

**Wesley United Methodist Church
December 6, 2020**

**Deck the Halls: Decorating Your Life with What Mattersⁱ
“Deck the Halls With Peace”**

Scripture: Isaiah 40-1-11
Mark 1:1-8

At the beginning of December, it can be hard to feel peaceful. In any year, it's a time when things really begin ramping up if they haven't already. It always seems as if there are more things on the “to-do” list than there are hours in the day or even days in the week.

Ann Weems wrote a poem that expresses my hope about this each year. It begins, “Who among us does not have dreams that this year will be different? Who among us does not intend to go peacefully, leisurely, carefully toward Bethlehem, for who among us likes to cope with the commercialism of Christmas which lures us to tinsel not only the tree but also our hearts?”ⁱⁱ

“Who among us does not have dreams that this year will be different?” Well, this year definitely will be different, but maybe not in the ways we often dream it will be. As it has been with many things these past 8 or 9 months, many things will not only be different, but potentially more difficult. For those of us who normally see our family members at Christmas, this year we are being reminded that we should shop early because we will also have to ship presents, not just bring them home, wrap them and put them under the tree.

For some of us it's going to be really easy to get overwhelmed like I did when my Christmas tree wouldn't light. For some it's going to be really easy to decide that it's not worth all the hassle, our hearts just aren't in it and we aren't going to celebrate – or we'll just go through the motions because it's expected of us.

I want to suggest to all of us – myself included – that while this is the year when things will be different, we can make some decisions about how we will deal with those differences. We can – and quite frankly, we really need to be intentional about those decisions. In some ways, it's even more important this year than it has been in the past.

During Advent, I'm inviting us to Deck the Halls by decorating our lives with what really matters. Last week, I talked about decorating or filling our lives with hope.

Today, we focus on decorating with peace. Soon we'll talk about decorating our lives with joy and with love.

I think it's probably important for many of us to physically decorate our living spaces in some way. I think it makes a difference to our mental and emotional health – and that's especially true this year, but I believe it is even more important to decorate, deck, or fill our lives with the things that really matter – hope, peace, joy, and love.

In the short book we are using for our Advent study, this week I read these words, “Chirpy songs about Santa Claus won't get us very far in the face of the troubles we confront. Shopping, fun as it is, doesn't keep anxiety at bay for long. Old-time Christmas nostalgia doesn't insulate us from a broken and fearful world.”ⁱⁱⁱ What we really need is the hope that comes from Christ. What we need is the peace that only God can give. What we need is the joy that comes from a relationship with God. What we need is the love that Christ came to show and share with us.

“Christmas is not something we get out once a year and then put away. We think of the Christmas season as something that has a beginning and an end. ... We celebrate the 'holidays' but then we get back to business as usual, largely unchanged. ... That's not the gospel - not a minute in time to be celebrated and then largely forgotten. The good news is about transformation.”^{iv}

I think that's why Mark's gospel doesn't have a “traditional” Christmas story in it. We just heard the beginning of his gospel and it's not about shepherds or wise men, or even Mary or Joseph. It's not about angels. It's about a person – John the Baptist – announcing the good news – the gospel – about Jesus. It is about John preparing the way for Jesus. And Mark reminds us that he does so in the same way that the prophet Isaiah talked about.

When the Israelites had been in exile for a long time, when they had been forced to live in a foreign land, when all they wanted was to go back home, go back to the way things had been, go back to a better time, out of their suffering they pleaded with God. Through the prophet Isaiah, we hear God saying, “Comfort my people. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem.” Today we seek and yearn for that same kind of comfort from God. In difficult times, we yearn for someone to speak tenderly to us and tell us that this is almost over.

Then we hear from Isaiah, “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for God.” We hear about transformation: “Every valley will be lifted up and every mountain made low.” In other words, things will be leveled out. We hear an image about God but one that we also see and hear about reflected in Jesus about feeding his flock – them, in their despair – us, in our turmoil – and gathering his lambs into his arms and carrying them close to his heart, and gently leading the mother sheep. We call Jesus the good shepherd. We see this portrayed in pictures and stained-glass windows – including here in this worship space.

And so, John the Baptist, is also the messenger coming ahead of Jesus, preparing the way, the voice of one crying in the wilderness, calling out in the places of loneliness, in the places where we may feel afraid. It is in these wilderness places that the Jewish people most often encountered God. It is still true today. It is in the wilderness places in our lives, when we don’t have much to hold onto or where we are not complacent or happy with the way things are going, that we are most likely to be open to meeting God. It is in those places where we are often most able to hear God speaking to us directly, through an event or circumstance or through another person.

