

The pandemic has laid bare, and widened, economic disparity locally and globally. As we enter the Advent season, how can our churches become houses where the Holy will be born anew–offering respite, sustenance and care, opening the doors ever wider to those seeking shelter from the onslaught of life? No one church can do it all, but each can do something. As we study the biblical prophets that call us to care for our neighbors and "make room in the inn," the lonely and frightened spaces within us are filled with the light of Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love.

This worship series utilizes scriptures from Revised Common Lectionary Year C

Advent 1: **"Making Room"**
Advent 2: **"A Place at the Table"**
Advent 3: **"How Much is Enough?"**
Advent 4: **"A Room with a View"**
Christmas Eve: "**The Inn"**
Sunday after Christmas: **"Dwelling"**

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Advent 1: **“Making Room (Hope)”**

The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will fulfill my gracious promise with the people of Israel and Judah. In those days and at that time, I will raise up a righteous branch from David’s line, who will do what is just and right in the land. In those days, Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is what he will be called: The Lord Is Our Righteousness. - Jeremiah 33: 14-16 (CEB)

Make your ways known to me, Lord;
teach me your paths.
Lead me in your truth—teach it to me—
because you are the God who saves me.
I put my hope in you all day long. - Psalm 25: 4-5 (CEB)

We usually associate fasting with Lent, but the Eastern Church observes a “Nativity Fast” in preparation for the birth of Christ, understanding fasting as a way to “make more room” for the Holy and shift our focus to care of the neighbor. In a time when so many are suffering the economic consequences of the pandemic, we are invited this year to create room for more hope in the world as we learn to reallocate and multiply resources in ways that are just and right.

Advent 2: **“A Place at the Table (Peace)”**

Take off your mourning clothes
and oppression, Jerusalem!
Dress yourself in the dignity
of God’s glory forever.
Wrap the justice that comes from God around yourself like a robe.
Place the eternal one’s glory
on your head like a crown.
God will show your brilliance everywhere under heaven.
God will give you this name
by which to be called forever:
The Peace That Comes from Justice,
The Honor That Comes
from Reverence for God!
Get up, Jerusalem!
Stand on the high place,
and look around to the east!
See your children gathered

from the west to the east
by the holy one's word,
as they rejoice that God has remembered them. - Baruch 5: 1-5 (CEB)

This is my prayer: that your love might become even more and more rich with knowledge and all kinds of insight. I pray this so that you will be able to decide what really matters and so you will be sincere and blameless on the day of Christ. I pray that you will then be filled with the fruit of righteousness, which comes from Jesus Christ, in order to give glory and praise to God. - Philippians 1:9-11 (CEB)

Like the childhood game of "musical chairs," we are convinced that there are not enough places at the table. And so we shrink the guest list just in case there is not enough, and we scramble to occupy the chairs first. And yet our sacred texts invite us to imagine and make real the gathering of all people to the table, robed in the garments of a Peace that comes with justice. This is what really matters– this is the fruit of what is right and good.

Advent 3: **"How Much is Enough? (Joy)"**

God is indeed my salvation;
I will trust and won't be afraid.
Yah, the Lord, is my strength and my shield;
he has become my salvation."
You will draw water with joy from the springs of salvation.
And you will say on that day:
"Thank the Lord; call on God's name;
proclaim God's deeds among the peoples;
declare that God's name is exalted.
Sing to the Lord, who has done glorious things;
proclaim this throughout all the earth."
Shout and sing for joy, city of Zion,
because the holy one of Israel is great among you. - Isaiah 12: 2-6 (CEB)

Produce fruit that shows you have changed your hearts and lives. ..The crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" He answered, "Whoever has two shirts must share with the one who has none, and whoever has food must do the same." Even tax collectors came to be baptized. They said to him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He replied, "Collect no more than you are authorized to collect." Soldiers asked, "What about us? What should we do?" He answered, "Don't cheat or harass anyone, and be satisfied with your pay." - Luke 3: 10-14 (CEB)

As John baptized new converts, he invited them to live with “changed hearts and lives.” When asked how to do that, his answers all point to making sure no one is cheated or left without the basic necessities of life, including the right to not be harassed. A full life of joy, which the prophet Isaiah describes as an everflowing spring, is the birthright of all children of God. May we act to make it so.

Advent 4: **“A Room with a View (Love)”**

As for you, Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
though you are the least significant of Judah’s forces,
one who is to be a ruler in Israel on my behalf will come out from you.
His origin is from remote times, from ancient days.
Therefore, he will give them up
until the time when she who is in labor gives birth.
The rest of his kin will return to the people of Israel.
He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord,
in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.
They will dwell secure,
because he will surely become great throughout the earth;
he will become one of peace. - Micah 5:2-5a (CEB)

Mary said,
“With all my heart I glorify the Lord!
In the depths of who I am I rejoice in God my savior.
He has looked with favor on the low status of his servant.
Look! From now on, everyone will consider me highly favored
because the mighty one has done great things for me.
Holy is his name.
He shows mercy to everyone,
from one generation to the next,
who honors him as God.
He has shown strength with his arm.
He has scattered those with arrogant thoughts and proud inclinations.
He has pulled the powerful down from their thrones
and lifted up the lowly.
He has filled the hungry with good things
and sent the rich away empty-handed.
He has come to the aid of his servant Israel,
remembering his mercy,
just as he promised to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to Abraham’s descendants forever.” - Luke 1: 46-55

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This has been an Advent season of prophets: Jeremiah, Baruch, Isaiah, Micah. And now the prophet is Mary–the woman who was the original house for the holy. She was "the inn," her womb gestating love for the world. With all her heart, she proclaims that the lowly are lifted, the hungry are fed, mercy reigns. Like Mary, we must envision, must see, must prophesy and act on that vision for the world that God continues to call us to co-create. What is the view from the room that God has prepared?

Christmas Eve: "**The Inn"**

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness on them light has shined… For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this. - Isaiah 9:2-7 (NRSV)

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. - Luke 2: 1-7 [8-20] (NRSV)

The Inn is now open for business. The long-awaited Messiah has been born and on him the light shines. We have only to open the doors of our lives and to say "welcome." Our Advent journey has led us to this moment when the light shining through a closed door becomes one opened to new possibilities, new relationships. What a poignant moment for us this year as the light–the hope, peace, joy and love–multiplies from one illuminated heart and hand to another.

Sunday after Christmas: **“Dwelling”**

As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. - Colossians 3:12-17 (NRSV)

Each year his parents went to Jerusalem for the Passover Festival. When he was 12 years old, they went up to Jerusalem according to their custom. After the festival was over, they were returning home, but the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem… After three days they found him in the temple. He was sitting among the teachers, listening to them and putting questions to them. Everyone who heard him was amazed by his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him, they were shocked. His mother said, “Child, why have you treated us like this? Listen! Your father and I have been worried. We’ve been looking for you!” Jesus replied, “Why were you looking for me? Didn’t you know that it was necessary for me to be in my Father’s house?” But they didn’t understand what he said to them. Jesus went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. His mother cherished every word in her heart. Jesus matured in wisdom and years, and in favor with God and with people. - Luke 2:41-52 (CEB)

Developed in the 14th century, the word “dwell” became known as a “lingering” or “abiding.” It had connections to “in-habit”–another word developed at that time. After an Advent/Christmas season of focusing on housing the holy, how will we linger and abide in this habit of hospitality? What habits did you invite into your heart in this season that you desire to take with you into the new year? How might we sustain the dwelling places that feed, house, clothe those who need it most?

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