this first Sunday in Advent as we remember the prophets and the lessons they have to teach us as we await the birth of the Christ Child in Bethlehem and his rebirth in our hearts, and our lives. Are we worthy of this great gift of the renewed presence of God in our lives? Dear friends, the unqualified answer to this question is – yes, yes! A thousand times yes because Jesus himself tells us that God loves us beyond all reason. The gift of grace – God's unconditional love for each of us – is ours to receive and celebrate during this Advent season. And once we can understand and believe that, trust that this unbelievable, incredible gift is ours to accept – then we embark on the challenge of responding as Isaiah did when God asks "whom shall I send?" Dear ones, God asks this

question of each of us all the time. The real issue is, will we hear it and if we do, how will we respond.

God isn't asking me to do anything, we think. Not me! Who am I that God would ask me to do anything? Well, dear ones, that's it precisely. God is asking you because you are you. God asks each of us to act on God's behalf in the world.

St. Teresa of Avila (1515-82), the mystical doctor of the church who saw all things with the eye of her soul, famously wrote: "Christ has no body on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes with which he looks compassionately on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands with which he blesses all the world. Christ has no body now on earth but yours!"

<https://www.ncronline.org/news/spirituality/soul-seeing/christ-has-no-body-earth-yours#>

So, dear ones, the question is not will God ask you to do something. Rather, the question is truly, how will you answer. And know that this doesn't mean God will ask you to do some big, scary, impossible thing. Often God's requests are so softly made, so seemingly insignificant, that we can miss them if we're not paying attention closely. Like those nudges we get to send someone a note or card, or give someone a call and it makes both of you feel better when you do. Like those moments when you are sorting through the stuff to give away and you're tempted to hold on to something because you might need it someday, but you decide to give it away anyway. Imagine the delight of the person who finds it in the thrift store or the "attire for hire" closet at WARM Center or the PNC and knows they might just have a chance at that job after all.

Dear ones, God's asks of us come all the time and too often we miss them. We miss them because we are so deeply stuck in our own thoughts and embedded in our own worries that we just don't see them. Yet, there they are in all those moments when a kind word or even a smile can ease a difficult moment, all those

moments when you make the effort to let someone know that they matter. Yes, it takes a little effort to do this at times, especially when you're in the midst of your own lousy day. But, dear ones, it is at precisely those "woe is me" moments when doing something kind for someone else will make the most difference to you and that other person. Being kind can be as simple as listening to someone who is sad or upset. Just listen, without giving advice or trying to solve their problem for them. Just listen to them in their "woe is me" moment. Be with them when they feel lost and alone, hurt and angry, confused and sad. Be with them and know as you do that you have indeed said to God "Here am I; send me!" I just did, God will say to you and smile. Amen.