I don’t believe that God causes the tough things in our lives, but I believe that God can use them to help us come closer to God, to grow in our faith that God is always with us. God didn’t bring the Israelites back to the world they were looking for – to the way it had been. God doesn’t roll back the clock and undo what has been. God will not bring us back to a pre-Covid time. Rather God offers us a way through what is and invites us into what has the possibility to be. God invites us to see what we have the possibility to become because of what we have seen and experienced, not in spite of it.

When we begin to see this in our lives, we begin to experience the peace that only God can give us, the peace and assurance that whatever is happening is not the end. God can, and does, prepare a way through it. When the obstacles seem overwhelming, God metaphorically changes the obstacles from huge mountains to rolling hills; God changes the huge sink holes of despair into navigable dips in the road where we can walk by holding God’s hand.

God listened to Israel – and listens to us – and speaks in the Word that is Jesus. God brought them home, not to the home they envisioned, but to the community that

God calls us to create, to relationships that fulfill us and connect us. That is the home that we find in Jesus. It is a home that may begin with a baby in a manger, but it is also a home profoundly manifested in Jesus' life and in his death as every step of the way he showed God's love for us. Jesus shows us what God is like. Through Jesus we see the best reflection of who God is and what God is like and what God wants for each of us – an embodied love that changes us and changes our world.

Because, you see, while God is preparing a way for us, there is another part to this. We are then also called to prepare the path for others.

Someone said it beautifully, "The glory of Christmas is that while there a silent night, there is a need to listen and to shut out the distracting noises of the world and our own brokenness, it is fundamentally a dialog. The Lord's highway is a two-way street. Our call is to listen and to respond. To announce, to proclaim. To make way."^v

So, the question for us is how might we be about the business of lifting valleys and bringing down hills, so that the way of the Lord is prepared for others to see, walk and experience? We begin with prayer – not because there isn't anything else that we can do, but because that is always where we should begin. We don't pray because we are helpless – although sometimes we may feel that way. We pray because we know where the power is. We pray because we know who it is who walks with us. We pray because we know that this is where the peace comes – the peace that can only come from God.

That peace comes not only when we pray, not only when we are silent and listening to God, but it also comes when we act upon what we have understood to be God's call to us. Peace comes when we know that we are fulfilling God's invitation to us to walk further along the path, to take action, to be God's hands and feet reaching out to our hurting and frightened world.

I was drawn back this morning to the book "Anatomy of Peace" and the reminder that we become agents of change only to the degree that we begin to live to help things go right rather than simply to correct the things that we think are going wrong. The reality is that we cannot force another person to change, but we can invite change by seeing others as people who are equal to us, not less than, not other. When we see others as people like ourselves, rather than as objects, our heart is at peace rather than

at war. When we see others as children of God, loved by God just as we are loved, we experience the peace of God that can carry us through the dark and difficult days. With that peace decorating, decking, filling our hearts and our lives, we can then also become instruments of peace for others.

The third verse of our opening song reminds us, “How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given; so God imparts to human hearts, the blessings of his heaven. No ear may hear his coming, but in this world of sin, where meek souls will receive him, still the dear Christ enters in.”^{vi}

Let us pray using words adapted from Steve Garnaas Holmes.

Loving God, how shall we prepare your way? How might we announce your coming? How might we live to make your coming plain? How will we think, speak and act this day as messengers of grace, so that those who yearn may hope, and those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death may rejoice?

How do you enable us to live this gospel? What path are you making in our hearts? How are you preparing your way in us? Let us see and hear and trust and follow you. Fill us with the peace that only you can give and help us to be instruments of your peace to others. Amen.^{vii}

ⁱ This Series is based on a series from United Methodists of Greater New Jersey, prepared for this season during a pandemic. Some material is mine, but some ideas also come from this resource abbreviated as GNJ. Other resources influencing and quoted are Adam Hamilton’s book Incarnation and General Board of Discipleship Advent Resource Year B “Company’s Coming”. At times it can be difficult to know exactly which source is influential.

ⁱⁱ Weems, Ann. Kneeling in Bethlehem “This Year Will Be Different” p.65

ⁱⁱⁱ Christmas in the Four Gospel Homes p.7

^{iv} Ibid

^v Company’s Coming

^{vi} “O Little Town of Bethlehem” vs. 3

^{vii} Adapted from Steve Garnaas Holmes “Unfolding Light” for 12/4/2020. Pronouns changed from singular to plural and some other minor changes and additions made.