



### **WEEKLY STUDY December 2-8, 2023**

(Use this guide to individually or with a group dive deeper into this week's sermon.)

#### **IT'S A WONDERFUL LIGHT Advent 2023**

**Our sermon series for December is: It's a Wonderful Light. As we journey to Jesus' birth, we will encounter Zechariah, Elizabeth, John & Mary. We will look for the light in their stories that beckons to reflect brightly on our own.**

**In the tradition of Advent, light one candle this week – the Candle of Hope. This is also called the Candle of Prophecy. Choose one image of hope for you and hold it in your mind and heart, in God's presence.**

#### **Our scripture this week is: Luke 1:5-17**

"In the time of Herod king of Judea here was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old. Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.

Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and gripped with fear. But the angel said to him, 'Do not be afraid. Zechariah your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of his parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous – to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.

- 1)** We began this week's worship singing (at 8:30) and hearing (at 10:30) one of the great Advent hymns of the church. Hear these words of the hymn: "Come thou long expected Jesus, born to set thy people free; from our fears and sins release us, let us find our 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." Charles Wesley (who, along with his brother

John Wesley, founder of the Methodist movement) wrote these lyrics in 1744, but they could just as easily have been written this year. We are so eager for Christmas that many decorated their homes the day after Halloween and many stores have sold out of popular decorations. And yet Advent tells us to wait; to rest in hope; to prepare ourselves for meeting the Christ child, to linger in the “not yet” and not to jump too quickly to celebrating Christmas.

**Question: *What are ways you need to prepare yourself to once more receive Christ as a newborn baby. How will you use the time of these four weeks to examine your life, to find rest in the midst of busyness and to welcome Jesus? What are you hoping for as you wait?***

- 2) The scripture for this Sunday helps us see Zechariah and Elizabeth – both from the Priestly tribe - who have lived lives obedient to God’s commandments. We are told Zechariah had been chosen to be the priest who would enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. Gathered outside were all the people praying. Zechariah entered into this moment prepared and full of expectancy about his role for entering the Temple of the Lord and burning the incense. But God intervened. Can you imagine being in the midst of something you have prepared for and being interrupted by news of something even more amazing? AND even though you first don’t believe, you are given a sign that it will be so BUT you can’t tell anyone. AND you have a long wait before others will know what you have learned. AND throughout the time of waiting not only can you NOT talk about this one thing but you won’t be able to talk at all! Pastor Sam called this “a divine hush.” Its an invitation to be quiet and still. To watch and listen and wait in order to sense and hear the movement of the Spirit.

**Question: *In this season of Advent, what do you need to do to participate in the divine hush rather than frantically running around and drowning out not only our own thoughts but the presence of God?***

- 3) In the sermon on Sunday, Pastor Sam talked about a book that Pastor Steve had shared in staff meeting. *Hardwiring Happiness* by clinical psychologist Rick Hanson explores why it’s easier to ruminate over hurt feelings than it is to bask in the warmth of being appreciated. He stated that we learn more quickly from bad experiences and more slowly from good. (Who else has skimmed through good evaluations and focused on the bad ones obsessing on what you might do to make them better?) Hanson says its part of our innate survival mechanism to see the bad as a threat and to quickly respond. The good news, he says, is that we can override the systems and hardwire ourselves for happiness. We can learn to reframe, to hold onto hope, or look for light in the darkness – just as Advent (and our faith) invites us to do.

**Question: *What is your take on the thesis of *Hardwiring Happiness*? How could you see yourself breaking open the loop of fear, worry, anxiety and negativity that so often surrounds all of us? What actions would you need to take?***

- 4) A central theme of Advent is the light of God overcoming darkness with the gift of Jesus. We are in the darkest period of the calendar year. Every day we lose minutes of sunlight

until December 21 – the winter solstice – the shortest day of the year. It feels as if darkness is overcoming light. As humans we respond to light and we ourselves shine more brightly with light. And it is true that we respond to darkness becoming more dark and dim ourselves in our thoughts and actions. With Advent each week, as the days grow shorter, we light a candle. And each week the accumulation of light is a sensory reminder that God’s light still shines and grows brighter with the gift of love. Pastor Sam reminded us on Sunday that with our scripture reading, we begin with a long wait ending. A light shines. A baby is on the way. It’s a wonderful light!

**Question: In the coming weeks, name ways you intend to living your life expectantly, joyfully, and hopefully.**

**Prayer: (Our prayer this week is modified from the liturgy for the lighting of the Advent wreath in Sunday’s service)**

O God, as Advent begins we once again sing, “Come Thou Long Expected Jesus.” And because the darkness can so easily overwhelm us, we light one candle for hope. We look around and see a broken world – nations at war; people calling one another names that we’ve been taught since childhood not to use; distrust being spread through rumors, untruths, and hate. We long for kindness. We long for a stop to violence. We long for all people to be accepted. We long for words that heal. We are reminded once more that as a people of faith, we are called to hope. Hope holds space for all our longings. Hope lingers on the edge of harsh reality like the first streams of light that overcome darkness each morning. We hear hope whispering to us, “Keep awake. See what God is doing. See how the world is being made new.” So this day we grasp on to the light of one candle, embracing hope in the light that spreads your love to all. Amen

**Weekly Challenge: This week challenge yourself to daily find and claim signs of hope. Turn on the lights. Light your first Advent Candle. Notice how it dispels darkness. Silently take time to find your quiet center. Refresh yourself in God’s presence.**

*(Weekly study guide prepared by Rev. MaryJane Pierce Norton)*